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Teach or Perish

By Jacques Berlinerblau

My undergraduates' career plans are a peculiar mix of naked ambition and hair-shirt altruism. If they pursue investment banking, they do so not merely to make money. Rather, they wish to use their eventual wealth to distribute solar light bulbs to every resident of a developing nation. They'll apply to the finest law schools in hopes of some day judging war criminals at The Hague. Countless want to code. They dream of engineering an app that will make tequila flow out of thin air into your outstretched shot glass. My students, I suspect, are receiving their professional advice from a council of emojis.

There is one occupation, however, that rarely figures in their reveries. Few of these kids hanker to become professors. Maybe that's because undergraduates no longer believe that the university is where the life of the mind is lived. Or perhaps they are endowed with acute emotional intelligence; they intuit that their instructors are sort of sad and broken on the inside. It's also possible that the specter of entombing oneself in a study carrel does not appeal to them.

I guess they must also read those headlines, the ones suggesting that the liberal arts as we know them, and the scholars who toil within, are about to get rolled. I rehearse, with light annotation, some of these headlines here. Tenure-track positions in the humanities are—poof!—continually evaporating. Contingent faculty make up around 75 percent of educators in postsecondary institutions. To read an account of a part-timer's daily grind is like reading *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Then there are the stories about MOOCs, "outcome based" online

start-up colleges, and other forms of curricular disruption. Awash in VC cash, such initiatives portend the final, ignominious breakdown of the professorial status quo. They augur a future when even fewer (underpaid, contingent) scholars will serve swelling numbers of students. Job markets are fluxing into oblivion, and I surmise that our young charges have taken notice of that, too.

Some observers contend that the headlines are overwrought. The academy has endured crises before and has adapted. And who's to say that faculty members had it so good in the past? Ever read a campus novel, like John Williams's *Stoner* or Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* or Randall Jarrell's *Pictures From an Institution*? Do those fictional scholars of bygone eras seem existentially content and professionally fulfilled?

Those novels chronicled some well-known infirmities of our vocation (e.g., infinite hours, philistinism run amok, Midwestern college towns). Those problems continue to vex. Couple them with the grim headlines and it becomes difficult to remain optimistic. With all due respect to the it's-not-that-bad crowd, it's bad enough. I'm going to assume it's bad enough for a 53-year-old adjunct. I'll venture that it's pretty unbearable for the grad student whose debts mount while her job interviews dwindle. I know it's pretty depressing for the countless tenured professors who often tell me that they will not advise their best undergraduates to pursue doctorates. What does it say about a profession when its most successful members stand ready to discourage apprentices—apprentices who, I hasten to add, do not exist?

We humanists are at an inflection point, careering down the steep gradient like terrified campers on a mammoth water slide. We accelerate into the bottomless future, arms flailing, mouths wide open, eyes closed, gowns streaming behind us. Where'd our caps go? How did it come to this? How did such an august body find itself in this undignified position?

Like the downfall of an empire, the collapse of something as complex as the professoriate defies simple monocausal analysis. There is, undoubtedly, a multitude of factors that account for our plight. Many are beyond our control and culpability, like decreased public funding for higher education and America's inveterate anti-intellectualism.

That said, we can and should be held accountable for all sorts of inanities. If the nation's humanities faculty consulted a life coach, even a representative of that peppy and platitudinous guild would conclude that we have made some bad decisions. It was not unwarranted to pose political questions in our research. We erred, however, in politicizing inquiry to the extent that we did. There is nothing wrong with importing theory into studies of literature, art, cinema, and so forth. It was ill-advised to bring so *much* theory—and almost always the same dense and ideologically tinctured brand of it—to bear on our vast canon of texts and traditions.

