

CAMPUS TOUR

We have to recognize that the University is a *ruined institution*, while thinking what it means to dwell in those ruins without recourse to romantic nostalgia.

—Bill Readings¹

First, let's make a quick stop at the University of California, Los Angeles, to gather some information. Since 1966, UCLA has conducted a nationwide survey of incoming freshmen about their goals for college and life. One survey question gives us a fascinating glimpse into changing values, asking the freshmen to indicate “to you personally the importance” of a variety of goals such as “becoming an authority in my field,” “raising a family,” “keeping up to date with political affairs,” and “improving my understanding of other . . . cultures.” Given our faith in the young to recall us to our ideals when we drift toward cynicism, two items on this question stand out: “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” and “being very well-off financially.” The changing priorities tell the story of the last half century (see table 1).

The trend lines draw an indelible X, the cynical chiasmus that is the signature of late capitalism. The desire to be *very* well-off (comfortable is not enough) rises steadily; the meaning of life plummets, wallowing in the mid-forties since the reelection of Ronald Reagan.

Unsurprisingly, these value shifts are mirrored in the changing popularity of college majors. In 1971, there were more humanities majors (16.6%) than business majors (13.7%); in 2020, there were almost three times as many business majors (19%) as humanities majors (6.9%).³ Or consider the relative number of majors in these five fields in 2020:

1. Business (387,851)
2. Engineering (128,322)

3. Homeland security, law enforcement, and firefighting (57,044)
4. Parks, recreation, leisure, fitness studies, and kinesiology (53,749)
5. Philosophy and religious studies (11,889)⁴

Perhaps the meaning of life is clear after all.

As college education comes to resemble professional training, and training itself devolves into mere credentialing, branding becomes difficult. How do you dress up a labor market queue in the garb of higher learning? Thus, Cornell recently found itself uneasy with its double identity as both an Ivy League institution and a “farm school,” that is a large land-grant university with strong agricultural programs.⁵ To deal with this ironic case of “Ivy envy,” an “image committee” was formed and the university bookstore unveiled “a new line of hats and sweatshirts that looked vintage and emphasized Cornell’s Ivy tradition. A blue fitted hat with a simple red C became a big seller, as did a red hooded sweatshirt with a small C on the front.”⁶

Readings offers another vivid example of this double bind in action, from his days at Syracuse University in the late eighties. At the time, Syracuse was rethinking itself “as an aggressive institution that modeled itself on the corporation rather than clinging to ivy-covered walls.”⁷ The problem is that the university is a very particular kind of corporation, “one of whose functions (products?) is the granting of degrees with a cultural cachet.”⁸ This tension revealed itself in Syracuse’s visual rebranding process. A new “explicitly ‘corporate’ logo” was designed, sidelining the traditional seal bearing the Latin motto “Suos Cultores Scientia Coronat” (Science crowns those who seek her).⁹ However, Syracuse retained the traditional seal “for official academic documents such as degree certificates.”¹⁰ There have been several rebrandings since this time. The current logo is a simple block “S” (orange on white or vice versa), which the Division of Marketing and Communication describes as “bold and dynamic, reflecting how

Table 1

Students by decade deeming stated goal “very important” or “essential”²

	1966–1969	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	85.2%	67.8%	47.9%	45.8%	44.7%	46.6%
Being very well-off financially	41.5%	47.6%	69.2%	72.4%	74.5%	81.6%

we connect exploration and action to go beyond what's possible.”¹¹ Just as Readings predicts, the brand guidelines add this note: “While our primary logo should be applied in most contexts, the heritage logo can be a powerful way to elevate our prowess and prestige.”¹²

Our next stop is the University of Virginia. As the story goes, Jefferson was so proud of his founding of UVA that he chose it as one of three accomplishments to be inscribed on his gravestone, leaving off such minor accomplishments as governor of Virginia and president of the United States.¹³ At the heart of Jefferson's vision for UVA was its main quad or “academical village,” at once a literal and educational architecture designed to create a conversational community of learners.¹⁴ The early curriculum was varied in content and public-minded in its aims. Jefferson requested professorships in ten areas: ancient and natural languages, pure and applied mathematics, physical and life sciences, law and medicine, government and humane letters.¹⁵ Jefferson wanted UVA to offer a “higher grade of education,” forming in students “reasoning faculties” and “habits of reflection,” to “enlarge their minds” and “cultivate their morals,” “rendering them examples of virtue to others & of happiness within themselves,” all of this in order to “provide for the good . . . of their country.”¹⁶ But times have changed and universities have evolved. Has this pedagogical architecture become outmoded?

