
What Went Wrong on the Campus —And How to Adapt to It

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As we move toward the end of this century, we also mark the changing of the guard in the academy. A whole generation of university professors move into the final decade of their careers. People who earned their doctorates in the 1950s and 1960s now reach their late 50s and 60s, and, it is clear, a dramatic change in the composition and character of university faculties will mark the beginning of the next century. We leave the universities considerably smaller and less consequential places than they were when we came on the scene. But I should claim that we have done our best.

Professors were the earliest victims of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, but we went willingly to the barricades. We were the ones to make peace with what we should have fought. Many of us from that time onward were to witness in our unfolding careers the transformation of the gentle and intellectual character of the academic world—women and men of curiosity, seeking understanding—into something quite different, rather more political and less engaged by learning and teaching.

*Scholarship
displaced by
politics.*

We have seen the presidents and provosts and deans seek success not in education but in public relations, substituting for an academic vision of education an essentially instrumental program of public policy and the shaping of public opinion. We have witnessed the destruction of a beautiful and precious moment in the history of learning. What good has come from the ruin of the old I do not know. Ours was the transitional generation. We did our best to cope and accommodate, but we received from our masters universities that were better—more

humane, more intellectual, of a purer academic character—than those we hand on to our disciples. Our careers have spanned interesting times. But, at least, for good or ill, we always knew the change was for the worse. And, for my part, I always said so. At least the other side, from the Cultural Revolution onward, cannot say they did not know what they were doing; they knew precisely what they were doing, and they did it. But I say, Forgive them Lord, for knowing, they knew not. And forgive us too our incapacity to educate.

*Scholar's
preeminent
responsibility
to write books.*

And yet—if truth be told, and I think I speak for more than myself—all that has mattered in my life and career, excluding the life of home and family, is book-writing. My advice to the next generation of scholars is that all that matters is the books you write, that alone. For intellect is shaped, where it is accessible, in books, there alone. And we live and strive for the life of mind, for that above all. I wasted much of my life by placing my highest priority upon teaching students and upon engagement with my Universities. I could have done much more had I understood what lasts and what matters and what makes a difference to the coming age and ages beyond counting, and it is only books, there alone is life. I need not mourn the waste of a once-precious organization, the university, nor do I mourn the destruction of a once-vital institution of society, the one that pays my salary even now, nor do I look back with satisfaction on years given over to students and their nurture. All this is nothing. All that matters lies, now, in the reader's hand, or, at least, sits on the library shelf for readers to come. But that suffices to make this life, my life, worth having lived.

Let me now spell out why I think the world has lost something of value, and something not readily replaced. I can speak for more than myself. We who came to the campuses as students in the 1950s and returned as professors in the early 1960s shaped our careers to serve three causes: scholarship, teaching, collegial citizenship. We deemed success to be the writing of books, the raising up of a new generation of thoughtful students, and the sharing of common responsibilities in the building of a campus community of intellect and heart. We measured success by our capacity to contribute to knowledge in some specific way, to share knowledge with others, both in writing and in the classroom, and to learn from others and join with others in a common life of intellect. We did not succeed all the time, or even very often. But these avenues formed the royal way, the golden measure: scholarship and learning, teaching and sharing, citizenship and caring. It was a gracious ideal, a nourishing faith of the academy and in the academy. We

formed that faith not from within our own minds alone, but from what we saw in the generation that had brought us up.

If people wish to conduct research and scholarship, in our day and society, most can do it only in universities or colleges. There is no living to be made outside of the academy in most academic fields. True, in engineering, many of the hard sciences, and mathematics, you can hope to pursue research not supported by teaching—hence as a professor in a college—but supported in research institutes, corporations, government, and the like. In the social sciences, sociology, political science, and economics, for example, there are research institutes for some. But, without inherited money, one cannot on a full-time, lifelong basis study Greek and Roman literature, or medieval history, or English literature, or religion, or other of the humanities, except with a Ph.D. and working as a college professor.

In their current state, universities are best used by scholars as means to higher end.