But no decision we ever made could have been more catastrophic than this one: Somewhere along the way, we spiritually and emotionally disengaged from teaching and mentoring students. The decision—which certainly hasn't ingratiated us to the job-seeking generation—has resulted in one whopper of a contradiction. While teaching undergraduates is, normally, a large part of a professor's job, *success in our field is correlated with a professor's ability to avoid teaching undergraduates.*

It follows from this contradiction that the more accomplished the scholar, the less she or he is required to engage with students. Prestigious institutions perpetuate this logic by freeing their most distinguished faculty members from classroom responsibilities. Such luminaries, of course, might be asked to teach a small graduate course in their area of microspecialization. Or they might speak at multitudes of underclassmen in a stadium-size auditorium. These stars will be shielded by a battalion of teaching assistants, lest they be disquieted by some sophomore's imbecilic concern about her midterm grade.

Permit me to illustrate these contradictions with a personal example. When I was an adjunct, teaching at (criminally) underfunded public community colleges and universities, I would cobble together six courses in the fall and six more in the spring. When I won the lottery and received a tenure-track job at a midlevel institution, I graduated to a 3-3. After improbably hitting another jackpot and making it to an elite university, I now enjoy the luxury of a 2-1. I have never been so garlanded in my field as to receive the 0-1 or the vaunted "double zero"—the mark of exemplary scholarly achievement.

We live by the unspoken creed that teaching is, well, not really what one is supposed to be doing. Conversely, doing a lot of teaching is construed as a sign that one is not doing well. This perverse reasoning leads scholars to conjure up all manner of strategies geared to evading the lectern and maximizing undisturbed research time. In their ingenuity and inventiveness, these tactics have the quality of grift. There are those who robo-teach scads of extra classes for a few consecutive semesters, including summers, so as to bank years of liberty. There are "bishops" who convince some higher-up that they can function as part of the magisterium of the college by taking up residence indefinitely in a city far, far away. There are those who barter with deans to remain on sabbatical in perpetuity. Anything to avoid the servitude of the syllabus.

Of course, somebody's gotta teach all those undergraduates—they won't teach themselves! A tremendous debt of gratitude is owed to the so-called losers—the full- and part-timers who teave and slave in classrooms with students. I salute them. But it must be acknowledged that many of these hard-working scholars would eagerly shuck aside all those fresh-faced freshmen in exchange for a double zero. As teachers they don't lack for industry; they lack for passion.

How we arrived at a point where teaching is reckoned as a burden and a stigma is not a story I can recount here. The retreat from the classroom is like that long stretch of highway you navigated to get

home but can't recall in any detail. We obviously went down that road as a guild—we just can't remember when or how. Now we're here. It may be too late to turn back.

In many ways, we resemble the ailing magazine, newspaper, and taxi industries: crippled by challenges we never imagined, risks we never calculated, queries we never posed. Here are some questions we didn't ask but really should have: Was it sustainable to configure a field so that the quality and (mostly) quantity of peer-reviewed research became the unrivaled metric by which status and advancement were attained? Ought we to have investigated whether there exists a point of diminishing returns—a line beyond which too much publication, too much specialization, becomes intellectually counterproductive? Why did we fail to examine the long-term impact on both students and scholars of having the latter so singularly focused on publishing? Why did we not promote the ideal of professors equally skilled in both research and instruction? Why did we invest so little thought in puzzling through how teaching excellence could result in tenure? Was it wise never to train graduate students how to write clearly, speak publicly, and teach effectively?

For a guild that prides itself on research, we sure didn't invest much effort into what the corporate folk call "research and development." Who was thinking about the consequences of our inadvertent drift away from students in the final decades of the 20th century? And who's thinking about it now?

I don't want to sound like a TED talker, but the fundamental shift in higher education is going to go something like this: We're moving from an era in which we prized accumulating knowledge to one in which we equally prize its transmission. Professors are failing to deliver, as it were. This leaves us fatally exposed to challenges that are unnerving and in some cases unprecedented.