As it happens, there was an attempted coup in Charlottesville in 2012 that turned on this very question. UVA's first female president, Teresa Sullivan, was just concluding her second year in office. By all accounts, things were going well. Sullivan was well liked by both faculty and students, a fact that became apparent in the vocal protests triggered by her temporary ouster.¹⁷ So what led UVA to try to remove a popular president who had just begun to serve? The Sullivan ouster was spearheaded by the chair (“Rector”) of the board of trustees (“Board of Visitors”), the real-estate developer Helen Dragas.¹⁸ Dragas and her allies were pressing for structural changes, hoping to shift resources away from “obscure academic departments” such as German and Classics and to get in on the ground floor of the MOOC (massive open online course) revolution.¹⁹

Sullivan is no rabid humanist, mind you, but a quantitative demographer by training, whose leadership style has been described as “technocratic.”²⁰ Indeed, one of her first moves in office was to shift UVA to an RCM (responsibility center management) budget model, the hallmark of the corporate

university.²¹ However, Sullivan made the mistake of urging a cautious approach to launching the academical village into cyberspace. According to Dragas, Sullivan was wedded to a problematic “model of incremental, marginal change.”²² By contrast, Dragas was preaching the gospel according to Clayton Christensen: disrupt or be disrupted.²³ And lo: Betamax begat VHS which begat the DVD which begat Blu-ray which begat Netflix. And Christensen saw that it was good. “All that is solid melts into air,” Marx and Engels observed ambivalently; “all that is holy is profaned.”²⁴ MELT IT!, the Christensenians chant. According to Dragas, UVA (with its traditional baggage of quads, departments, and classrooms) was facing an “existential threat” and a clear choice: pivot into this brave new world of MOOCs or become the Betamax of higher ed.²⁵

Emails from the weeks leading up to the failed ouster show Dragas and Vice-Rector Mark Kington feeding off of the growing hype around MOOCs and Education 2.0. On May 4, Kington sent Dragas a David Brooks editorial from the *Times*, “The Campus Tsunami,” quoting Christensen and hyping Coursera (the for-profit MOOC provider launched earlier that April, announcing partnerships with Penn, Princeton, Stanford, and Michigan). On May 31, Dragas sent Kington an email with the header “good piece in WSJ today—why we can’t afford to wait,” containing a link to “Higher Education’s Online Revolution,” a commentary by John Chubb and Terry Moe with the subhead “The substitution of technology (which is cheap) for labor (which is expensive) can vastly increase access to an elite-caliber education.”²⁶

Even while Dragas was building consensus on the board, she was working with two powerful alumni to build a public case for the removal of Sullivan.²⁷ One was Peter Kiernan, a graduate, like Dragas and Kington, of UVA’s Darden School of Business and chair of Darden’s Foundation Board. Kiernan had been introduced to Dragas by his billionaire buddy, Paul Tudor Jones.²⁸ As resistance to the removal of Sullivan grew, Kiernan and Jones were there, ready to provide Christensenesque ideological cover. Kiernan emailed Darden trustees, stressing the principles of RCM (“many of the schools will face the notion of self sufficiency”) and the need for a leader more disruptive than Sullivan.²⁹ “The governance of the University was not sufficiently tuned to the dramatic changes” faced by universities, he suggested: “These are matters for strategic dynamism rather than strategic planning.”³⁰ Meanwhile, Jones offered his spin on the attempted coup in the form of an op-ed dubbing Jefferson the original “change agent,” applauding the board’s

“bold action” and hoping for a new president who could “chart an innovative path” for UVA in the “world of academia” as it might be in 2032. “Why be good,” Jones asked, “when there is outstanding to be had?”³¹

