

Preface

America's colleges and universities have problems that could grow worse unless they are addressed by top administrators and faculties. We present those problems in this book and examine the potential for solving them through interdisciplinary studies. We also suggest a new mode of thinking for institutions of higher learning as a way to treat those problems.

What are the problems?

In his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Philosopher Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago claims that higher education has failed democracy and is "impoverishing the souls of today's students."ⁱ At Notre Dame, historian George Marsden (*The Soul of the American University*) locates the problem in the virtual vanishing of what was once the pervasive influence of religion in the intellectual and cultural life of America's preeminent colleges and universities.ⁱⁱ Many of the nation's finest educators assert that universities have become too profit-oriented and commercialized, destroying the values that had made them so successful.ⁱⁱⁱ

Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, concurs with them:

Commercialization has plainly taken root in higher education, and also in other areas of American life and culture: health care, museums, and public schools, even religion. Entrepreneurial initiative, high executive salaries, and aggressive marketing techniques are all spreading to fields of endeavor quite outside the realm of business. Such practices set examples that legitimate the use of similar methods in universities.^{iv}

Bok contends that commercialization has grown because of profit-making opportunities on campus. We are in a "knowledge-based economy" and the university is the place to make money. Big corporations are making contracts with science faculties and the professions; university presidents, enterprising professors, and administrative staff find seductive opportunities to turn knowledge into profit. Bok argues that the problem is not just a loss of purpose. Sprawling "multiversities" create a vacuum into which material pursuits enter easily. While entrepreneurial universities may succeed occasionally in the short term, only those

institutions that vigorously uphold academic values, even at the cost of a few lucrative ventures, will win public trust, according to Bok, and retain the respect of faculty and students.

Many scholars are worried about the future.^v Jennifer Washburn, a Fellow at the New America Foundation, says that secret contracts made with private industry undermine the public trust.^{vi} Eric Gould, who has been both a college administrator and a professor of English, says that higher education is on a disastrous course in which universities compete for students, faculty, and funding, and that liberal principles lose in the process. The university has failed to structure the curriculum so that it integrates responsible social ideals and humanism with economic and cultural needs. The humanities are diminished, no longer at the core of university life.^{vii}

The basic problems summed up by Richard H. Hersch and John Merrow in *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*, echo and add to those already raised. There is too much materialism in the adoption of marketplace values, too much emphasis on the bottom line and on job specialization; not sufficient adaptation to the information explosion; an excessive rise in tuition for students; a misplaced emphasis on university rankings of credibility in the media; and too much weight given to college sports that shape campus values.^{viii} Robert Zemsky, chairman of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, agrees, “What higher education is in danger of becoming is just another industry full of well-run, for the most part successful, enterprises that have learned to bring to market programs that will attract customers and sponsors.” What is required are more leaders confident in the strengths of their institutions, “who are prepared to spend personal and institutional capital in pursuit of public purpose.”

Stanley Aronowitz, a professor at the City University of New York, scolds colleges and universities for selling out to corporate America. Universities offer themselves as training sites for businesses, he says, and turn their presidents into full-time fund-raisers who look more like CEOs than academic leaders. Aronowitz argues that there has been an “intellectual decline” in higher education and that the American academic system has failed to meet its goals of

providing students with a well-rounded education. Most colleges and universities offer specialized fields of study without requiring students to take courses outside those fields. Further, Aronowitz sees “training programs” replacing “higher learning” in post-secondary education. Students are rewarded for regurgitating knowledge, rather than thinking for themselves and challenging “established intellectual authority.” What is the true purpose of higher education? he asks, and how can we structure our universities to achieve it? Higher education, he posits, should play a leading role in the development of general culture rather than be undermined with contracts that allow student-athletes to slide through the system. He proposes a radical reorganization of American higher education based on a new pedagogy. This would include a curriculum centered on a trans-disciplinary introduction to science, philosophy and literature -- within a historical framework.^{ix}

Top scholars and educators argue that such problems, if left unresolved, will have dire consequences. In order to address them, we need to start building model institutions for the 21st Century, similar to the models that Oxford and Cambridge provided for the 18th, and Harvard and Berkeley for the 19th and 20th Centuries respectively. How then, we ask, could institutions begin building that model in the 21st century?

