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## Professors and the Humanities and the Challenge of Corporate Universities

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dozwolonego użytku.

Clarinda E. Calma\*

## PROFESSORS AND THE HUMANITIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF CORPORATE

(Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors. The Corporate Universities and the Fate of the Humanities*. New York: Fordham University Press 2008, xix + pp. 180)

The aim of Frank Donoghue's new book, *The Last Professors. The Corporate Universities and the Fate of the Humanities*, is to present a detailed historical and sociological analysis of the deep and irreversible changes that American universities are undergoing today. It is based on the assumption that corporations, though once heavily criticized by academics and often seen as driven by market forces once perceived as incompatible with the ideals of the university, are radically changing the institution of universities in general, and the lives of professors in particular. Moreover, to attack the university as an institution that has safeguarded the need for studying the liberal arts, to question the usefulness of professors who engage both in instruction and in scholarly investigation as bastions of culture, is inevitably inseparable from attacking the humanities. In fact, as the author boldly states in the preface of his book, "I take a dispassionate look at how our jobs have evolved and how they have come to be assessed (and devalued) by corporate standards. I speculate on why those jobs are likely to vanish in the not-too-distant future and on what universities might look like without professors" (p. xvi). Continuing on this pessimistic note, which carries on throughout the book, Donoghue continues, "I think that professors of humanities have already lost the power to rescue themselves" (p. xvi).

Unlike what the reader might expect, the author shies away from using the word "crisis." Instead, he makes a conscious decision to avoid the word, which has been omnipresent in any debates within and without the academe. What he proposes is an in-depth analysis, sup-

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ported by the corpus of pamphlets, university speeches and books dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, which only convincingly proves that an animosity had always existed between the academe and the industrial and mercantile industries. The main topic of these hostile attacks on the university, which have been repeated particularly by the first generation of capitalists like a tiresome mantra, was that studying the humanities was a useless occupation, for it did not prepare college graduates for the hard life of work, where pragmatic skills were more needed. To put the argument behind this way of thinking simply and bluntly, the humanities did not teach graduates to be market smart. In the first chapter, entitled "Rhetoric, History and the Problem of the Humanities," Donoghue draws from an abundance of sources, from university addresses and publications in the form of exposés and pamphlets made by the first generation of capitalists, such as Andrew Carnegie, Clarence F. Birdseye and Richard Teller Crane. He emphasizes the fact that the American economy was growing very rapidly and at an unprecedented rate at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from a gross income of \$ 87.9 billion at the end of the 19th century to \$ 335.4 billion by the 1920s. The number of universities in this period practically doubled in number, from 977 institutions in 1900 to 1,409 by the 1930s (p. 3). It was against this historical backdrop of industrial and economic superiority that the first generation of capitalists spoke up against American universities. Andrew Carnegie, a self-made multimillionaire of humble education was, as Donoghue observes, the first to defend the need for a more utilitarian approach to education. Quoting Carnegie, in an address delivered to graduates of Pierce College of Business and Shorthand of Philadelphia in 1891, Donoghue observes: "After this flurry of mixed metaphors, Carnegie concludes that 'college education as it exists today seems almost fatal' in the business domain, and he starkly contrasts such traditionally educated students, 'as adapted for life on another planet'" (p. 4). Birdseye takes a further step in his book published in 1907, *Individual Training in Our Colleges*, in explicitly saying that since "our colleges have become part of the business and commercial machinery... they must therefore be measured by the same standards" (Birdseye quoted on p. 5). But perhaps, as Donoghue himself acknowledges, it is Richard Teller Crane who is the most aggressive in his attacks on the liberal arts. Crane published three pamphlets, *The Futility of Higher Schooling*, *The Futility of Technical Schools*, *The Demoralization of College Life* and a book, *The Utility of All Kinds of Higher Schooling*. Crane based his publications on research gathered by a private investigator, whom Crane had hired to spy on the lives of Harvard undergraduates. The

purpose of his writing was to examine and praise knowledge that was truly worth one's while, for time should not be wasted, so he claims, on the "impractical special knowledge of literature, arts, languages or history" (quoted on p. 6). As Donoghue stresses, Birsdeye goes so far as to say that "no man who has a taste for literature has the right to be happy, ...for the only men entitled to happiness in this world are those who are useful" (quoted on p. 6). This unwillingness to recognize the market value of the liberal arts is something that continues to exist within the academe itself, in which businessmen, for example, have been included as part of the board of directors of almost all American universities. This, of course, entails a certain clash of priorities within the administrative level of the universities itself. First and foremost, this has led to the development of a system of accountancy within the academe, for the "corporate overseers" of the universities who often "value the expedient and immediately tangible above all else, even pandering to the popular conception of the university as an 'aggregation of buildings and other improved real-estate' by spending more money to improve the appearance of their campuses than on any more abstract and purely intellectual goods" (pp. 10-11). If there is one thing that Donoghue makes clear with this first chapter, it is that universities should not only educate students in business-related subjects, but more importantly, universities should *function* (italics mine) like businesses themselves. The last pages of this first chapter dwell on how the academe, itself often hostile to the attacks of corporations, has unfortunately failed to address the issue properly and effectively, since academics have only centered their debates on the *what* and *how* of teaching the subjects, at the expense of providing a useful answer to *who* it is that should teach themselves (p. 21). This is a mistake, as Donoghue sulkily claims, that professors themselves will have to pay for themselves in the future, unless of course they undertake an open dialogue to redefine themselves and the role of the humanities today.