The story has a curious ending as, while Sullivan was reinstated, Dragas was also reappointed by Governor McDonnell for another term as rector. And despite the outcry caused by the revelation that a real estate developer and a pair of hedge fund operators from Greenwich were trying to “disrupt” Jefferson’s university after a peek into Christensen’s crystal ball, UVA signed on to Coursera anyway, less than a month after Sullivan’s reinstatement. In a statement released on the occasion, Sullivan offered an excellent impression of Dragas and her consiglieres, justifying the decision by saying, “It’s critical for UVA to be in on the ground floor so that we can learn along with our peers what the future holds.”³² These new online courses, Sullivan wrote, “will in no way diminish the value of a UVA degree, but rather enhance our brand and allow others to experience the learning environment of Jefferson’s Academical Village.”³³

We are told that public relations is an art, and perhaps it’s true. Even in this single measure, we see Sullivan’s skill as a composer. Notice the use of counterpoint: the left hand carries the rumbling bass of the uncertain future; the right, the rising tones of certain success. Left hand: the storm clouds of technological change are approaching; the building you are in will likely collapse; you had better get in on the ground floor of the new one! Right hand: rest assured, there are blue skies ahead; your old building will be just as grand as ever. This FOMO counterpoint resolves in a crescendo: Buy now!

While it is risky to press any harder on a PR soundbite, let us be brave. In particular, let’s look more closely at Sullivan’s reassurance that expanding occupancy in the academical village will only enhance UVA’s brand. This is a perfect example of what epistemologists call “bullshit”: it is conceivably true, very likely false, and ultimately truth and falsity are beside the point. What Sullivan declines to discuss is what sort of curtain will be drawn between the first- and second-class cabins in this new hybrid university. For she is surely aware that “the value of a UVA degree” is directly related to the percentage of students denied admissions—this is the cruel but perfectly transparent law of exchange-value governing the market that higher education has become.³⁴

The whole point of ideology—the narratives and images that smooth over our social contradictions—is to blend in. It is this fact that leads Louis

Althusser to describe ideology as a screen of “tenacious obviousnesses.”³⁵ The phrase “massively open” does this work in the case of MOOCs. It eases us into magical thinking: as if problems of access in higher education stemmed merely from the fact that our classrooms were too small. But the contradictions show through when Sullivan conjures up the MOOAV (massively open online academical village). If there were two things Jefferson cared about in his design of UVA, they were scale and materiality. The academical village had to be small enough to foster sustained relationships and some degree of intimacy. When Sullivan insists that the new online audiences will get to “experience the learning environment” that Jefferson designed, she is clearly protesting too much. MOOCs obviously do not transport students to campus; they provide a platform through which professors may “deliver” something we are now told to call “content.” Jefferson would, and we should, flatly reject this alchemical conceit of Education 2.0, that educational form and content can be severed.

The academical village is not transposable content: it is a medium in its own right. The lawn, encircled by the freestanding pavilions and connecting colonnades, embodies what A. Bartlett Giamatti describes as a key phenomenological aspect of liberal learning, the experience of “a free and ordered space.”³⁶ The UVA Coursera page is like a warped version of Jefferson’s village: at the top is a photographic header, showing a corner of the lawn—underneath a list of courses in no discernible order, represented by mostly clip-art icons.³⁷ By contrast, the colonnaded gaps between pavilions on Jefferson’s lawn make palpable the differences among and connections between the disciplines. At the center of the academical village is its secular church, the gorgeous Rotunda that Jefferson modeled on the Pantheon. Here the contrast between Charlottesville and cyberspace is intense. Imagine looking for a book in a space that embodies the aspiration to become citizens of a republic of letters; now imagine double clicking on a pdf.

Jefferson’s lawn also offers a reminder that one need not choose between culture and utility. The idea of the academical village was eminently practical. Jefferson saw too many colleges “overbuilding themselves,” erecting one large building “sufficient to contain the whole institution.”³⁸ Such a building could too easily become “a common den of noise, of filth, and of fetid air” and would be overly “exposed to accident of fire, and . . . bad cases of infection.”³⁹ And as for the beautiful linking colonnades? What

could be more practical than, having separated the pavilions housing each professor, providing covered walkways “under which [the students] may go dry from school to school”?⁴⁰ Jefferson’s distributed pavilions were also fiscally practical, as he “shrewdly realized that the parsimonious state legislators would be more willing to fund a university consisting of modest units rather than a single monumental building.”⁴¹