The things we thought mattered when our generation came on the scene—scholarship, publication, teaching in an engagement with students' minds, commitment to excellence in our university or college—no longer find a place on the campus. Universities have become places of privilege and self-indulgence, in which boredom—the cost of easy tenure based on considerations of politics, not accomplishment—reigns, and energy and commitment to learning defy the norm. Tenure marks not achievement but acceptability. Those who go along get along. The road to success is scholarly withdrawal and disengagement. As in prison, so in a professorial career: you do your own time. But here our successors, like ourselves, locate themselves by choice: because the university is where you can do things you think worth doing, you accept the restrictions of the place.

When we came along, if you wanted to teach and also pursue scholarship, you were wise to follow a path to a professorship. You would not get rich, and not much, beyond learning, would ever be at stake. But you would learn and enjoy the satisfactions of teaching others through both classroom engagement and published scholarship, and those accomplishments would enjoy appreciation among colleagues. Today, the gentle virtues of learning give way to more robust values of politics and management. If young people want to teach, there are better places in which to do it than colleges. If they want to pursue scholarship as an exercise in on-going curiosity, in many fields there are better opportunities, and more agreeable situations, than universities. It comes down to this: if you have to use universities in order to conduct a career of learning, then use them.

*Universities
no longer
communities of
learning or
teaching.*

Today, for those who wish to pursue scholarship, universities offer one opportunity—and perhaps the only one. Universities two generations ago were not the main, or the only, medium for scholarship, and many of the great discoveries in the humanities and sciences from the Enlightenment to our own century did not come from people who held professorships. People drawn by curiosity found ways to make a living—or lived on inherited wealth and pursued their scholarship. Darwin and Freud—to name two of the greatest intellects we have known—pursued their research without university support. And many of the most important ideas that shape minds now came from people who did not make their living through university teaching—and some of them did not even have doctorates. Yet they made their discoveries and gained a hearing for their ideas. Today, much research, even when conducted in universities, finds support other than through students' tuition. Finding such support is the reason, the only reason, for seeking employment in colleges and universities as we now know them. For they have ceased to be communities, and they are in the main not very academic.

Why has it come to this? Let me explain what things were like—and why they changed. We who began in the 1950s took over the dream of an earlier generation and lived through the nightmare of our own times. Our model of the university came to us as the gift of the generation of the Second World War, which brought America to a position of responsibility within the larger world. Universities took on the work of educating young Americans to address that great world beyond. Professors became scholars, not only teachers, responsible for learning more and more about many more things. To do their work, professors had to learn new things and teach worthwhile subjects, and students for their part actually had to study. Serious, demanding times awaited. There was no place anymore for Mr. Chipps, benign but boring, saying over and over again the lessons he had learned from the Mr. Chipps who came before. And no place anymore for the cheering and the singing and the gentleman's C.

What changed? It was the entire configuration of higher education. Colleges became universities, and universities turned themselves into centers of research. Publication mattered. Tenure came to those who produced. Students studied, scholars taught, knowledge expanded and exploded, higher education in America set the standard for the world, as much as German universities had defined the golden measure a century earlier—and with good reason. From our universities

came the science and the scientists, the social science, the humanities revived by fresh questions, the spirit of discovery, the compelling call of vivid curiosity.

At the age of eighteen I went to Harvard in 1950 because, so far as I then knew, it was the only university in which research went on. (Of course, I was wrong, but, for an adolescent intellectual in West Hartford, Connecticut, the choices were Harvard, Yale, and Brown, and, among them, only Harvard seemed a place where people read books.) But ten years later, a dozen New England universities, and many score throughout the country, had gained that ambition to transform and transcend themselves that in the aggregate formed the great leap forward of America's universities. A new definition of the calling of higher education took hold. We were partners, all of us on the campus, in an adventure of learning. That meant that students would study, not merely gain credentials. Scholars would publish, not merely speculate. Teachers would treat the classroom as a realm of discovery, not merely as a stage for the rehearsal of other peoples' knowledge and the professor's opinions of that knowledge. Knowledge itself—and the definition of what is to be learned for the degree of Bachelor of Arts or of Science—vastly changed. Old boundaries gave way. New subjects found entry.