The title of chapter two, *Competing in the Academe*, speaks for itself. Here the author argues that, despite the fact that the academe has always been skeptical of the so-called corporate values of "transparency, effectiveness and competitive achievement," it has in fact incorporated these values in the race for academic prestige. He begins the chapter by discussing the problem of PhD attrition. Firstly, he discusses the somewhat "painful and difficult mystery" of post-graduate education. There is, he stresses, a great imbalance between the number of existing universities (3,500 traditional universities in the United States) and 133 institutions (20%) which actually account for up to 80% of PhD graduates. The requirements to enter post-graduate or PhD pro-

grams are very restrictive. Here he cites that the average English PhD program admits 20% of those who apply for doctoral studies, many of whom comprise the most gifted in the baccalaureate population. Moreover, it seems that only 15% of those who actually begin successfully defend their dissertation. He refers here to a study conducted by the Modern Language Association (MLA) last 2006. The study concentrated on the number of students who dropped out of the average three-year English PhD program. An average rate of 6.5% of the students was found to drop out per annum. However, in the complementary study "Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2004," of the 6,457 PhD students with teaching assignments, only 933 were actually awarded the PhD (p. 27). The question that logically follows is "what happened to the roughly 5,500 PhD students?" Then comes an attempt to address the problem of PhD drop-outs. Many of those who drop out of doctoral studies have been reported to have higher GRE and GPA scores than the average student. He also points to the fact that many studies have only concentrated on the "environmental factors" that surround the problem (p. 28), while ignoring the personal (and often financial) commitment and sacrifice required to pursue research, which is central to a completing a PhD (p. 30). Of those who successfully complete the PhD program and defend their dissertation, the author likewise stresses an often neglected aspect of academic life: the competitive academic job market. More than 43% of those who got their PhD's in 2000–2001 did not find tenure track posts within a year of defending their thesis. Moreover, most of those who do indeed teach find courses outside of their area of research or interest. The academic job market does not look promising, Donoghue continues, for especially in the case of the humanities, "there is no market at all." Quoting Marc Bousquet, the author continues that in fact universities do not look for the best, but the cheapest teachers. "For the last thirty years, the most cost-efficient higher education teachers have been adjuncts without PhD's. Universities do not prefer to hire the best or most experienced teachers, but the cheapest teachers thus the 'market' demand for PhD's is permanently and artificially suppressed" (p. 34). The long and difficult road to success only becomes much longer (literally – when considering the amount of pages that have to be published). Competition in the academe has made it imperative to establish a uniform set of standards, against which candidates for tenure track can be "qualified." This has led to the establishment of an imperative: "publish or perish." Once on a tenure track job, the "few humanities PhD's who do get a tenure track job cannot afford to celebrate, for they must immediately embark on a new competition that only end with tenure. ...in the disciplines of literature and histo-

ry, this new competition entails publishing a book” (p. 40). And prospects definitely do not get brighter, for despite the obligation to have scholarly publications, the financial budget of most university presses have only shrunk. This is most probably due to the fact that, while thirty years ago 80% the library’s budget went to book acquisitions, today it has been reduced to 20%, most probably owing to the fact that most libraries prefer to invest in JSTOR online publications, which, lest we forget, sometimes end up being much more expensive. Electronic publications have sometimes been seen as the cure for these budget restraints; however, as Donoghue points out, electronic publishing also entails costs for “decoding the book in XML, paying for Web developer’s time and searching for library subscriptions” (p. 44). Then comes the real question, says Donoghue: Who are all these academics publishing *for* (italics mine) in the first place? Indeed, in today’s competitive academic world, not even one’s colleagues would bother to read one’s publication, and the burden of reviewing is often left to the discretion of publishing houses. Indeed, the disastrous state of scholarly publishing has been reduced to, “the production of the unreadable for the unprofitable” (Markley quoted on p. 45).

