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WHY TEACH?



IN DEFENSE OF A REAL EDUCATION

MARK
EDMUNDSON

AUTHOR OF *WHY READ?*

WHY TEACH?

In Defense of a Real Education

Mark Edmundson



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Emerson, and Sigmund Freud*

Introduction

Midway through the last decade of the twentieth century, American higher education changed. Colleges and universities entered a new phase in which they stopped being intellectually driven and culturally oriented and began to model themselves on businesses. They sought profit; they sought prestige: the more the better. To be sure, there had always been a commercial side to American higher education. But in the mid-nineties, universities began dropping pretenses and putting profit ahead of intellectual and (dare one say it?) spiritual values. This book reports on the change and attempts to combat it.

What does it mean for a university to stop seeing itself as having something like a spiritual mission and begin acting like a commercial venture? Many things: The shift the universities underwent was complex and had multiple dimensions. There were major technological changes, changes in the intellectual climate. As this book unfolds, it will offer a comprehensive picture. But we might begin by saying that at the center of it all was a shift in the role of students. Before 1995 or so, students had about as much say in the shaping of the university as members

of a fairly well established religious community have in determining its moral codes and forms of worship. Which is to say, they had almost none. The professors ran the show: What was important to them was what mattered.

But things changed. Starting in 1960, the American birthrate began to decline. In 1974, it hit its lowest point in sixty years. The baby boom was emphatically over. Twenty years later, the kids born in the seventies were ready for college, but there simply weren't enough of them to supply the schools that had so happily expanded to accommodate the baby boom population.

The university of the early nineteen nineties was still geared to the enormous swell of kids born after the Second World War. When that previous population finally made its way through—like a juicy meal passing the length of a boa constrictor—the schools began to see trouble. How were they going to complete the freshman class? How were they going to pay for all the tenured professors and the entrenched deans brought on to educate the prior generation? Colleges can expand readily enough—hire more professors, hire more administrators, build more buildings. But with tenure locking professors in for lifelong employment, how do you get rid of surplus faculty when the market declines? What do you do with the dorms that threaten to stand empty? How do you fill all those potentially vacant seats in Psych 101?

The answer was obvious. The universities were going to have to pursue students much as businesses pursue customers. They were going to have to treat their prospective students as potential buyers. And they were going to have to treat their existing students as customers too, for students can always switch brands: They can always up and transfer. So securing customers and

getting them to maintain brand loyalty became the order of the day. “Most colleges don’t have admissions offices anymore,” a college administrator told me in 1993. “They have marketing departments.” Even those schools that had more applicants than places in the first-year class had to market aggressively. They were competing for prestige and position with other schools of their caliber. They were also competing for full-tuition payers. Everyone wanted the kids who weren’t going to petition them for a full ride or nag for discounts come tuition time. Ultimately, too, the schools were competing for future money: The best students tend to become successful, and then (with luck) committed donors. “The primary purpose of Yale University,” a Yale faculty member said not long ago, “is the production of wealthy alumni to further enrich Yale University.”

How did the students respond to being treated like customers? They didn’t seem to mind at all. From what one could see, they loved it. They were long accustomed to the consumer role. From the time that they were toddlers they’d been the targets of ads and ads and more ads. They were used to being addressed in the teasing, whimsical, and ultimately sycophantic advertising mode that the universities now felt compelled to use. The kids apparently adored being fawned on: They’d grown up in front of the television, being treated like monarchs of the marketplace. When the universities followed suit and began to address them with similar deference, the kids ate it up. On came expensive student centers, lavish gyms, gourmet dining, and slews of student service workers, deans and deanlets to cater to the whims of the customers. Universities began to look like retirement spreads for the young.

No surprise that when the kids got to the classroom they

demanding a soft ride: They wanted easy grading, lots of pass-fail courses, light homework, more laughs. If the professors didn't oblige, the kids flayed them on the course evaluations. Those evaluations had an impact on tenure, promotion, salary, and prestige. By and large, the professors caved.

In the old days, when the university was a quasi-churchly institution, the professors largely called the shots. (The ecclesiastical style of architecture at Yale and Duke and numberless other schools makes the old religious affiliations clear.) The professors disseminated scientific knowledge that could improve daily life and help us to understand nature. They promulgated literary and philosophic wisdom that initiated young people into the complexities of the adult world.

But in the new university all this changed. Now the professors were the people who gave the grades, period. They needed to be humored at all times and hearkened to occasionally. But anyone who revered them for their wisdom or wanted to emulate them was tacitly understood to be half-cracked. The word *professor* intoned in a certain way began to mean "learned fool."

As the professors' influence receded, the world of consumerism and entertainment enhanced its powers. In the mid-nineties, the kids were socialized into the consumer mentality by their new, two-hundred-station TV sets (and of course by their parents). The first chapter of this book, "On the Uses of the Liberal Arts," describes the confrontation between the TV-driven consumer ethos that the kids brought with them from home and the intellectual ethos of the university. At the time, many commentators ascribed the decline in American higher education to the advent of programmatically debunking cultural theory. Freud, Marx, and Derrida were at the root of all evil. If debunking theory did have an effect, it was largely because of how well

it rhymed with the attitude of dismissive superiority that TV and commercial culture overall tended to stimulate.