In both plan and elevation, Jefferson’s pavilions embody key educational ideas. The plan features living quarters above a ground-floor classroom. The entry hallways, with their beautiful arched doorways separating and connecting the two spaces, stage the connection of living and learning.⁴² In the elevations, Jefferson sought “a variety of appearance, no two alike.”⁴³ While UVA would not add a professional school of architecture until 1919, from the start the lawn itself was conceived as a standing classroom for experiential architectural learning.⁴⁴ Jefferson carefully composed the pavilions and colonnades as a study in contrasts across the Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Tuscan orders. In the end, to learn is to *live* ideas, and a human life is an embodied one.

Having evoked the importance of materiality and scale, two caveats are in order. First, I do not mean to suggest that interactions in brick-and-mortar settings are inherently more educative than those in online spaces. It is not hard to imagine pseudo learning on a leafy campus or genuine transformations online. What matters is the creation of a thoughtful architecture to support inquiry, reflection, conversation, and so on. The ratio of brick to click—as education is increasingly hybrid now in any case—is not the deciding factor.⁴⁵

Second, to deflate the fantasy that democratic higher education is just a hyperlink away is neither to deny the importance of access nor to pretend that traditional campuses have been good at providing it. Indeed, turning our attention to the material conditions of educational experience helps concretize the facts of exclusion and subordination. Consider first the history of racial inequality. As Craig Steven Wilder has documented with devastating matter-of-factness, the rise of American universities was intertwined with ideas of racial superiority and purification and was dependent on the economics of slavery.⁴⁶ Jefferson’s university was no exception. UVA did not admit its first African American undergraduate until 1950, and indeed Jefferson himself reports that Charlottesville was chosen for its “centrality to the white population of the state.”⁴⁷ Even as UVA’s

architecture embodies the idea of ordered liberty, it indexes the dialectic of freedom and servitude. The initial construction of Jefferson's academical village was performed by enslaved Black men rented out by local slave owners to the university, which agreed merely to cover the costs of "feeding and maintaining" the slaves and returning them to their masters with "fresh outer- and undergarments."⁴⁸

Class is an equally reliable marker of unequal access, at least if we are talking about access to genuinely higher education.⁴⁹ A recent study found stark differences between the college prospects of rich and poor students:

- The 1% are seventy-seven times more likely to attend an "Ivy-Plus" college than the bottom 20%.⁵⁰
- Thirty-eight US Colleges enroll more students from the 1% than from the bottom 60%.⁵¹

At the ostensibly public UVA, to stick with our example, the median family income of undergraduates is \$155,500; at nearby Piedmont Community College, it is \$42,700. The academical village has been and continues to be a gated community.

It is nonetheless surprising that the inheritors of a flawed but evolving tradition of practice, reflectively shaped for nearly two centuries after Jefferson (who himself was working within a tradition of liberal arts education stretching back for two millennia), would simply hand the reins over to Coursera.⁵² "A university," Michael Oakeshott observes, "is not like a dinghy which can be jiggled about to catch every transient breath of wind."⁵³ Because "time is limited," Herbert Spencer pointed out, educators cannot escape that "question of questions": "What knowledge is of most worth?"⁵⁴ But perhaps Spencer never considered the power of donors to preempt this question. In the same year that German and classics were rumored to be on the chopping block, UVA was cultivating a new \$100 million gift from Jones whose previous \$100 million had included \$35 million to build a basketball facility named after his son.⁵⁵ The first step in securing the new gift was acceding to a request by Jones and his wife, a devotee of Ashtanga Yoga, to launch a yoga-related center at UVA. Though \$15 million was secured to create a new Contemplative Sciences Center, the rest of the nine-figure ask was apparently shelved after the backlash suffered by Dragas and the reinstatement of Sullivan.

