

# **SOCRATES, THOREAU, AND THE STATUS QUO**

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The three primary themes of this volume are enhancing revenues, evolving faculty contracts, and implementing change. The authors of the chapters use an assortment of metaphors to describe the current state of higher education from Stan Ikenberry's tightrope on which administrators are trying to balance student access with issues of tuition and cost control, to David Kirp's inner tube heading down a class five river with regard to new technologies, to James Hearn's frog in a pot of water heated up so slowly so that it does not realize that it's boiling until it's too late with regard to incremental change toward becoming commercial enterprises. In my assessment, a more appropriate allegory might be a glacier; universities do move, but they move so slowly that change is almost imperceptible; they move only of their own accord and en masse; and they pursue the path of least resistance.

The authors of the various chapters are all over the map in terms of whether or not there is a 'crisis' in higher education and they cover a lot of ground in terms of possible responses. David Kirp has described the 'problematic successes' of colleges that transformed themselves through technology or by adopting a business model; problematic because while there is a place for the market, 'the market must be kept in its place' (economist Arthur Okun) and, presumably, because:

...embedded in the very idea of the university...the university at its truest and best—are values that the market does not honor: the belief in a community of scholars and not a confederacy of self-seekers; in the idea of openness and not ownership; in the professor as a pursuer of truth and not an entrepreneur; in the

student as an acolyte whose preferences are to be formed, not a consumer whose preferences are to be satisfied. (Kirp 2003, p. 7)

And yet, the downside of a community of scholars shut off from market forces is insularity; the flipside of autonomy is isolation. Without the market, where is accountability? 'Academic freedom is a widely shared value; academic duty, which ought to count for as much, is mysterious' (Kennedy 1997, p. 2).

The topic of revenues and spending are examined in many of the chapters. James Hearn (2005), citing economist and college president, Howard Bowen, pointed out that:

...leaders continually seek funding growth because they operate under a 'revenue theory of cost:' new revenues are always being sought in order to pursue excellence, prestige, and influence. Because there is no limit to what might be spent in pursuit of those goals, institutions will always raise and spend all the money that they can. [p. 1]

Authors lament (Ehrenberg) or support (Sexton) the use of adjunct and full-time non-tenure-stream faculty. Ehrenberg effectively argues that substituting these non-traditional faculty for tenure-track and tenured faculty has enormous costs in terms of student interest in doctoral work (Ehrenberg May 2005) and retention, which may not be offset by lower salaries and benefits (Ehrenberg September 2005).

Sexton, on the other hand, as president of NYU—a ‘university in and of the city’—writes that this institution would be remiss if it did *not* employ large numbers of adjuncts given the depth and breadth of expertise in the NYC area, its mission and its students. Sexton suggests that the academy should rethink how it distributes shame and honor. He comes close, at least to my mind, to stabbing (but not slaying) the sacred tenure cow, although that may not have been his intent. Sexton (2004) carefully highlighted the role of the tenured faculty at research universities as well as ‘five broad categories of faculty, by and large outside the tenure system’ (University Teachers, Arts Professors, Adjunct Faculty, Global Professors, and Cyber Faculty), and concluded thus:

In short, we must encourage, draw on, respect and reward an appropriate blend of faculty actors.... This will be a foundation of the new research university, creating a culture of institutional citizenship that honors equality of voice and the role of all members of the community. The notion of faculty governance, which will characterize this university, does not entail faculty literally running the institution and goes far beyond mere consultation. It entails instead meaningful inclusion of all faculty in a discussion of institutional priorities, conducted in a way that enables them to balance the variables and complexities of decision making. It entails a commitment by university leadership to conference ideas with faculty in a transparent process that empowers them to participate meaningfully in shaping both aspirations and strategies. (Sexton 2004, conclusion section)

Throughout this volume, authors address the necessity of involving the faculty in conversations about strategy, new revenue sources, cost control, access, productivity, but producing real and lasting change will be enormously difficult, for reasons I shall now address.

Let's turn this discussion on its head for a moment. What would have had to have happened for the following to be the central questions that are addressed in this volume?

- Why are the faculty so obsessed with student performance that their research is lagging?
- Why won't faculty allow the administration to wrest control of advising and turn it over to a central office?
- How do we get the best faculty out of the classroom and into the lab?
- How can we interest tenured professors in teaching something other than large, introductory courses to freshmen?
- Why are most of the tenured professors, especially in science, math, technology and engineering, white women and persons of color? What happened to all the white guys?
- How can we get the faculty senate to focus on the details of its own welfare rather than the keys to a successful undergraduate education?

What would have had to have happened is for the academy to have done a 180. If these were the questions, we would not recognize this enterprise. We are as likely to see the day when these questions are addressed as we are to see pigs fly, and for good reason.

