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Academic Malaise: Bring Back the Groves of Academe

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Abstract
The state of university governance and academic freedom are discussed. Several related topics are also considered: tuition inflation; term versus tenure-track faculty; massive open online courses; and relative standing of higher education in the United States.

The Malaise
There is a malaise creeping into the American tertiary education system. Shared governance of the academe is slowly becoming a dinosaur. Tuition costs are increasing at triple the general inflation rate. Tenure-track faculty are systematically replaced by term teachers. Massive open online courses are mushrooming. And universities in the United States are no longer the envy of the world. Those interconnected vagaries will be raised in turn, but first the genesis. Let there be light!

The Genesis
The modern autonomous university traces its roots to the University of Bologna (1088), University of Paris (1150), University of Oxford (1167), and University of Modena (1175). Those followed the sixth century Christian cathedral schools and the Islamic Al-Azhar University (975),[1] which emphasized the scholarly studies of their respective religions. Today's universities are institutions of higher education and research that grant academic degrees in a variety of subjects and provide both undergraduate and graduate education. They can be public or private, with a handful of the latter type being for-profit institutes, a neo-circumstance.

The word "university" is derived from the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, which means community of teachers and scholars. Not community of teachers, scholars, and innumerable vice presidents. Universities are self-regulating guilds that determine the qualifications of their members. The original secular universities were specialized associations of students and teachers with collective legal rights usually guaranteed by charters granted by princes, prelates, or the towns in which they were located.

To commemorate the 900th anniversary of founding the University of Bologna, which was the first to adapt an academic charter guaranteeing academic freedom, *Constitutio Habita*,[2] 388 European university rectors signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.[3] More universities have been added as signatories to the original 1988 document. By 2018, the total reached 889 universities from 88 countries.[4]

Faculty Governance

The American Association of University Professors issued its first statement on university governance in 1920. The declaration emphasized the importance of faculty involvement in personnel decisions, selection of administrators, preparation of budgets, and determination of educational policies. Refinements were introduced in subsequent years, culminating in the development of the 1966 AAUP Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities.[5]

Nowadays, the ideal of faculty participation in the academe's affairs is becoming a distant memory. For the most part, university budgets are decided solely by administrators. Hiring of those in particular occasionally comes top-down with little or no regard to faculty input. Faculty senates are declawed and derided by some administrators as 'debate clubs' or, worse, 'sandboxes for faculty'.

Instead of shared governance, presidents with little academic experience and governing boards with none now mostly decide university affairs. In public universities, the state's governor politically selects such boards. In a handful of states, the general public elect university board members. In either case, mostly businessmen and businesswomen—some of whom would like nothing more than to manage a university as a successful business—constitute many boards. There are serious pitfalls with that sincere albeit misguided effort. Witness as one example the insatiable appetite for sponsored research, which emphasizes engineering, medicine, and business studies over those of humanities and sciences. Guardians of the medieval university's trivium and quadrivium curricula constantly have to justify their existence.

Administrator Misdeeds

Following the 2012 debacle of the board's firing (later reversed) of the University of Virginia president, a professor there, Siva Vaidhyanathan, articulated the situation best[6]:

> "In the 19th century, robber barons started their own private universities when they were not satisfied with those already available. But Leland Stanford never assumed his university should be run like his railroad empire. Andrew Carnegie did not design his institute in Pittsburgh to resemble his steel company. The University of Chicago, John D. Rockefeller's dream come true, assumed neither his stern Baptist values nor his monopolistic strategies. That's because for all their faults, Stanford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller knew what they didn't know."

> "In the 21st century, robber barons try to usurp control of established public universities to impose their will via comical management jargon and massive application of ego and hubris. At least that's what's been happening at one of the oldest public universities in the United States—Thomas Jefferson's dream come true, the University of Virginia."

At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, the provost decided to disband the faculty senate as a protest for their perceived slow pace, or perhaps as a revenge for choosing a senate VP who earlier pushed for a faculty vote of no confidence in the university's president.[7]

In a second public university in Virginia, following a time-consuming and expensive search for a new provost, the president decided to form a second search committee instead of selecting one of the three chosen as finalists by the original committee, and those three successfully completed

campus visits. It appears that the 'president's candidate' didn't pass the original committee's scrutiny. Mediocrity magentizes mediocrity. Democracy is slow and messy, but as Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others."