In the first chapter we will see how universities evolved in Europe and the United States. We look at the development of academic principles, ideas, themes, and beliefs. We propose that when a single idea, or doctrine, or theme or principle or belief comes to govern the academic culture, a problem arises. The problem becomes apparent in an intellectual climate when the suffix *ism* is added to that great idea. The *ism* at the end of a word signals that that special principle or doctrine has in fact become a ruling theme.

Reason, for example, is vital to the life of a university but it cannot serve as the single principle grounding the quest for truth and knowledge. Reason has been a theme for learning since the Greeks gave it prominence in ancient Athens, and it continues to be a key theme; but in its extreme form, reason becomes *rationalism*. The suffix *ism* signals that “reason” has become a preferred outlook that could narrow the quest for truth, suppress other

principles, or be taken as a theme superior to all others. The opponents of Reason soon argue that it has arrogated to itself the right to be regarded as the source of all knowledge.^x

Thus, in this first chapter, we point to the historical tendency to exaggerate great principles and ideas. We see the “*ism* signal” given to other great principles that dominated academic life in the past. To reiterate: when a particular idea is exaggerated into a metaphysic, the suffix *ism* appears. This can happen to very important concepts such as “secular” or “science” or “objectivity.” Secular becomes, disparagingly, *secularism*; science becomes *scientism*; objectivity becomes, negatively, *objectivism*. So as scholars talk about how business interests are taking over the university, commerce devolves into *commercialism*.^{xi} The fine idea of “liberal” transforms into *liberalism*, “conservative” into *conservatism*. The excellent idea of “utility” becomes *utilitarianism*. The key concept “legal” taken to an extreme becomes *legalism*; “instrumental” becomes a questionable *instrumentalism*; the principle of “progress” becomes an adversely judged as *progressivism*; the idea of the “state” in excess becomes *statism*; the notion of “nation,” over-emphasized, *nationalism*; the positive term “industry” *industrialism*; and so on. These *isms* signify that a great idea has degenerated into a doctrine or its functions in excess.^{xii}

Critics, some of them mentioned above, have objected that colleges and universities have reached that “excess” in various ways. They see that institutions have become overly structured with, variously, *commercialism*, *departmentalism*, *individualism*, *secularism*, *scientism*, *careerism*, *professionalism*, and *capitalism*. They argue that, in mirroring the decline of the core values in American society, the university has lost its soul.^{xiii}

Is there a national decline in core values? Such a decline is hard to document but those leaders who say there is pervade the political spectrum -- liberals, conservatives, communitarians, libertarians, and others quite various. Witness the work of Robert Bellah and associates (*Habits of the Heart*), Francis Fukuyama (*The Great Disruption*), William Bennett (*The Book of Virtues*), Robert Hughes (*Culture of Complaint*), John Miller (*Egotopia*), Gertrude Himmelfarb (*The Demoralization of Society*), Richard Sennett (*The Corrosion of Character*),

James Davison Hunter (*The Death of Character*), Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*), Amitai Etzioni (*The New Golden Rule*), and many others.^{xiv}

Philip Altbach, a distinguished scholar of higher education, says that the university is the most important institution for “knowledge creation and distribution today.” It serves as home not only to the basic sciences but also to the complex system of journals, books, and databases that communicate knowledge worldwide. It is the key provider of training in an ever-growing number of specializations and has taken on a special function in political thought, political action, and political training. If for these reasons alone, he might say, today’s faculty members should examine where they are going.^{xv}

Top educators would say that outside institutions (governments, businesses, religious institutions) have interests that enter into a general education that contribute to the diversity of learning, but any excess influence or outright control over teaching and the curriculum by these outsiders compromises higher learning. Higher learning institutions are an autonomous order with their own interests, values, themes, and goals in society.

One way to address the problem of the proclivity to overemphasize an idea, which we have already begun to introduce, is interdisciplinary studies. In this book I argue that presidents and faculties should start interdisciplinary studies between distant subjects and schools on campus. They could start in small steps, which include reading the history of their university and its mission. At some point in their preparation for a larger university study, a committee of faculties can look at how the subjects of isolated departments are related to one another. These initial steps should initiate separate studies that eventually lead to a central study of the core curriculum, with its contrary and diverse teaching patterns. This central study may review the comparative strength of departments and institutes in the context of core values in the academy. Universities – their administrators and faculties – then ask together: Where are we going?^{xvi}

An accreditation procedure could be the opportunity to start such studies that transcend the relative isolation of departments and schools. This would be a time for faculties to address

the problems posed by educators today. We elaborate these problems and potential resolutions for them through the telling of stories. We employ the method of storytelling in this book as a means for illustrating how leaders of academies might think imaginatively about their current difficulties. The protagonists in these tales assess key beliefs and discover how great ideas play against one another; indeed, they involve themselves with ideas that run counter to current trends and *isms*.