In chapter three, “The Erosion of Tenure,” Donoghue first dwells on the history of tenure, then moves on to demonstrating the growing suspicion in the perception of tenured professors, and the actually diminishing number of professors on tenure or tenure-track positions. Tenure, he explains, began as an initiative of the American Association of University Professors, who in 1915 issued a declaration in defense of academic freedom, moved by concern for certain instances of higher education teachers “fired under suspicious circumstances (p. 74)”. Although the declaration does not actually use the word tenure, and is cautious in even using the word “professor” (if so only in quotations), it does use the word “university teacher.” Its sole concern was to explain and defend academic freedom, drawing not from, as Donoghue observes, the First Amendment to the Constitution, but from the German notion of *Lehfreiheit*, from the German tradition of higher learning (p. 75). The brief explanation of the document is followed by a short historical and sociological overview, of how academics themselves not only abused the word “tenure” but also “academic freedom” itself. However, the prevalent suspicion, if not hostility to tenure is, according to the author, “motivated by far more straightforwardly economic rather than by political concerns” (p. 79).

The significant role of the economic factor in redefining the modern university is dealt with in detail in the last two chapters, “Professors of the Future” and “Prestige and Prestige Envy.” The factors that are rapidly changing the long and warped fabric of university education



and the tradition that it has represented are, as the author sees it, the changing demography of the student population. In 1970 only 22% were aged over twenty-five, with the vast majority enrolled as full-time residence students. Today, writes Donoghue, this is a thing of the past, with only 16% of today's students fitting within the definition of the "traditional student" and up to 81% enrolled in public institutions working part time. We are only reaping the fruits of the part-time education option first introduced in 1959 (p. 90). Another perhaps more decisive factor is the rise of for-profit universities, quickly gaining prominence with their persuasive if not aggressive advertising and marketing campaigns. And it is here where Donoghue's forecast darkens; in the discussion devoted almost solely to the profile of the for-profit university, university education takes a revolutionary turn. The epitome of these universities, Donoghue claims, is the University of Phoenix. With a student population of nearly 300,000 (making it the largest in the US), and a convenience-driven policy aimed at tempting the most students possible, for-profit institutions are changing the role of the university teacher. Indeed, as Donoghue quotes from the Apollo Group, Inc. web site (the largest postsecondary institution specializing in IT educational programs and owners of the University of Phoenix), professors have been termed "practitioner faculty" (p. 97). Moreover, almost all courses are available on-line, which in turn has serious implications. Firstly, there are no professors in these universities. They have been done away with as an unnecessary "expense," for online courses are advertised as being administered and mentored by *appropriate faculty* (p. 100). For having done away with expensive tenured professors, "prepackaged courseware and self-guided courses would make it easier for less experienced, cheaper instructors to do the teaching" (p. 101). Secondly, since humanities courses such as philosophy, literature and history are difficult to "granularize," most educational institutions simply do away with them (p. 101). Lastly, on-line education also signifies greater administrative control over the courses, therefore less academic autonomy. Perhaps as a disclaimer, Donoghue states that the traditional universities offering humanities and tutorials will continue to exist, but the gap in the quality of education between these kinds of institutions will only widen, making attendance to traditional universities such as Harvard, Yale or Princeton a luxury (p. 84).

Having thus painted this dark scenario of university education, the book ends with a plea to professors, if they want to prevent their "extinction." They must devote themselves "to studying the institutional histories of scholarly research, of tenure of academic status, and per-

haps most important, of the ever changing college curriculum” for only in doing so, “can we prepare ourselves for the future” (p. 138).

Though it definitely leaves a bad taste in the mouth, this book certainly gives one much food for thought. Exhaustive and comprehensive, brave and in-depth, Donoghue does, however, fail to address at least two issues. Firstly, as Donoghue himself states in his introduction, it would be interesting to have a look at the second generation of capitalists from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, when humanities departments in universities were booming. In his introduction, he mentions and promises an analysis of how, especially in the era of the Cold War and thus of the soulless Soviet Union, many a university and corporation valued the importance of the humanities. Unfortunately he does not, however, deal satisfactorily with this issue, as promised. Secondly, while it is true that we are indeed witnessing the rapid rise of the for-profit university, this will not replace traditional universities, which are first and foremost addressed to a different brand of student. The kind that is dedicated to study and interested in fruitful intellectual interaction with both his/her peers and teachers. At least we can hope that this is the case.



**Clarinda E. Calma** jest doktorem nauk humanistycznych w zakresie literaturoznawstwa. Jest absolwentką Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Obecnie pracuje jako adiunkt w Wyższej Szkole Europejskiej im. ks. J. Tischnera i zajmuje się przede wszystkim poezją metafizyczną oraz ogólnie XVI-, XVII-wieczną literaturą i kulturą brytyjską.