

REAFFIRMING HIGHER EDUCATION

Jacob Neusner and Noam M. M. Neusner

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Decline and Revival Higher Education

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Decline and Revival Higher Education

Preface

The compilation of articles in this book represents a four-decade history in higher education. In some respects, these pieces embody a personal odyssey from student to professor to dean. More importantly, in my judgment, is that these pieces mirror the evolution of higher education in the recent past.

In some sense, this is a tale of despair since I believe the academy predicated on the free exchange of opinion has been transmogrified into a center for orthodoxies. But there is reason to believe that the essence of higher education can be recaptured through intellectual beachheads, places where the best of our civilization's intellectual heritage is assigned and discussed openly and without prejudice.

Clearly some points in the book are dated, e.g. tuition rates, and just as obviously some events are only to be found in the entrails of the past. Nonetheless, the basic emphasis on the conditions that degraded higher education and the factors needed for regeneration remain intact.

While my professional aspirations have taken me from my professorial chambers to the think tank world, my heart is still very much with the academy. I know what higher education has done for me and I know as well what it can do for others. It is with that spirit in mind that this book is offered to the prospective reader.

—HIL

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Introduction

In the interest of full disclosure, I entered Columbia College in 1956 as a largely uninterested student. While I was in the top 5 percent of my high school graduating class, academic work was something I was obliged to do, not something that I really wanted to do. I had one overarching interest: playing big time basketball.

It may seem odd by contemporary standards, but in the fifties the Ivy League produced several great players. But something strange, indeed intoxicating, happened at Columbia that altered my worldview. Yes, I did play on the basketball team. But gradually, inexorably I fell in love with ideas.

Where this started is somewhat hard to say. It may have been the "C.C. Hum" (Contemporary Civilization-Humanities) sequence of required readings—what I have called Columbia's great books program. Or perhaps it was Bill Casey's remarkable analysis of social theory (not to be confused with the Bill Casey who worked for the CIA). Or maybe it was history courses with Professor Metzger and Shenton. All I know is that by the time I graduated I was filled with desire to read every book in Butler Library from Aristotle to Zoroastrianism.

My thoughts moved from the hardwood to dusty stacks. This journey also included a deep appreciation for the cultivation of the mind that went beyond reading; it incorporated thought into the free and open exchange of opinion, into the uncharted terrain of positions I hadn't heard and wanted eagerly to explore.

Columbia at the time had a deep commitment to liberal opinion. Father and son Van Doren (Mark and Charles), the recently appointed Dan Bell, my adviser named Sam Huntington, the legendary Lionel Trilling, and a brilliant lecturer named Amatai 2

Etzioni graced the campus and, more or less, leaned left at the time, albeit over the years several had their political orientation change. Yet there was one constant: These professors eschewed orthodoxies, notwithstanding the fact that in a poll of faculty members Adlai Stevenson won the 1956 presidential sweepstakes hands down.

Different views were welcome. Controversy was invited. "Political correctness" had not yet entered the academic vocabulary, nor had it insinuated itself into debate and chastened nonconformists. I was intoxicated by the sheer variety of thought. For me this smorgasbord of ideas had delectable morsels at each setting. It was at some moment in my senior year that I became enchanted with the idea of an academic career.

The one thing that mystified me was the artificial constraint of disciplinary study. After all, C.C. was history, philosophy, religion, social thought, and psychology. Why weren't all courses multidisciplinary, perhaps even integrated? Was Montesquieu a political theorist, a social commentator, a jurist? Could Homer only be thought of as an epic poet? Was Shakespeare simply a playwright? I was struck by the arbitrary boundaries of disciplines and began to daydream about a university unfettered from what I considered disciplinary restraints.

The subsequent years seemed to fly by. I was awarded a PhD, received a Fulbright to study in Australia, wrote my first book about the liberalization of the "white Australia policy," and, *mirabile dictu*, was offered an appointment at NYU—the same institution that conferred my advanced degree.

I taught with fervor, eager to impress my students and fully cognizant of my Columbia College experience. My goal was to unlock the secrets of knowledge, to excite and hopefully inspire. What I didn't appreciate was the *zeitgeist*. The Vietnam War and the draft elicited an impatience with contemplative analysis. This generation of students wanted action; they were intent on winning an ideological war of their own creation. These students I soon learned were the acolytes of Antonio Gramsci eager to transform the university of learning into the launching pad for social transformation.

One day as I passed Waverly Place on my way to a class I noticed graffito on a wall that captured the spirit of that time and opened my eyes to a new and, from my point of view, degraded academy. It read "Make them teach you only what you want to learn." These it was; the naïve had taken command of the center of learning. I was part of "them" and felt as if I had been transported into Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*.

Most of my students didn't want to read. In this new age, they simply wanted to express themselves. Each spring from 1967 to 1973 brought blossoms to Washington Square Park, the start of the baseball season, and demonstrations. Classes were invariably suspended and bacchanalia was in season. I grew despondent about my chosen profession.

At a commencement exercise in 1970 the president of the university delivered an address in which he said, "Seated before you is a graduating class endowed with the talent and knowledge to solve the problems of war and peace, urban woe, income disparity, and third world deprivation." I sat there with a smirk on my face.

As I left the exercise, I ran headlong into the president and couldn't resist blurting out, "you mean to say that these students are prepared to solve the problems you listed when you can't be sure they've even read a serious book?" "What are you getting at?" he inquired. I made it abundantly clear that these students were not prepared to balance a checkbook much less deal with the platitudinous goals outlined in the speech.

