

The University in Flux

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AFTER 45 YEARS AS A PROFESSOR at three very different types of universities, after serving on an array of committees (including with the College Board) and holding academic offices, I found myself in agreement with virtually all the observations and claims made by Cathy N. Davidson in this engaging book, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. As I was gathering my thoughts and my notes for this essay I soon discovered that predominantly these were not my thoughts at all but really an exercise in paraphrasing what Davidson was saying in an affirmative manner. For the record, it is not that I am unfamiliar with the genre of book reviews. I have done scores of such reviews over the years and even had a stint as a book review editor. It is just that it is difficult for me to add to a work that is so thorough. It is difficult for me to criticize a work that I so fully agree with. Finally, it is difficult for me to offer any new insights since the author has anticipated every “new” idea that I was going to offer to complement her book. The data that I cite is drawn from this

meticulous, detailed work. I say this not to head off charges of plagiarism, but rather as offering the highest form of approval; that is, my desire to capture what this work offers in a way that will encourage readers to read the entire work for themselves. I am aware that I cannot do justice to the merits of this book, let alone capture the depth of Davidson’s insights, in a few thousand words, but I do think I can make enough points sufficiently to warrant why readers should commit themselves to examining this volume, sharing it with others, and most importantly help to enact changes in higher education offered in this work.

While we may not be able to tell a book by its cover, we usually can tell a lot by its title! After all, a title is the author’s way of directing the minds of readers both to the subject and, in some cases, how readers ought to be viewing the subject. Davidson’s title *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* is both old and new. *The New Education*, ironically, is the old part. Davidson took the title from the work done by the former President of Harvard University, Charles William Eliot. Almost 150 years ago, at the dawning of the 20th Century, Eliot believed that Harvard had out-used its design, its mission and (most importantly) its vision. Harvard had been established to educate ministers and gentle learned men for polite society. Eliot correctly recognized that the population of his day had other needs and, to that end, he radically re-envisioned Harvard. Eliot created many features that not only persist today at Harvard, but have been modeled by most colleges and universities in America into the twenty-first century.

When Eliot began his educational career, Harvard was a Puritan college designed for the clergy and the elite aristocracy of American wealth. In 1869, Eliot wrote “The New Education” calling for a total

transformation of higher education and, to that end, he enacted his vision when he eventually became President of Harvard. Eliot did his homework. He went to Europe to study models and types of universities, discovering that, for the most part, the European universities also catered to the wealthy and religious. However, Eliot was impressed by the pragmatic and vocational orientation of the Humboldt University of Berlin, which seemed to Eliot more responsive to the social needs of the day than the traditional orientation of most universities had been. Eliot saw the need to redirect and to expand American higher education toward vocations and careers in response to the tremendous social changes that were taking place in America after the Civil War.

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Eliot transformed Harvard, Davidson observed, from a Puritan college to a modern university. He did so not just by copying Humboldt but by applying the organization and management principles of non-academic institutions. Eliot was impressed with the emerging “scientific methods” that innovators such as Frederick Winslow Taylor introduced to factories, where, under constant scrutiny, productivity was measured in units, graded, compartmentalized, sectioned into departments, reviewed and evaluated. Enamored by the “new” science of business management and production, Eliot re-conceptualized Harvard as an educational “factory” in an effort to meet the needs of his day. That is, he changed Harvard in some of the following ways: departments, credit hours, grading in a standardized

fashion that moved from oral formative grading to summative (letter) grading. Components were introduced that provided vocational training, professionalism, credential awarding, and accreditation procedures inspired by what Eliot saw being done in highly productive factories.

Eliot was not alone in his desire to modernize universities. He was in contact with other university leaders, both public (the University of Michigan) and private (Stanford, Chicago) who also wanted to change higher education. Such changes not only transformed Harvard, but also other universities who followed in step, since Harvard was regarded as the pinnacle and therefore their paradigm. This infatuation with “Harvardization” extended even in the case of public universities such as The University of Virginia, which had always seen and characterized itself as an elite university... proving that ivy really does grow in the South! Interestingly, Eliot purposefully ignored “land-grant universities” in his plans, since they were too new following the Morrill Acts to be seriously considered. The result was a huge success. Harvard became the model for what a modern university “ought” to be and others, as mentioned earlier, followed in step. To this day, in fact, some public universities like to call themselves “Public Ivies.”