Let's start with a political climate in which the size and role of government is being strenuously contested. Many elected officials, usually of the Republican persuasion, appear disinclined to

allocate funds to The U. They are revolting against a longstanding civic compact whose cheerful, mid-20th-century rationale could be charted as follows:

The commonwealth apportions tax monies to a public university. This institution teems with experts whose scholarly judgment we trust. These savants offer a tenure-track line to a scholar of great promise, who is permitted to spend a semester furrowing through an archive in Belarus for the juvenilia of a formidable but unknown poetess. He then subsequently shares his specialized insights, upon his chipper return to the States, with appreciative undergraduates, who, of course, then graduate and enrich America's culture and future.

Conservative figures across the nation have endeavored to bludgeon every single phoneme of this flow chart. They trust neither the public institutions, nor the scholars in their employ, nor their promise for the American future. Embroiled in a raucous debate about funding for the University of North Carolina, Gov. Patrick McCrory recently said to William Bennett, "If you want to take gender studies, that's fine—go to a private school and take it. But I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job."

On his website, McCrory speaks of the need to "align higher education with changing market needs." The public, he contends, along with many other Republicans, is entitled to receive a quantifiable public good from public dollars. To a certain extent, the Obama administration, with its blurry vision of rating colleges according to "labor-market outcomes," shares this rationale. Much of America's leadership class doubts that courses in Victorian literature, or functionalist sociology, or the Harlem Renaissance do much for the commonweal.

It's a deceptively difficult argument to neutralize. Scholars generally push back by uttering something about "critical-thinking skills." We've been reflexively mouthing that line for decades. As we say it, however, our thoughts are actually concentrated on making next week's deadline for a research grant. What we really

need to argue, or, better yet, prove, is that the college classroom and its personnel transmit lessons and intangibles that are invaluable to the nation's well-being.

Jobs? Surely someone over in the B-school has demonstrated that better-educated employees are more productive employees. Innovation? We respond that an ensemble of challenging courses in the liberal arts, including gender studies, incubates innovation. Market needs? Our view is that through mentorship a professor helps undergraduates pragmatically ponder their proper vocational niches. Citizenship? We hold that learning how to be an American takes place in a seminar where people argue, civilly but intensely, about ideas. What other national institution offers up such deliverables?

Two conservative writers, Jonathan Riehl and Scot Faulkner, invoked some of these themes in a rejoinder to McCrory. They chastened the Republican governor for espousing "anticonservative" principles. "The notion of colleges and universities as factories for job-performance," they wrote, "smacks much more of leftist, socialist societies where individuals were not valued for their knowledge or perception but for their ability to perform tasks." They also doubted that McCrory's initiatives would make graduates more competitive in global markets. "Is it not practical in preparation for entering the work force," ask the authors, "to have read deeply in philosophy, cultural history, politics and literature?"

Those are the types of talking points that all professors should be voicing. Whether we are conservatives, liberals, or radical leftists, whether we work in private or public institutions, whether we are contingent or noncontingent faculty, we need to proclaim these truths together. Regrettably, we are so comically atomized as a guild that we'll never unite to protect our mutual interests.

But an even bigger impediment is that we can't make any of the above claims in good faith. That's because so few actually retain the commitment to teaching that powers the Narrative of Righteous Professors and Mentors whose contours I have just

sketched. In theory, many great things can happen in the American college classroom. In practice, our upside-down set of priorities assures that those things occur far less frequently than they should. After all, that fellow in the archive is doing everything he can to spend another year in Belarus. And then another.

To effectively neutralize increasingly common assaults such as McCrory's, we need to demonstrate that professors are deeply invested in, and committed to, the minds of undergraduates. Not just a few professors. All professors. Every provost in the United States can trot out a dozen ringers. These are scholars who reek of chalk and marker, who stock linens and pillows in their offices, who are masters of conveying their expertise. Mentoring, for them, is no act of altruism but a moral injunction. These creatures do exist. But they are the exception, not the norm. My fear is that if we don't multiply their presence very quickly (but how?), our crisis will grow deeper.