In the Conclusion, we analyze the stories and develop premises underlying a philosophy of interdisciplinary studies. We look at how ideas can contradict one another, describing them alternatively as *antinomies*, *polarities*, and *binaries*. These stories include such oppositions as *sacred vs. secular*, *reason vs. spirit*, *local vs. global*. In our stories professors find that they can link high-minded ideas in ways that change the conditions of their polarities. Faculties find that antinomies can be “complementary” rather than contrary, but that they always stand in the tension of opposites seeking resolution.

The stories in this book are based on many events that I have witnessed and on people that I have known in life. Their actors represent humankind, certainly composites of people I have met during my half-century of teaching and administrative work. But I clothe the stories, the events and characters, in the form of legends. So, these characters also carry the spirit of ancient tales that have both comic and tragic outcomes -- all the drama and ironies that develop in any struggle to change a system. Some of the characters resemble famous heroes and scoundrels; others, on the surface, are more mundane. But they embody traits that transcend the details of history, and they are all fighting larger-than-life battles. . They show all the aspects of human resistance that inevitably arise— the emotions, the disappointments as well as the successes— when human beings, such as those in universities today, confront change and seek solutions to the common problems that plague their institutions.

The Course of the Book: Summary

In Chapter I, we review a history of higher learning among universities and colleges, with the changes that have taken place over the centuries. We see how institutions

have mirrored the epoch in which they exist. We witness how universities began in a tension between medieval theology and the monarchy, how secular thought rose to replace theology, and subsequently, how different governing themes rose and fell. This history brings us to today's problems and prepares us for our larger-than-life tales.

Chapter 2 introduces these tall tales. The questions for the president of Alpha Omega University are: "Have we lost our soul? What is sacred in this university?" President Theresa Neumann looks like a saint who wants to revive her institution. She organizes conferences on wars and holocausts and asks faculty members to look into the subject of history and convinces them to initiate a university-wide self-study. In the course of their work, Alpha Omega professors discover departmental themes that show universal qualities. In the process the faculty learn together as a body of scholars. ^{xvii}

At Black Hills College in Chapter 3, we see how American Indian President Red Cloud hires an East Indian named Arjuna Gandhi, called R.J. for short. In the spirit of the great Hindu story of the *Mahabharata*, R.J. maneuvers his way through key battles between campus and town. The "gown and town" had once been like a family but have now split apart, struggling to own land during difficult times. The college is losing out against for-profit universities and global markets, and the question is whether Red Cloud and R.J. can win the battle and reverse a situation that has turned bleak for everyone. They find that great ideas are a basis for planning beyond the capitalist market; and equally important, they discover that human experience and spirituality are at the root of learning.

Chapter 4 recounts the story of Robert Ulysses Mendez, who grew up in Guatemala. He condemns imperialism as he learns first hand that the United States, his adopted country, looks like an imperial power. Following the symbolism of the Greek epic, the *Odyssey*, Mendez confronts impossible obstacles before he is made Dean of the Law School at National University. Before this tale is over, he is defeated many times while confronting big obstacles in his effort to build inter-school studies, but he is finally able to fight his way home with some

success. When he returns home, he finds his wife, Patience, waiting for him. Be forewarned, however: this story is not *just* about mythic heroes and romance.

In chapter 5 we are introduced to the "literary club" at Aristotle University, whose original members had built a clubhouse to promote a tradition of great learning. The Club debates "what is real versus what is ideal," and members argue fiercely about whether language can represent reality. Club members finally ask Aristophanes, the university president, to help them resolve their difficulty. President Aristophanes has studied everything and is more knowledgeable than anybody, but faculty members wonder whether he thinks the debate amounts to anything. He is famous for his humor, and so nobody is certain that he is serious when he asks for interdisciplinary studies. He wants to know whether the universe is composed of music, and whether atoms and molecules are dancing. He proposes that a choreographer and a biologist study "the dance of the bees," at which point campus professors ask: "Is Aristophanes playing a joke on us?"