Again, the point is not that older subjects are better and newer ones are to be distrusted, only that some thought must be given to the overall shape of the curriculum, to the relation of the different branches of learning. This is what, theoretically, distinguishes a university from Amazon.com. “If the university is to be more than a skillfully coordinated department store,” Grant and Riesman write, “it must somewhere demonstrate that its connections are deeper than the aisles through which consumer preferences are demonstrated.”⁵⁶ Perhaps, after deliberation, a neuroscientific approach to yoga would make the cut (it might even help drum up interest in the meaning of life!). Nonetheless, a university cannot maintain its integrity if it is adding and dropping programs at the whims of donors or perceived consumer appeal. Enter the brave new world of the corporate university: while “hot yoga” is hot, classics and German have to fight it out in a budgetary cage match.⁵⁷

At some point, hedge-fund higher education will realize that it can sell tickets to such bloodsport. For now, the mess is hidden behind “responsibility center management,” a phrase which repackages trend-chasing and the abandonment of cross-subsidization as the sensible request to balance your check-book. Indeed, once we are speaking of “cross-subsidization,” the jig is up, as we have already begun to think of academic units as separate shops and the university as nothing but a tax collector. And it turns out that UVA’s Darden School was a trailblazer in the world of RCM. As David Kirp chronicles, in the late 1990s, UVA was looking for a new dean for Darden, finally finding their man in Ted Snyder, “who combines the calm demeanor of a scholar with the shark’s instinct for the jugular.”⁵⁸ After an offer was made, it took eighteen months for Snyder and UVA to come to terms. The sticking point, it turns out, was the “franchise fee,” the percentage of Darden’s tuition that would have to be coughed up to the university.⁵⁹ Snyder bounced to Yale three years later, but he left Darden in a sweet spot, paying an “internal tax rate” of 10%, “with side payments as a sweetener,” and paying nothing on its “lucrative executive education programs or other private sources.”⁶⁰ UVA’s business school alone now boasts an endowment (\$808 million) larger than that of twelve state flagships.⁶¹

Let’s head next to Harvard Yard to find out how our oldest and richest university distributes resources. In fact, Harvard has practiced a homely version of RCM, “Every tub on its own bottom,” for two centuries.⁶² However,

given its unique brand and stupendous endowment, there is usually no need to select tributes for an academic hunger games. Even “obscure” areas of study such as the humanities have a long established place on the quad. But perhaps the unpopularity of the meaning of life has reached even Cambridge. In 2006, facing a projected one hundred million dollar budget deficit, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences was offered a way to avoid foreclosure: sell off Massachusetts Hall (the oldest surviving building at Harvard, where hundreds of Continental Army soldiers were quartered during the siege of Boston) to the university’s central administration.⁶³

This is ironic, given that one documented budget pressure on the contemporary university is administrative bloat.⁶⁴ While the faculty-to-student ratio has remained constant, there has been a marked growth in the number of administrative and demi-administrative positions and a ballooning of top administrative salaries. During a period (1976–2018) in which the number of students grew by 78% and the number of faculty by 92%, the number of administrators and demi-administrators increased by 339%.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, from 2009 to 2012, in the aftermath of the worst recession since the Great Depression, average pay for *public* university presidents increased 14%, to \$544,554. The gains were even more obscene at the twenty-five highest-paying publics, where presidential pay increased 34% to an average of \$974,006.⁶⁶

Well, here we are at Massachusetts Hall. Built in 1720, it was originally a dormitory, counting among its inhabitants Samuel Adams, John Adams, and John Hancock. Now it houses the offices of the university president, provost, treasurer, and vice presidents. Actually, fourteen freshmen are still housed on the fourth floor of Mass Hall, in the eaves of the academical village.⁶⁷

The last stop on our tour is UC Berkeley. The year is 1964. There seems to be a protest going on at the administration building, Sproul Hall. At the time, there were still philosophy majors, and one of them, Mario Savio, has just grabbed the microphone. Let’s hear what he has to say:

I ask you to consider: If this is a firm, and if the board of regents are the board of directors; and if President Kerr in fact is the manager; then I’ll tell you something. The faculty are a bunch of employees, and we’re the raw material! But we’re a bunch of raw materials that don’t mean to be—have any process upon us. Don’t mean to be made into any product. . . . Don’t mean to end up being

bought by some clients of the University, be they the government, be they industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone! We're human beings!

There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels . . . upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!⁶⁸

The one thing in the world, of value, is active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

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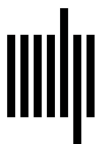
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