As Davidson says, Eliot’s university had a good long run. Even the American factory, however, is not what it was 100 years ago, nor is American society for that matter, let alone the universities that educate within it. As Davidson accurately points out, however, there are constraints to change and adaptation. Many American universities by and large pride themselves on not changing, of preserving their time-tested methods despite the world changing around them. This stagnation has come, Davidson argues, at a high cost, a

cost that means even more than the debt-generated tuition that is paid by the students and their families. It is a cost, as Davidson points out, that directly and often negatively impacts American society in many ways and, unless changed, will continue to do so.

Davidson's *The New Education* is an effort to do nation-wide what Eliot did a century ago when he wrote his "The New Education" essay to transform Harvard from a Puritan college to a model, national university. That is the focus of the book title following the colon: *How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Davidson is advocating the same sort of transformation but for higher education itself and that actually began with herself. That is, Davidson's own career has been a personal effort to "re-invent" the education that she came to see as essential for American society. She introduced and participated in many expansive and innovative programs at Duke University where for thirty years she served as both a professor and an administrator. Now at the City University of New York, she currently teaches and serves as the Director of the Futures Initiative program there. Her current work crosses the twenty-four CUNY campuses. In fact, many of the suggestions that she offers in *The New Education* are not just ideas but rather programs and practices that she has implemented over the years. Davidson is trying to change higher education and she is backing up her words with her actions; she left a prestigious Methodist-based "Southern Ivy" to take on the challenge of an urban-based public giant. Regardless of whether the road map Davidson unfolds for us in this book is the one we want to follow or not, we have to respect someone who lives out a dream. And this is a good place to make note that Davidson does not merely "critique"

American education but offers many positive solutions—both for teachers and for institutions—to the problems that she exposes, which alone makes the reading of her work essential.

What are the realities of Davidson's dream for higher education? First, she asks us to stop and re-examine our views about the presumptions or starting points for higher education itself and how we go about re-conceptualizing the very idea of higher education. For example, college (in some form) should be available for everyone—the "top 100%" as she presents it—and the best illustration of that availability is our community college system in America. Community colleges are designed to take the top 100% of high school graduates. They are, with intent, not constructed to be a watered-down four-year model but rather an alternative to post-secondary education. They are, with intent, not intended for the professional-managerial model but to serve other more immediate needs facing many Americans, often inner-city and cultural outsiders. Here, Davidson argues, good teaching counts and inventive plans combine to help disenfranchised students. Subway passes enabling poorer students to get to school, study cohorts for group support, bridge loans to meet daily expenses are all innovative ways to help address such needs. We could learn a great deal from community colleges, Davidson points out, and she is absolutely correct.

Davidson also warns about two extremes that "harm in both directions": technophobia and technophilia. For example, MOC (massive open online courses) were heralded as the savior of higher education in 2012 but now have virtually disappeared from the conversation and are all but forgotten. The failure of the MOC education movement exposed that the need for direct, interactive

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communication remains essential to higher education. Technology is, as Davidson reminds us, epistemology and the new mentalities are not being recognized or utilized well enough in higher education. Why? Because although technology shapes our mentalities, they do not satisfy the needs of the whole person. Davidson believes that online learning is here to stay, but will never replace brick-and-mortar universities. The “virtual” university will be of help but will not replace the “real” university, because the virtual university cannot cross over to the dynamic reality of genuine social human interaction any more than a simulated combat video game can possibility hope to duplicate the horrors and trauma of real warfare. We need to benefit from technology but not see it as the solution itself. The solution is to have technology work *with* the arts and humanities and not be seen as their replacement. Love or fear of technology errors when in the extreme; technology with human interaction is the sort of symbiotic unity that benefits the student.

As should be apparent, there are no sacred cows in Davidson’s *The New Education*: all educational axioms and presumptions are under scrutiny. For example, students often do not see how all of their courses “fit” together. We often leave it for students to somehow figure out how all the moving parts work together or at least are supposed to synchronize in harmony. Some universities, however, are not dumping that responsibility onto the students. Rather, they are shifting the burden from the