Our disarticulation of knowledge accumulation and knowledge transmission also leaves us exposed to an even more frightening adversary. I refer to tech and its maniacal destabilizing energy. Financiers have recognized that there's good money to be made in conveying knowledge; their thoughts, naturally, do not linger on the costly infrastructure that produces knowledge. Working in tandem with the digital wizards, they wager that they can do it better than we can and cash out in the process. Given that they're up against a cohort that has very little interest, or dexterity, in sharing its immense store of wisdom, the money and tech people like their odds.

So do I. The specs on this showdown suggest a brutal smackdown. We are old. They are young. We are risk-averse. They posit chaos as a sacrament. We are locked into traditions of inquiry centuries in the making. They like to "break shit." We see an undergraduate as a speed bump en route to a research project. They see an undergraduate as something to be monetized. We scrimp to provide a visiting lecturer with a $150 honorarium. They are connected to reserves of capital unimaginable just a decade back.

We are an abacus. They are an iPad.

I think we should sue for peace—a humiliating peace insofar as our conquerors haven't even made it past their 10-year reunion. The digital technologies they fabricate are already driving classroom innovation. I sometimes wonder, though, if the present enthusiasm for alternative pedagogies, like "flipped classrooms," is a 21st-century virtue born of a late-20th-century vice. The art of college-classroom teaching had fallen into complete disrepair. Simply put, having professors do what they'd been doing for the past few centuries was no longer viable.

Enter the new masters with their cyber-superpowers and hoodies. They have imparted to us, their teachers, an abiding truth about the humanist's ethos: What you can help others know is as valuable as what you know.

The adage "publish or perish" is outdated, almost sinister in its misdirection. For the truth is that many well-published Ph.D.'s are out of academe altogether. At colleges across the country, there labor underemployed scholars with stellar CVs. Their accomplishments, at least in the first decade beyond their thesis defense, are usually comparable to those of their far less numerous tenured counterparts. The slogan we lived by is, empirically speaking, false. It really should have read "publish *and* perish." If the metric of success in our profession is a tenure-track position at a liberal-arts college, then most of our recent doctorates are perishing.

As for today's graduate students, how different they are from today's emoji-driven undergraduates. A few years back, the former did hanker to become professors. Most of them probably still do—though maybe they wish they had listened more carefully to their faculty mentors, assuming they had one.

When forlorn A.B.D.'s in the humanities ask me for advice, I recommend that they think in terms of "teach or perish." Society will always need skilled transmitters of knowledge. But another peer-reviewed article on the "circulation of Enlightenment

triumphalism" in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, not so much. Don't get me wrong. *Tess* stands among the most spectacular fictions ever composed in English. It shouldn't live on only in the sepulcher of a scholarly journal. Its afterlife should be experienced in the minds of students, their awe for the novel's innumerable charms ignited by a professor. That *Tess*'s fate is linked to our own is a probability I won't address here.

If all the dour reflections above are accurate—if they are half-accurate—we will need to rethink our priorities and core concerns. The kindergarten instructor, I surmise, likes those little tykes, thinks they're cute. I have met seventh-grade teachers who reveal to me why they work in middle schools: They are mesmerized by the dorky majesty that is the mind of a child age 11 or 12. In this spirit, I submit a re-visioning of an American college professor's job description: The successful candidate will be skilled in, and passionately devoted to, teaching and mentoring 18- to 22-year-olds, as well as those in other age groups. Additionally, she or he will show promise as an original and creative researcher.

Jacques Berlinerblau is a professor of Jewish civilization in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. His most recent book is Secularism on the Edge: Re-thinking Church-State Relations in the United States, France, and Israel *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, co-edited with Sarah Fainberg and Aurora Nou). This semester he is teaching one course, "Philip Roth: Fiction About Fiction."*