That was the vision. Along with the best and the brightest I knew, I was drawn to a life of learning: reading and writing, studying and teaching, speculating and testing propositions: what if? and why? and why not? That was the life I chose, and, given the choice again and the years in which to carry out the work, I should choose that same life again. But not for the same reasons, and not in the same realm. Our tide flowed in, in the 1950s and 1960s. But it flowed out again. The ebb-tide came in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We who then were young, the legacy of the vision of the 1940s and 1950s, sustained the hope that others had given us but confronted a world no one could earlier have conceived. The great university presidents of the 1950s and 1960s were scholars, one and all. They had the capacity to find the money they needed to build their universities by finding greatness in scholarship. They were educators, and their criterion of success was the quality of mind—in the colleges, even the character and conscience—of the young people for whom they and their faculties bore responsibility.

But in the trials of social revolution and political crisis, when the campus became the battlefield and the college students the shock-troops, the scholars and the educators failed and were replaced. What

*University's
vision lost.*

most of them could not, and did not, do was hold the center. They were educators, scholars and teachers, not politicians, not managers, not planners of budgets and manipulators of women and of men. And others came along—people thought they were needed—who could do those things. We in academia still pay the price of the campus revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. And why not? Ours was the mistake, for we believed when we should have doubted, and we thought that by an act of the faculty senate we could change human nature, reform society, and redeem the world. But we could not even save ourselves and our own ideals when the barbarians came.

*University
leaders now
mere managers.*

University leadership no longer found its definition in the particular requirements of the tasks of the academy: scholarship and research. What the campus now thought it needed was what other large institutions needed. These were deemed no different from the university in substance, but only in form. A person with political capacities could move from the Cabinet or the House of Representatives to the campus. A general could turn himself into a college president. So could a chief executive officer of a large corporation. So could a fund-raiser, a foundation program officer, anybody who had shown capacities to control, manage, and administer any organizational entity, whatever its nature. These new types of academic officeholders were not chosen because of achievement in education and scholarship, and they did not value a capacity to teach and to write—things they had never done and could not do. They were chosen to keep the peace and balance the budget, and that is what they did.

The ideal of the academic builders of the 1940s and 1950s produced us, the professors of the 1960s through the end of the century. We received a vision and lived by it. That vision implied a certain kind of America, and it demanded of the academy a distinctive calling. Despite the profound changes of recent decades, the academy can yet serve useful purposes, if not the cause of education and academic citizenship, community and civil discourse, and reasoned argument about honorable alternatives. So my advice to the aspiring scholar is, use the university for what it can give: the chance to do your work, that alone. The academy has no room anymore for those who find themselves called to learning and to service. It is a place for careers—and careerists. It is not going to change soon. So if the university serves your purpose, use it. Take your pay and do your job as you would in any other corporation, in a normal, utterly professional and impersonal transaction. More is not wanted.

But learning will go forward, if not on the campus, then elsewhere. For the curiosity of humanity draws us onward, and if the university does not nurture learning, some other institution will. The will to know, to ask why, and why not, and what if—that never-to-be-satisfied hunger and thirst will never fail us. It is what it means to be human. If I had to do it all over again, would I give my life for learning and teaching, sharing and building? Yes, I would do precisely what I did with my life. But I would do it for different reasons, and I would do it in a different way.

I would attach myself to the academy for one reason only. If you want to be a scholar, you have to make a living, and in many subjects you can make a living as a scholar only in a university. And I would proceed not as I have done, giving half of my energy and commitment to students, and half to scholarship. I would give all of my energy and commitment to scholarship, and leave over only what I absolutely had to reserve for a minimal accomplishment of such tasks of teaching as I could not decently avoid.

Advice to young academics: attend to your scholarship.

So my best wisdom for the next generation that now begins work for the Ph.D. and a life of learning is as follows:

[1] Scholarship, in published form, is all that matters in graduate school and in your career beyond. Pay no attention, now or later, to issues of higher education and the larger setting of the university. These should not concern you.

[2] Do not think of yourself as an educator, let alone as a teacher, but only as a scholar. If you have to make a living in the academy, teach as little as you can, to as few students as you can, and avoid all engagement with students. And, for the rest, no committees, no politics, no involvements, just read and write.

[3] Take from the university what it has to give you, but give nothing more than your scholarship, which is to say, nothing the contemporary university wants or values. Leave the university to those who now control it: the presidents, provosts, and deans, on the one side, and the students who come and go, on the other. They will do as they like, anyhow, so keep out of their way and do your work. Use them, as they use you, and you will have a useful career—for yourself and for your field of learning, and these are all that matter.