students and taking charge in transforming their curricula in order to have education make sense, and to lay out a clearer roadmap. For example, STEM programs have often been given a free pass because the skills they teach are marketable. However, no AI or technology program covers all that students need. To be sure, as Davidson points out, universities need STEM. But STEM also needs the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences, because students need to learn about human judgment, talent, empathy, persuasion, leadership, and all the careers that require the “human touch” —from surgeons to creative writers. In short, they need to learn how all of these moving parts work together to form a clear big picture of their dreams. Believe it or not, some universities are at the forefront of making such integrative syntheses a reality. According to Davidson, Arizona State University should be recognized as an example of a major university that consciously works hard to leave behind the narrow-minded skills approach to jobs and helps (yes, actually *helps*) students find real, meaningful careers that blend technology with the humanities and arts into a coherent whole. In all of these new programs, communication—speaking and writing skills—are essential. Knowledge, devoid of clear and meaningful expression, is next to useless. Davidson takes time to praise the innovative work of Andrea Lunsford of Stanford University for making such unifying skills possible for her students. You would think that these movements are grassroots—and some indeed are—but

credit some visionary university presidents, such as Arizona State's Michael Crow, for utilizing his power to make the dream a reality.

One of the best features of Davidson's book is showing the true cost of higher education. By that I mean not only the financial debt, but also the social consequences of the abysmal way we have financed higher education in America. One of the great costs is paid by the students (and their families) who take out student loans and never graduate. According to Davidson, out of 100 high school students, only about 70 will graduate, 49 will enter college, and about 25 will earn a college degree. One of the worst consequences, besides the staggering high school dropout rate, of course, is that those who fail to earn a degree have taken on debt with no benefits of a degree to show for it. As of 2017, according to Davidson, 42 million Americans collectively owe over 1.3 trillion dollars in student debts! Little wonder, when you think about it, because the average annual cost of college is approaching \$50,000, even though half of all courses are taught by adjuncts, which is a polite way of saying underpaid part-time instructors who have no benefits and no job security, a number that has risen 30% since 1975.

"Who profits from the massive student loans that parents and students must pay?" We should ask ourselves such questions. From 1993 to 2008, student loans were turned over to Wall Street and for-profit loan agencies. Even the Department of Education reaped the benefits, some years earning 20% on loans! Of course, there is a history of political contempt for students that leads to government officials not caring about student debt. Past President Ronald Reagan called students "freeloaders" and "tax eaters" and even the very Secretary of Education William Bennet called them "deadbeats." Some medical students amass a

debt, sometimes in excess of \$400,000, in order to become a doctor. I am sure these "freeloaders" and "tax eaters" would not appreciate being called such derogatory terms for trying to make their dream of helping to heal others become a reality. Of course, the argument is that financial problems arose when the GI Bill opened higher education to minorities, including Blacks, Italians, Greeks, Roman Catholics, who willingly took on greater debt in an effort to break the cycle of poverty by providing the hope of a better life through education. Even for those groups, few, such as Black GIs who expressed a desire to go to college (43%), were still financially able to attend (12%) and take an advantage of this "benefit." In short, while we made it possible to borrow money to make the American dream of a college education a reality, we did so in a way that mortgaged the future to a level so high that it created a problem unto itself.

What are the solutions to the snowballing cost of higher education? What do Sweden, Brazil, Germany, Finland, France, Norway, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Iceland all have in common? For their students, college tuition is free. In America, elementary, middle school, and high school all have public school options that are tuition-free . . . but not our public colleges. That said, we have taken small but positive steps toward providing a better option. Some community colleges, such as in San Francisco, are trying to move to becoming tuition-free, similar to when California State colleges in the 1960s were tuition-free for tax-payers, and much like we think of elementary and high schools being tuition-free. Some universities used to be tuition-free (e.g., Rice University and Cooper Union) and a few still are. Many years ago, and before I came to TCU, I heard an administrator from another institution say that he wanted to raise tuition at his university because to be more expensive

would put that university in the same category with elite universities. To be sure, there is opposition to reducing or eliminating tuition. Many would not want to see this profit-generating system replaced, for it would mean the removal of a major source of revenue and endowment-building—even if it means that the benefits for the few would be at the cost of the many. In other words, a “good buy” was the last thing some schools wanted to be known for being! Obviously, this summary illustrates the devastating social consequences of a debt-carrying society where we now have not only the ever-growing numbers of “have nots” but the small in number, but financially significant and growing, “haves and wants more.” In short, entry into the present system is, for many, gained only by amassing years of debt.