In chapter 6 Dr. Lao J. Li is Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Temple University. She is a compassionate woman and students trust her enough to speak about subjects as intimate as sex, an alcoholic roommate, a major illness or death in the family, and suicidal feelings. She is an expert on Chinese philosophy and says, "Be still like a mountain, and flow like a river." The conflict between Passions and Principles must be reconciled everyday, she claims, while designing an interdisciplinary course on evolution. She invites professors from different departments to join the discussion and then reveals to them her proposed course of study for the 21st century.

In the Conclusion, I interpret these stories and argue that colleges and universities should initiate new interdisciplinary studies. I offer a demanding study-guide based on philosophical principles embodied in every academic culture, then propose a series of self-studies by which universities could treat the problems that critics say trouble America's best institutions. University presidents, accrediting agencies, chief executive officers, and faculties have the opportunity to introduce a new order of thinking into academe.^{xviii}

ⁱ “. . . today’s students.” Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind ((NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

ⁱⁱ “. . . colleges and universities.” George Marsden, The Soul of the American University (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994).

ⁱⁱⁱ “. . . made them so successful.” Claire Van Ummersen, "Issues Facing Higher Education," in The Academic Workplace, Vol 4, No. 1, Fall/Winter, 1992, p. 6. Also: A. Altschul, et. al., "Higher Education Must Change," AGB Reports, May/June 1992.

^{iv} “. . . methods in universities.” Derek Bok, Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Bok argues that universities are jeopardizing their mission by an eagerness to make money, by agreeing to compromise with academic values. There are dangers posed by increased secrecy in corporate-funded research, for-profit Internet companies funded by venture capitalists, industry-subsidized educational programs for physicians, conflicts of interest in research on human subjects, and other questionable activities.

^v “. . . about the future.” There are many books that emphasize this trend. Sheila Slaughter (Arizona University Professor of Higher Education) and Larry Leslie (Academic Dean at Arizona) say that one of the major changes that has taken place as a result of globalization is that faculty, who were previously situated between capital and labor, are now positioned squarely in the marketplace. Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie, Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Bill Readings believes that the University has lost its soul and is no longer the pivotal cultural institution that it once was. Universities are now a business and are being evaluated as a

business in competition with other businesses. Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

^{vi} “. . . the public trust.” Jennifer Washburn, a Fellow at the Open Society Institute and a senior research associate for the Arms Trade Resource Center of the World Policy Institute at the New School for Social Research, says that the irony is that business partnerships with schools do not generate the financial windfall that they promise. Businesses leave universities with “hollow rhetoric about creating the next Silicon Valley.” Jennifer Washburn, University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education (NY: Basic Books, 2005).

^{vii} “. . . of university life.” Eric Gould, The University in a Corporate Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Gould says that student consumerism, culture wars, faculty alienation, and trustee activism have resulted from the unholy alliance between pragmatism, corporatism, and liberalism in higher education. What is needed today is a general education for undergraduates that will promote the ability to critique power relations (including those within higher education) so that students can understand how social forces shape contemporary public philosophy.

^{viii} “. . . shape campus values.” Richard H. Hersch and John Merrow, Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005). Some essays in their book argue that “higher education” is Teflon-coated, immune to criticism. Vartan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (former president of Brown University and the New York Public Library) enumerates challenges facing higher education: the "fragmentation of knowledge"; a "curriculum crisis"; "the commercialization of research"; development of a "two tier" faculty system of full- and part-time instructors; “diminishing quality in schools of education”; and the challenge of distance education. She says that the failure to answer these challenges could threaten our democratic republic. It is that serious. Robert Zemsky, “A Whining View of Higher Education.” The Chronicle of Higher Education, The Chronicle Review, June 17, 2005.

^{ix} “. . . a historical framework.” Stanley Aronowitz, The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating Higher Learning (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

^x “. . . source of all knowledge.” Rationalism is a philosophical doctrine based on the premise that truth should be determined by reason and factual analysis, rather than by experience, revelation, faith, dogma or religious teaching. It has some similarities in its form to humanism and secularism. Generally it aims to provide a framework for social and philosophical discourse outside of religious or supernatural beliefs.

^{xi} “. . . devolves into *commercialism*.” The idea of the “individual” came into prominence at the end of the 18th century. When it developed into *individualism* an extreme system of belief, it was challenged by other great ideas evolving in the 19th century. The idea of “social” became *socialism*, while other commanding ideas, like those pertaining to “capital,” became *capitalism*.