If these were the questions the academy was addressing, would you be of a mind that the academy is a much better place than it is today? Would there be any market advantage to behaving differently?

We know that most faculty at research universities do not take a great deal of interest in undergraduate education, prefer to conduct research than advise students, yearn for the lab over the classroom and favor teaching small, graduate courses over large, introductory ones. We know that the numbers of women and minorities in the tenured ranks at the most prestigious universities are stagnant, at best, and virtually nonexistent at worst. We know the agendas for most faculty meetings are more apt to be focused inward, not out, and cover minutia affecting the faculty themselves rather than cost control, finding new revenue streams or institutional strategy.

It does not take any deep, penetrating insight to say that excellence in undergraduate education, diversity, equity and cost control are important priorities to pursue. Or to acknowledge that our colleges and universities are facing vast changes. In late October, 2005, I read that ‘Harvard...is facing unprecedented change and new challenges brought about by the growth of interdisciplinary fields, the explosion of information technology, the desire of students and faculty to engage globally, and a spate of new government regulations’ (*Harvard University Gazette*, p. 3).

And yet I ask you, are any of these really unexpected or completely unpredictable? Why do we almost always seem to be reactive rather than proactive? Presumably, some really smart people work at Harvard who had to have seen these things coming. Why the apparent shock about the fact that the ‘intellectual landscape is being

redefined?’ One answer is that we are structured in a way that practically ensures business as usual. We have structured intentional continuity.

Universities are mired in the status quo because of an entrenched culture where it is nearly impossible to do business differently and a market that says, ‘Why would you want to?’ I have four primary points that I believe lie behind status quo maintenance, and that make me less than optimistic about the academy’s ability to respond to a changed environment.

1. Tenure shields faculty from the vicissitudes of the marketplace.
2. Shared governance shields faculty from leadership.
3. Decisions happen by accretion because of decentralization and loose coupling.
4. The market is saying nothing is wrong.

Those who may want change—‘intentional leaders’ (Shaw 2005) who want to lead—and those who may be in the best position to carry out the work of the new university in the global community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—junior faculty—have little power.

Why is change the exception in the academy? We have deeply held rules, beliefs, and values embedded in a culture of the dominant coalition that wishes to preserve its power base at almost any cost and that operates largely in its own best interest with little understanding of, or interest in, the university writ large.

What are the rules that govern our faculty, and thus, our institutions? Tenure. We have institutionalized a promotion, tenure, and reward structure designed by and for white men of a bygone era that perpetuates the status quo because it favors basic over applied research, research over teaching and community service, uses peer review

methods proven to be wrought with cronyism and even bias (or if you prefer, ‘cognitive errors’) (Moody 2005), ensures allegiance to disciplines by supporting narrow research within disciplines over that which crosses boundaries, conformity over innovation, and solo over collaborative work. In the minds of the dominant coalition, there is and always has been a ‘right’ way to conduct research, the ‘right’ methods and even the ‘right’ journals in which to publish results.

Many tenured, senior faculty are loathe to teach and provide service, and for good reason. ‘Senior professors in great demand often insist on modest teaching loads. Their reputation, their bankable asset, depends on what they write, not how they teach’ (Kirp 2003, p. 69). The way we train doctoral students and socialize junior faculty feeds this mentality. Kennedy highlighted the issue for doctoral students:

Too often, little attention is given to the teaching responsibilities that doctoral students will have later.... Faculty members-in-training receive little or no preparation for the range of personal and professional challenges they will face as practicing members of the professoriate. The vast majority of academic doctorates are produced in fewer than one hundred ‘research universities,’ but 90 per cent of them will teach in several thousand institutions that are quite different from the places in which they were trained (Kennedy 1997, p. 30).

Regarding junior faculty, Kennedy noted, ‘Young faculty, whether as candidates for junior positions or as aspirants at the tenure bar, are regularly urged to concentrate on

research and, if necessary, skimp on teaching' (Kennedy 1997, p. 30). The late Ernest Boyer, former Vice President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, said, 'Winning the campus distinguished teaching award is the kiss of death when it comes time for tenure,' a concept that made headlines in *The Tech*, at MIT with the Baker Teaching Award and several assistant professors denied tenure in the early 1990s, and described thus, 'Teaching excellence is a perishable commodity,' in medical schools by Aron et al. (2000, p. 1) in an empirical study.

In the relentless quest for individual and institutional prestige there is, naturally, a relative indifference to efficiency as any component of strategy (and even to strategy, for that matter). 'Not only research but most activities in the university are carried out by individuals working on their own...The work of the university is left almost entirely in individual hands' (Damrosch 1995, p. 57). This may be why William T. Foster, then president of Reed College said, 'The progress of this institution...will be directly proportional to the death rate of the [tenured] faculty' (quoted in Birnbaum 2004, p. 60), and a tenured professor at a major research university recently quipped during a retreat on the strategic plan, 'I and every one of my tenured colleagues *is* a strategic plan!'