To his credit, he said, "What would you do to address this matter?" Needless to say, I was baffled by the question, but the conversation led to my appointment on a newly created Commission on Undergraduate Education. It was on that body that I devised a plan to create a new "experimental" college devoted to the study of great books and removing the barriers that militated against cross-college enrollment. Why, I asked, shouldn't an undergraduate take a law school course if he meets the criteria for admission?

The key to winning acceptance for this college was to call it experimental. To some degree, it was since cross-school enrollment was limited by financial concerns. But the curriculum of eighty-seven great books including the Bible, Plato, Aristotle,

Dante, Aeschylus, Euripides, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Marx, Dostoyevsky, Freud, etc. are hardly readings one would describe as experimental.

But as I noted at the time, when commencement rolls around I'll be able to tell the president my students have read serious books even if I cannot be sure they'll solve the problem of urban woe.

Now the question that arose was even if my plan made sense, would the faculty council approve it. I received a call from the chairman of this body, Sidney Hook, the eminent philosopher, who gave me the time and place of the hearing.

Professor Hook arrived with five colleagues, but he proceeded to ask the first question. "Tell me Professor London, can you name a great man who attended an external degree program?" By my lights, this was a most peculiar question. It was obvious that Professor Hook misunderstood my proposal. I had no intention of inaugurating an external degree program. Moreover, at that moment I couldn't think of a great person who graduated from a conventional degree program. But as I hastily rummaged through the rolodex in my mind, I remembered that Lenin attended the University of Moscow Extension Division.

With that in mind, I said if I can change the words "great man" to "influential man," I have an answer for you. Hooked nodded and I blurted out Lenin. A strange look crossed his face. "How did you know that?" he inquired. When I provided a source for my reply, Professor Hook noted that further questions were unnecessary. He spoke for the council and said the program is approved. Thus was born a new division at the university based on a path I had anticipated years earlier at Columbia.

Deciding what to call this entity wasn't easy. As fate would have it, I was browsing in the library stacks when I came upon the papers of Albert Gallatin, Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury and coincidentally founder of NYU. At the time of founding, Gallatin was asked why New York needed another college. After all, Kings College (later Columbia) was in place uptown. Gallatin noted that Kings College was organized for the children of clergymen; he was intent on creating a college for the children of New York's emerging merchant class.

Well, said one trustee, if the students at Kings College are obliged to study Greek and Latin, what will students at this new college study. Gallatin thought for an extended moment as a colleague shouted out, "English." Upon hearing that, Gallatin the Swiss born, but true patriot said, "no in my college students will study 'American." The college, my college, now had a name, "The Gallatin School."

Based on my instincts and background, the curriculum was easily determined. At first, I offered seminars on the Bible and Plato. But, in time, I hired faculty members from other colleges. In fact, I "cherry picked," lining up those colleagues I most admired and "buying," in effect, a portion of their time.

To my astonishment the 55 students who joined the program escalated in number to 130 in the second year and, for the first time, I felt confident this school would meet its financial goals.

This newly constituted "experimental" college was considered the progeny of the early 1970s *zeitgeist*. In reality, it was a throwback, an assertion of Newman's definition of a classical college. However, I went along with the misleading claims. On several occasions I was invited to address the so-called higher education experimental consortium, a group of colleges devoted to innovative approaches.

After several of these meetings all that I could attest to is the loonyness that accompanied higher education innovation. On one occasion I was encouraged to push "energy balls" across the Roger Williams College campus. At another meeting I was chastised for insisting that students read the work of dead, white, European males. I responded by noting I would happy to assign alive, black, Zulu, female authors if appropriate great books can be identified. This didn't go over so well with my new found colleagues.

As a consequence of founding a college, I was given the status of dean, a title, I soon learned, that means very little except that the dean is a metaphorical hydrant on whom those above and those below choose to urinate.

However, decanal status offered two privileges: attendance at university senate meetings and participation in the deans' council. Both of these privileges were transmogrified into headaches. The deans met weekly with the university president. While I assumed educational priorities would be discussed, the primary focus was financial. One meeting after another was devoted to this matter. Feeling thoroughly frustrated, I finally spoke up asking if we would ever discuss educational issues. The president replied: "Any other questions or comments?"

I got the message. When I mentioned my frustration to a seasoned colleague who had attended these meetings for years, he said, "I love the Deans' Council; since virtually nothing is at stake, it is the only time during my busy week when I can daydream."

Senate meetings weren't much better. Each one seemed to confirm the Kissingerian view that expression was exaggerated because so little was at stake. When an important issue did emerge, such as divestment of the university's assets in South Africa, left wing opinion was mobilized and contrary views given short shrift.

It became apparent by the 1980s that Gramschiites had come to dominate university life—hiring and tenure decisions were meant to exclude those skeptical of the campus orthodoxy. I remained devoted to my students and committed to the college I helped to create, but the signs of change in a most unwelcome direction produced dismay.

In the mid-1980s I spent interesting meetings with three resourceful professors, Peter Shaw, who taught at the State University of New York at Stony Brook; Steve Balch who had an appointment at John Jay College; and Barry Gross, who was teaching at York College. We shared a common concern about developments in higher education and agreed that a new organization was needed, one that would promote the free and open exchange of opinion in the academy. Initially we called it the Campus Coalition for Democracy, but in time this title with activist implications was changed to the National Association of Scholars. Steve Balch became its president and I was named chairman and editor of its publication, *Academic Questions*.

Since our goal transcended political matters, even though detractors didn't believe that contention, we attracted to our membership C. Vann Woodward, former president of the ADA, and Sidney Hook, self-proclaimed socialist and, yes, the same person who