One of the costs driving up tuition is underscored by Davidson: universities and colleges have become administratively and staff top-heavy. She is correct. Don’t believe me? Go to the media guide of your favorite college intercollegiate sports program and count the number of staff and administrators for this extracurricular activity. To be sure, the growth of sports programs as an entity unto themselves is not the sole contributor to the management explosion in higher education and, for some universities, athletics even can be a financial gain and is often a real alumni/ae pleaser. Universities have evolved in management from many directions. Generally, and not surprisingly, about forty years ago the number of faculty used to be roughly twice the number of administrators, but now faculty are outnumbered by the self-justifying bureaucracy. While administrators make up the ever-growing general staff, the faculty member is the soldier in the trenches.

Davidson also compels her readers to question basic starting points of higher

education regarding the performance of students within Eliot’s century-old system, such as “How do we measure students?” Everything in higher education is standardized, evaluated, automated, and graded in a summative fashion. It is all about selectivity, and the more selective the better. This is the sort of mentality that presumes that we all want admission into the “country club” that rejects everyone else save the special few! We have chosen to determine this selectivity by departing from a formative system to a unitized summative rank-grading system and numerical scoring of student performance. In 1897, Mount Holyoke was the first institution of higher education to create and implement a system of letter grades. During World War I, the IQ test was implemented by Robert Yerkes and Edward Thorndike, to determine who would be “officer material” for our armed forces. Unfortunately, both Yerkes and Thorndike were eugenicists and the IQ test was constructed to support the belief that native-born Anglo-Saxons were intellectually superior to Jews, Italians, Irish, African-Americans, etc. However, even these early unitized tests were not without criticism and fear. As early as 1913, there were concerns that our students were being reduced to test scores, letter grades, numbers and statistical averages. Yet, such performance-ranking practices continued. For example, in 1914 Kansas State Teachers College invented the multiple-choice test based on the presumption of “the one, best answer.” Even Eliot himself changed from

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the Harvard oral exam practice to written exams. These measures soon became so popular, Davidson points out, that summative (i.e. “scientific”) grading replaced formative evaluations. These same concerns were carried over to standardized tests and continue to this day, such as the SAT and the ACT examinations. Some universities have decided to oppose this college-entrance system to the extent that they no longer require such tests. Do colleges any longer “interview” high school students for admission? Smaller schools may, but I doubt that would happen for general admission purposes at the Ohio State University or the University of Texas, traditionally two of the largest public universities in America!

Perhaps these systematic measures of students are done because faculty simply do not have the time for formative, personalized systems of evaluation. The average faculty member works 61 hours a week annually and the hardest workers of the faculty are the full professors. There is a criticism that faculty not only no longer know their own students, and that some faculty don’t think that they should have to know their students personally as a part of their responsibilities, since the student is just a unit-number in a large lecture class. I have taught at two large public institutions and I recall how thrilled students were that I remembered them to the extent that I could write a letter of recommendation (a formative type of evaluation that still lingers)! Clearly, Davidson advocates change from a tried-and-used-to-be-true system that is now so engrained in our higher education that it would be hard to imagine an alternative and yet, she makes clear, we must if we wish to teach an ever-diverse population of students in order to meet their and our social needs.

Does our future look bleak? Davidson paints a clear and representative picture of higher education in America but she, as

mentioned above, also offers solutions. Of course, it all starts with recognizing the problems that she has pointed out and, of equal importance, a commitment to solve those problems. In short, we must do what Eliot did 150 years ago. We must (mentally) tour universities at home and abroad and “cherry-pick” those innovative programs that are responsive to the needs of our society and especially to those of our students. We need to rethink higher education just as Eliot had the courage to do. As Davidson pointed out, what was innovative and daring 150 years ago are now impediments to be overcome. The first step is to recognize that condition by admitting our problems, as Davidson has done so well in this book. Davidson contributes to the solution. She ends her book with “tips” for students getting the most out of college in our present system and also tips for transforming our classrooms to active student-learning centers. These may be baby steps and short-term solutions, but they are going in the right direction, for we are also changing the mentality of what higher education is, who benefits from it, and how can it contribute in a flexible way to the ever-changing society that we are experiencing, and will be experiencing, in the foreseeable future. This is the foothold for creating long-term solutions. We have much to thank Davidson for achieving, for with this book she not only exposed our problems, she pointed us toward our solutions. Eliot would have been proud of her! Let the “revolution” she calls for so earnestly begin! ¹

Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Basic Books, 336pp, \$28 cloth.