Such great words are more complex than the *ism* that they may develop into. Analytically speaking, the word "social," for example, depicts virtually the entire human condition, referring to the way people relate to one another. see: Max Weber, Economy and Society (NY: Bedminster Press, 1968) pp. 24 ff. See also Raymond Williams, Communications (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962); Writing in Society (London: Verso, 1984).

Each *ism* has its own history with meanings that we cannot review here. For example, the term 'objectivism' became notorious with its use by Ayn Rand, who chose it as the name for her philosophy of reason, individualism, and freedom. However, there have been other “objectivists” in contemporary philosophy. The mathematician Kurt Gödel combined objectivism with Platonism, although Gödel recognized objectivism as the broader term. Douglas R. Hofstadter, Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid (NY: Basic Books, 1999). John Dewey particularly urges that all teachers and educators looking for a new movement in education should think in terms of the deeper issues of education rather than in terms of some divisive “ism” about education, including progressivism.

^{xii} “. . . in excess.” There are many more examples. The great idea of “universal” when over-valued takes on the restricted idea of *universalism*; the word “particular” when accepted as a doctrine becomes *particularism*; the simple term “matter” in its ideological expression becomes *materialism*; the great idea of “spirit,” as a system of belief becomes *spiritualism*; the excellent word “intellect” by overemphasis becomes *intellectualism*; the important concept “ideal” when applied to explain all things became *idealism*; “real,” overdrawn, becomes *realism*; the simple word “department” can become the pejorative *departmentalism*; the important word “profession” when over-accented as a way of life becomes *professionalism*; the fine word “feminine” when applied as a strong belief or a singular ideology becomes *feminism*; the wonderful idea of “human” turned into a belief that explains too much becomes *humanism*, and so on. This suffix *ism* is not assumed by everyone to illustrate a degenerative principle, nor is it always perceived as pejorative. The National Secular Society (founded in 1866) promotes “secularism” as an educational philosophy. The Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. promotes “individualism” as the essential philosophy of American society. We point out these *isms* to alert readers to the possibility that they refer to a single-minded view, an ideology, or a closed system of belief. The special attention given to one systematized idea could subordinate another contrary idea that is important to weigh and consider. Indeed, an overemphasis on polarities itself as a strategy of thought that can be turned into a system of belief called *polarism* or *dualism*.

^{xiii} “. . . lost its soul.” A university often reflects the culture in which it resides. In other books, I have written about dangers in the spread of weapons of mass destruction while universities build technologies to advance more of these weapons. There are dangers in world terrorism threatening the existence of all institutions, while universities build bio-labs to study germ warfare and create new chemistries that are studied for the opposite of public safety. There are dangers in ecosystem failures while universities focus on expanding their campuses and raising tuition rates. There are dangers in a precarious economy without a system of civil governance at

the world level. These are problems that I believe scholars should address more carefully in public policy. See Severyn T. Bruyn, *A Civil Economy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); *A Civil Republic* (Bloomfield, Conn., 2005). But other writers speak more deeply about the dangers of these trends in universities, as in their commercialization, the decline of humanities, the rise of specialized professions and the impact of growing sciences in the academy.

^{xiv} “. . . and many others.” For more books and authors writing along these lines see Wayne E. Baker, *America’s Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception*, (Princeton University Press, 2000).

^{xv} “. . . are going today.” Phillip Altbach, Robert O. Berdahl, and Patricia J. Gumport, *American Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Social, Political, and Economic Challenges* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

^{xvi} “. . . What is our mission?” As we shall see, there are ruling themes hidden in a core curriculum and concealed in the hierarchy of departments, made visible by the different salary scales of school faculties. Themes can also be extrapolated in many ways by looking at professional vocabularies, by the dollars spent on business contracts and athletics, by the manifest themes expressed through core courses, and more.

^{xvii} “. . . in their multiversity.” Each story is complete in these chapters, as they tell how faculties learn about major themes in their academic culture, but the issues they encounter are so deep, complex, and rich in substance, that readers may want more exposition of the topics. And so each chapter will continue online on the author’s website.

^{xviii} “. . . thinking in academe.” Critics say that we need leaders who dare to build new institutions. If it is true that no single idea, theme, pattern of thought, or principle, can represent the entire quest for knowledge, then self-studies are important to see the coherence. If it is true that no business interest or special national interest should control general studies, self-studies are vital to assess what is happening. If it is also true that colleges and universities have

purposes that are broader than the systems of belief in one epoch, then self-studies are needed to assess how that might be true.