The Culprit
Related to the issue of faculty governance, or lack thereof, is the rapid rise in tuition, which is currently running at least three times the general inflation.[8] Add to that, few schools charge additional tuition for each credit a student attempts above an arbitrarily defined threshold, so-called market-based tuition pricing structure. This threshold is now 12-credit hours per semester, which hits particularly hard engineering students who typically have to take 15–18 credit hours per semester in order to graduate in four years.

Administrators blame federal and state regulations as well as the rising cost of faculty's salary and benefits. But in the meantime, universities are systematically replacing tenure-track faculty with adjunct or term faculty. The latter earn near minimum wages, and for part timers no benefits such as pension and health insurance. In some institutes, the number of contingent (non-tenure-track, term, adjunct, and part-time) faculty approaches 76% of the total.[9] Additionally, term faculty are, of course, deprived of any semblance of academic freedom. Faculty, on the other hand, blame the inflated tuition cost on the steadily increasing number of administrators (as a percentage of faculty or students) and their generous compensation packages. The faculty also fault the five-star cafeterias, luxury gymnasiums, and lush landscapes.

MOOC
Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are also seen as future cost-cutting tools. In 2012, Sebastian Thrun, a former Stanford computer scientist and founder of the MOOC company Udacity, predicted, with a bit of hyperbole, that within half a century the world will have just ten traditional universities left.[10] On the other hand, Donald Verene[11] argued that online education rests on a mistake, which confuses information for education and training for teaching. A forum organized by the editor of *Academic Questions* presented the pros and cons of MOOCs, but the cons gained the upper hand.[12–15]

The Trouble With Online Education
Humans are social beings and learning is a social process. Both require interaction and connection to flourish. These factors undermine the effectiveness of an online class. In our digital, mobile society, on-site discussion forums are still the most effective tools for student–student and student–teacher interactions.

Even in a large lecture hall, a good teacher is able to sense the students' mood and receptivity, and instantly adapt to them. In a good course, there are rich spontaneous interactions that can take place amongst all. In a 2012 *New York Times* op/ed, Mark Edmundson, professor of English at the University of Virginia, likened a memorable non-virtual course to a jazz composition: there is a basic melody that you work with—as defined by the syllabus—but there is also a considerable measure of improvisation against the disciplining background.

Acquiring knowledge is not the same as knowing what to do with it. Learning to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, collaborate, innovate, and use the unlimited information available is what education is

all about. In my opinion, MOOC does not offer much beyond a do-it-yourself learning from the vast information available on the Internet.

There are of course the fortunate few who have superior discipline, motivation, and intellect to self-learn and make sense of the boundless information out there, but the majority does not possess these gifts. MOOC and the Internet are no different from having a library at your disposal. Both offer monologues not dialogues. Dialogues are individual, labor-intensive, and expensive, but they nurture learning and critical thinking. Monologues are the polar opposite.

Mooc's panic, mania, and tsunami are some of the recently coined phrases. Lecture-based instruction could undoubtedly be improved, but MOOC is far from being a panacea to our real or perceived pedagogical shortcomings. Would anyone want a physician or an esquire who is taught the fundamentals of medicine or law via MOOC courses? Believing that MOOC would improve the learning process is in the same dreamland as wishing that incessant texting and tweeting could produce the next Tennessee Williams.

Return to the Medieval University?
In an influential lecture delivered in 1947, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, Oxford-educated Dorothy L. Sayers advocated a return to the medieval university where the syllabus was divided into two subsequent parts: the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music). She eloquently wrote, "We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks." Sayers suggested that we 'presently' teach our children everything but how to learn.

The question today is, are the Internet, online courses beamed to millions around the world, lack of proximity, and other modern realizations helping or hindering the quest for teaching how to learn? Despite the MOOC's deluge—even Harvard is jumping into the fray, and the president of the University of Virginia nearly lost her job because she was not adapting Internet learning fast enough—this contrarian believes the new pedagogic paradigm is, in the long run, a setback for the ability to learn and for honing critical thinking skills, in both the sciences and the humanities. Here is why.

Technology enabled MOOC, but the prohibitive cost and extreme selectivity of top universities allowed it to mushroom. There are several journals devoted to online learning, teaching, and administration; for example, *MOOCs Forum*, *Hybrid Pedagogy*, and *The Internet and Higher Education*.

The recently unveiled college admissions bribery scandal[16] is an inevitable result of the race to enter top-ranked colleges, combined with the university administrators' insatiable appetite for funds. In short, 36 wealthy parents of elite-college applicants (to Yale, Stanford, and UCLA) were accused on 12 March 2019, by the U.S. federal prosecutors in the District of Massachusetts, of paying more than $25 million between 2011 and 2018 to a "college admissions counselor," who used the money to fake student test scores, doctoring sport photos, and bribe college officials.

