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Henry Reichman

American Association of University Professors, henry.reichman@csueastbay.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

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Anti-Intellectualism, Corporatization, and the University

Henry Reichman¹

In bargaining collectively over conditions of employment, college and university faculty and administrations face a peculiar challenge. Unlike much labor faculty work is primarily intellectual work and the conditions of employment are much impacted by societal attitudes toward intellect and intellectuals. We are accustomed, of course, to bargaining over protections to academic freedom and intellectual property. But how should we address changing public views of the intellectual life itself? In particular, when America's tradition of anti-intellectualism, analyzed with such great skill back in the 1960s by the historian Richard Hofstadter, comes to the fore, as it seems it has today, how are we to respond? Clearly such an atmosphere calls for renewed attention to the protection of both the faculty's academic freedom and the university's autonomy, but it also calls for a greater and better understanding by both faculty and administrators of the anti-intellectual pressures we face.

There is much to be said about the growth of such pressures on higher education exerted by our society as a whole: by government—most notably the Trump administration—by the media (traditional and social), and by donors. But in this essay I want to examine those intellectual pressures generated by colleges and universities themselves. In particular, I want to discuss two such pressures. The first is what is often covered under the term corporatization.

We've all heard from both outside and increasingly from within the university community the mantra that colleges and universities should be run "more like a business." This mistaken notion has been rebuked with devastating effect by Christopher Newfield in his recent book *The Great Mistake*, which is what Newfield calls the cluster of decisions over the last few decades to essentially privatize public higher education. For Newfield privatization is not a solution to the problems of public higher education; it is their cause. He demonstrates how the retreat from public investment in higher education, not only in teaching but also in scholarship and research, has meant the increasing dominance of private business and corporate interests over scholarship and, in the end, the intellectual life.

¹ Henry Reichman is First Vice-President and Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, AAUP; henry.reichman@csueastbay.edu.

Ever greater portions of our research budgets come from the private sector, which increasingly shapes the intellectual agenda in ways that often discourage independent investigation and thought. This can be seen most dramatically, of course, in tobacco research, but also in climate change research. But even in non-controversial areas the compulsive craving for private funding to replace public investment has led to compromise after compromise with private interests by both university administrators and faculty members. Too many administrators have embraced a managerial approach to education that is fundamentally hostile to free intellectual endeavor. And this has created a pervasive atmosphere that is almost ironically, if sadly, hostile even to higher education's fundamental mission.

A few years ago at the university where I taught for a quarter century a mid-level administrator posted this message on the institution's website: "I look forward to the summer session because then most faculty and students aren't around and we can get things done." This was a foolish thing to post and when I criticized it the person quickly apologized and took it down. But it's symptomatic of an attitude far too pervasive among so many college and university administrators, often unrecognized by those people themselves, that what we're about is efficiency and measurable "results," and not inquiry and enlightenment.

We see this in the great push for improving graduation rates. Students are failing to graduate or taking "too long" to do so, we're repeatedly told. This, we're assured, is a problem, although it's not always so certain why it is one. Now, for the sake of argument let me point out that graduation rates could be increased very easily by having students pay for their entire education upfront, with the actual completion of work optional. We could then grant degrees before they even go to class. It would be much cheaper that way and everybody would be happy. But no one would support such a ridiculous solution because a degree must mean something and that meaning is the whole essence of what we do. The university does not "produce" graduates. If we "produce" anything, it is ideas, knowledge, and the ability to think. Hence to focus inordinately on and even to reify through contract language arbitrary measures of "productivity," "student success," throughput and "pipelines," is to embrace anti-intellectualism.

We are sometimes told that our students are our customers. No! They are not! The customer is always right, the student is not. Were students always right we really should give them their degrees in advance. Learning is inseparable from being wrong. You have to make mistakes in order to learn.

Students are not customers, but the notion that they are and that we must please them arises inevitably from the idea that higher education is not about the public good, the common good of society, but about individual improvement, usually simply cast as economic betterment. Somebody on Twitter wrote that "Donald Trump is what you get when you see education as

simply job preparation." There is some truth to that. To be sure, under the privatization model our students pay more and go further and further into debt. We therefore owe them some practical results for their education, of that there can be no question. But if we accept the idea that education is *only* about career—or even worse about getting an entry-level job—we fundamentally lose sight of what education is *truly* about and we engage in a fundamentally anti-intellectual activity that should be alien to the university.