Ten years later, in the middle of the new millennium's first decade, things changed again. Now kids weren't only being shaped by the belch-and-buy spirit of TV, but by the hurry-up consumer ethos of the Internet, which they patrolled with un-sleeping vigilance. (We create our tools, Marshall McLuhan famously said, and then our tools create us.) To put it crudely: The students had been sped up. Now they were consuming, watching, enjoying, buying at a hyper-accelerated pace—living in overdrive. What they couldn't do was slow down: slow down to observe and examine, slow down to think. The second chapter, "Dwelling in Possibilities," tells how the new computer technology administered an adrenaline shot to the already robust rebellion against real education. Now the consumer worldview was more confident, further insinuated, tougher to budge. What was actually a product of culture—the buy-buy, do-do ethos—was beginning to feel more like a precipitate of human nature. And fighting what people believe to be natural is never an easy thing.

This book tries. It's addressed not to presidents and deans and boards of directors and trustees; it's not addressed to the chair of the faculty senate or to the consortium of student leaders. Most of these people are by now part of the problem. The book is addressed to individual teachers and most of all to students and their parents. It puts a diagnosis on the table and then offers strategies for dealing with it. In these pages I talk about how to get yourself a good education at an American college or university, even when the forces of the school itself are arrayed against you. (The major enemy of education in America now is American education, university education in particular.) There are

astonishing opportunities to be had at almost all American colleges, and this book aims to inspire students to seek them out. I also want to offer teachers some resources to fight against the current modes of dull conformity that afflict us.

For education now is not for the individual. It is not geared to help him grow to his potential and let him find out what he truly loves and how he might pursue it. No. Education now is a function of society. This is the theme of the first section of the book, “The Shift.” Current schooling, from the primary grades through college, is about tooling people to do what society (as its least imaginative members conceive it) needs done. We are educated to fill roles, not to expand our minds and deepen our hearts. We are tooled to slide into a social machine and function smoothly with a little application from time to time of the right pleasing grease. Education now prepares us for a life of conformity and workplace tedium, in exchange for which we can have our iPhones, our flat screens, our favorite tunes, Facebook, and Twitter. But what we want is real learning—learning that will help us see the world anew and show us that there could be more to our lives than we had thought.

Conservative jeremiads against the university tend to declare that universities are not doing their socializing job comprehensively enough. They want higher education to feed the demands of the American economy overall and of private enterprise in particular. The authors of such tracts are inclined to feel that one idea subversive of the status quo is one too many. In my view, universities are still functioning far too much in the service of conformity. Whether the academic idiom in play is conservative or purportedly radical—traditional or post-post-structuralist—schools now educate the mind and not the heart. The curriculum has become arid and abstract: Preprofessionalism

is the order of the day. What Keats memorably called “Soul-making” is absent from current higher education. It needs to be restored.

How do you educate yourself, or, if you’re a teacher, how do you try to educate others? The next section of the book is called “Fellow Students,” for I think of myself as being a student of my discipline, as all teachers must be. In “Fellow Students,” I talk to people who are still in school and trying to get themselves an education despite the odds. I offer plenty of advice: about how to read, about how to deal with professors, about how to struggle against a decadent university culture. I talk about the kind of education you can find in a classroom at its best, which is epitomized for me by what my great teacher Doug Meyers offered. I ask young people to ponder the virtues of failure and to think about what they can gain educationally from sports—and what they can lose. I reflect on what’s called global education and I let students know why I think they should all—and I mean all—at least consider becoming English majors.

The final section of the book is called “Fellow Teachers,” and it’s addressed to my comrades in what can often seem like one of the impossible professions. I encourage people who teach in universities—and especially in humanities departments—to stop thinking of themselves as creators of so-called new knowledge (or “fresh paradigms,” as the current jargon has it) and start thinking of themselves as teachers. I’d like them to imagine themselves as potential liberators, not only of the students in their classes but of the people outside of school who might attend their lectures or read what they write. I urge them to stop the professional posturing and prestige chasing and liberate themselves and others into the fields of joy and salutary change that

the liberal arts at their best provide. I'd like them to step up and oppose the commercialization of their universities. I'd like them to think less about their careers and more about the hopes that brought them to the study of great books to begin with. I'd like some of them to cut the shit. I'd like all of us to have a little more fun.

I'd like us to blow a hole through the university's ethos of entertainment and training for success and to bury its weary-some work-hard, play-hard frat-boy ideology. We should blast away the customer-coddling deans and student service hacks; blast past academic pretension and the hunger for "standing in the field." Blast university presidents so afraid of offending a potential donor that they won't raise a word in behalf of social justice or political sanity. Blow away the trustees who think that they're a corporate board of directors and will not rest until their schools resemble Walmarts. Blast them all. And while you're doing it, have a good time. Because knowledge is joy. Creativity is ultimate freedom. Real thought is bliss. *Sapere aude*, as the old thinkers liked to say: Dare to Know; Dare to Be Wise!

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THE SHIFT