University Standing

Regardless of the culprit for high tuition cost, are the students at least getting their money's worth? The answer is a resounding no. In an influential book,[17] Allan Bloom described how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students. Twenty-four years after Bloom's bombshell, Richard Arum[18] pointed out that 36% of the student population shows no discernible change in cognitive skills after four years in college. More recently, Kevin Carey[19] deflated the myth that the United States has the world's best colleges. He argued that while it is true that some of the best higher education schools in the world are in the U.S., our universities on average are no longer producing the best graduates. For example, in a recent standardized math test, the United States along with Hungary and Lithuania battled it out for last place among developed countries.

Republic of Scholars

The issues discussed herein have been researched elsewhere,[20,21] even outside of the Americas.[22] The last reference features an author from Norway and a second from England. They analyzed "how the dominant ideals about the actual organizational patterns of university governance have changed over the past few decades away from the classical notion of the university as a republic of scholars towards the idea of the university as a stakeholder organization." The problems are widely documented and it is about time to have a dialogue between all 'stakeholders' to seek remedies.

Epilogue

Mary McCarthy prefaced her 1951 novel "The Groves of Academe" with a quote from Horace's Epistles, *Atque inter silvas academi quaerere verum* (And Seek for Truth in the Garden of Academus). What is the cure for the aforementioned malaise? I invite the readers to chip in elixirs that may bring back the groves of academe.

Endnotes

[1] This date is disputed at least in the West. The official web site for the university, http://www.azhar.edu.eg/pages/history2.htm and http://www.azhar.edu.eg/pages/history.htm (in Arabic), lists the following dates: construction begun 971 AD; mosque opened for prayer 973; beginning of theological instructions 975; chartered as an institute of higher education 988; expanded beyond religious studies 1961.

[2] Carlo Malagola, *Statuti delle Università e dei Collegi dello Studio Bolognese* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1888).

[3] http://cicic.ca/docs/bologna/Magna_Charta.en.pdf.

[4] http://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/signatory-universities/signatory-universities.

[5] "The 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," *American Association of University Professors*, http://www.aaup.org/report/1966-statement-government-colleges-and-universities.

[6]Siva Vaidhyanathan, "Strategic Mumblespeak," *Slate*, 15 June 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/hey_wait_a_minute/2012/06/teresa_sullivan_fired_from_uva_what_happens_when_universities_are_run_by_robber_barons_.html.

[7]Paula Wasley, "Faculty-Governance Fracas," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 September 2007, http://chronicle.com/article/Faculty-Governance-Fracas/23402/.

[8]"The Ongoing Inflation of the Higher Education Bubble," *Political Calculations*, 2 April 2014, http://politicalcalculations.blogspot.com/2014/04/the-ongoing-inflation-of-higher.html#.U-4jOEi7lEx.

[9]"Background Facts on Contingent Faculty," *American Association of University Professors*, 2014, http://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts.

[10]Steven Leckart, "The Stanford Education Experiment Could Change Higher Learning Forever," *Wired*, 20 March 2012, http://www.wired.com/2012/03/ff_aiclass/all/1.

[11]Donald Phillip Verene, "Does Online Education Rest on a Mistake?" *Academic Questions* (2013) 26:296–307.

[12]Mohamed Gad-el-Hak, "Monologues of Learning," *Academic Questions* (2014) 27:310–312.

[13]Herbert I. London, "MOOCs on the March," *Academic Questions* (2014) 27:313–315.

[14]Rachelle DeJong Peterson, "MOOC Fizzles," *Academic Questions* (2014) 27:316–319.

[15]Thomas K. Lindsay, "A Middle Path," *Academic Questions* (2014) 27:320–324.

[16]https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/business/dealbook/college-admissions-bribes.html

[17]Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

[18]Richard Arum, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[19]Kevin Carey, "Americans Think We Have the World's Best Colleges. We Don't," *The New York Times*, 28 June 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/upshot/americans-think-we-have-the-worlds-best-colleges-we-dont.html?_r=0.

[20]David A. Tandberg, "The Conditioning Role of State Higher Education Governance Structures," *The Journal of Higher Education* (2013) 84:506–543.

[21]Peter M. Kretek, Žarko Dragšić, and Brabara M. Kehm, "Transformation of University Governance: On the Role of University Board Members," *Higher Education* (2013) 65:39–58.

[22]Ivar Bleiklie and Maurice Kogan, "Organization and Governance of Universities," *Higher Education Policy* (2007) 20:477–493.