I turn now to a second tendency within the university that I think contributes to anti-intellectualism: our failure sometimes to acknowledge what I would call the intellectual life of non-intellectuals. I came to this understanding at a conference of a new and wonderful organization called the African-American Intellectual History Society. A fundamental theme of their meeting was the attempt to comprehend the intellectual history not only of African-American intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois, but also to engage seriously with the intellectual life of ordinary African-Americans, workers, farmers, or shopkeepers. And I think this points to something that we need to do in the university. We need to understand that the university is not an ivory tower. And this is, perhaps, the other side of the coin from the argument I have made about corporatization.

The answer to corporatization, to the sort of overly "practical" vision of education that it yields, is not to retreat into an ivory tower where we enshrine ideas as unchanging truths, but to engage the world by applying our intellects while respecting and even learning from the lives, understanding, and experiences of others. This fundamental principle has, I think, been called into question in many discussions of recent student unrest and in particular the complaints made by minority students about the lack of diversity in the student body and among the faculty and about the disrespect they often feel.

Much of the response to these students has made it seem as if the biggest threat right now to intellectual and academic freedom on the campuses is rebellious students, who are shouting down speakers and demanding conformity to some sort of Left Orthodoxy. There's some truth to that, to be sure. Certainly shutting down a speaker is an anti-intellectual practice that should be condemned. But the notion that somehow these students pose the main threat to free expression on campus turns things upside down.

I live in Berkeley where an aborted appearance last winter by the provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos prompted violence. In fact, the violence was not actually fomented by students or faculty members or even peripheral members of the university community, but largely by a tiny coterie of Oakland-based anarchists who seem to be engaged in a full-time project of subsidizing the store window glass industry. But much was made of this. "There is no free expression in Berkeley; the Free Speech Movement is dead," we were told. Nonsense! Every day dozens of

speakers appear on the Berkeley campus who are not shouted down; there are no demonstrations. These speakers reflect all points of view; conservative speakers come to the campus all the time. I know. I attend their talks.

So the real danger isn't students. After all, as Timothy Garton Ash quipped in his recent book *Free Speech*, "A university campus without student protests against outside speakers would be like a forest without birds singing." This is the price of intellectual freedom. The clash of ideas, the life of the mind, is not always neat and civil; it can be quite boisterous and messy. What we need to understand about student unrest and student movements is that they provide opportunities for learning. These are students. Of course, as the libertarian scholar Jacob Levy put it, "It turns out that 18-year-olds seized of the conviction of their own righteousness are prone to immoderation and simplistic views. Who knew?" But our role as educators must be to speak to their concerns, to respect their demands and their interests, and to address these.

This brings me to the final point I want to make, which is about academic freedom. It is important to recognize that for many people academic freedom is conceived as primarily a form of free expression. It's not. Academic freedom is not about the free marketplace of ideas. In the U.S. I have the freedom, should I so choose, to write an op-ed, give a speech, or post on social media and argue that the Earth is only 6,000 years old and that Genesis is literal truth. I have that right and no one should be allowed to shut me down. I also have the right to claim that the Holocaust is a hoax and that it never happened. But were I a professor of Geology who taught my students that the Earth is 6000 years old, or were I a professor of modern European history teaching that the Holocaust didn't happen, I could be—and, I would argue, I should be—fired. Because unlike the First Amendment academic freedom is not about the freedom to say whatever one thinks. It is not about the free marketplace of ideas. It is about the protection of professional expertise.

As professionals we have the responsibility to teach according to the methodologies and findings of our respective disciplines. Now most of us have to come to think that our disciplines generally survive and develop best when they are as open and flexible as possible, when they treat new ideas and iconoclastic notions with consideration. But ultimately it's about saying this is right, that's wrong. And that returns us to the intellectual life. Recognizing that the intellectual life involves expertise, involves knowledge, involves disciplined thinking is essential. We cannot retreat from the notion that the purpose of the university is, as Susan Jacoby put it, to train minds to think more clearly. To do that we must exercise a certain level of intellectual discrimination.

In a sense we are fighting a battle on two fronts. To resist anti-intellectualism we must, on the one hand, resist the encroachments on the academy posed by the corporatizing agenda, with its emphasis on the "practical" and the profitable. On the other hand, we cannot truly uphold the

life of the mind if we fail to recognize that the intellectuals are not the only ones with ideas, that as teachers we must learn from our students even as we teach them. In the end, the training and uplifting of minds must be democratic if genuine intellect is to thrive. And if collective bargaining is to succeed, if it is to move us beyond never-ending battles over money and interest, our efforts must be shaped by our common defense of intellect and democratic promise.