Shared governance. My second point is that shared governance shields faculty from unilateral, centralized decision-making. Presidents have little power to control, move, or change institutions; neither do deans or chairs. 'There are too many stakeholders who can block change, and almost no one who can legitimately drive it' (Cohen 2003, personal copy, p. 16).

Highly decentralized authority is the norm (Damrosch p. 59). Academic institutions have been described as organized anarchies, whereby we discover preferences through action more often than we act on the basis of preferences, we learn more often by trial-and-error and the residue of learning from the accidents of past experiences, imitation and the inventions born of necessity, and we have fluid participation in decision-making arenas (Cohen and March 1974).

In organized anarchies, decision-making through shared governance happens according to a garbage can model where 'issues just keep getting thrown in' and the 'weightiest tend to sink out of sight, and only the most insistently recycled or lightest matters receive any actual attention.' Further, the 'items that do end up on top tend to get mixed together in unpredictable ways' (Damrosch 1995, p. 59, quoting from Cohen, March and Olsen 1972).

'Faculties are...composed largely of people who like problems, perhaps even more than solutions, and even to the point of actively seeking them where they have not been recognized. Indeed, some of these individuals positively dislike solutions, preferring the deeper existential absurdity of the problem itself' (Adams 1988, p. 11).

The tendency for nothing ever to get decided on a campus reflects the extreme diffusion of authority within the system. With little or no direction coming from the top, the university bureaucracy really works as an antibureaucracy, whose ideal is to allow the greatest possible number of

individuals to pursue their own private interests with the least possible interaction (Damrosch 1995, p. 59).

All too often, in practice, shared governance is just another term for 'death by Faculty Senate.' Increased institutional size and complexity, the division of faculty into departments and committees, the presence of external funding and control agencies that bypass and weaken institutional administration combine so that 'individuals and groups lose their ability to affect their institution through the implementation of positive or constructive programs, [so] they increasingly tend to assert their influence and status by acting as veto blocs, thus increasing institutional conservatism' (Birnbaum 1988, p. 15).

After all is said and done, it is in senate committee where we can kill most ideas to do things differently, in part because, 'The status quo is the only solution that cannot be vetoed' (Kerr 1982, p. 30).

Decentralization and loose coupling. This leads to my third point. If decisions are made, they are more often made by accretion, and so, are not really decisions for which anyone can be held responsible. I wrote a piece in *Trusteeship* magazine in 2003, about the huge increase in part-time and non-tenure track faculty where I surmised that there was no central decision to reduce the percentage of tenured faculty on any given campus to 25 per cent and expand the other lines accordingly. But neither has any president or any faculty said, 'This far and no further.' Or, 'henceforth, all introductory courses will be taught by senior, tenured faculty. Too much research is being conducted here and undergraduate education is being neglected.'

‘...the larger institution may become an academic holding company, presiding over a federation of quasi-autonomous subunits. Unable to influence the larger institution, faculty retreat into the small subunit for which they feel affinity and from which they can defend their influence and status,’ (Birnbaum 1988, p. 17) further perpetuating status quo maintenance.

Another characteristic of our organized anarchy academic institutions is loose coupling, meaning that connections between organizational subsystems (for example, academic departments, schools) are infrequent, circumscribed, unimportant and slow to respond. (Weick 1976) Loose coupling makes it difficult to discard bad ideas or disseminate good ones throughout an institution, repair defective systems, coordinate activities and to use administrative functions to effect change (Birnbaum 1988, p. 42).

The market. To top it off, there really is no market pressure to do anything differently. In a nutshell, there is no crisis. In every industry, there are rule makers, rule takers and rule breakers (Hamel and Prahalad 1994). Rule makers are well served by preserving the status quo. To the extent that there is a market, it responds most favorably to the rule-makers. In the main, money flows to the rule makers.

Rule takers are not in an advantaged position. These are the Ivy ‘wanna bes’ who follow the rules of the rule makers and systematically try to catch the present market leaders (for example, climb in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, experience mission creep as teaching institutions attempt to mimic research universities, the amenities arms race), but never succeed in catching them. These institutions practice institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1991), a practice whereby organizations

strive to resemble others with the same set of circumstances. However, ‘A lot of time lost in benchmarking does not solve the problem. What is profitable is to be a rule breaker, and reinvent the industry’ (Hamel 1996). In academe, for the most part, rule breakers (for example, University of Phoenix) are the worst off in terms of the dominant coalition’s entrenched rules; they are the lowest in the food chain (however, in the market, they are eating our lunch!).

On the faculty, those with tenure are the rule-makers, probationary faculty the rule takers and there are no rule breakers. There are only the unloved, underpaid and untenured—the part-time and non-tenure track faculty—who have to play by an entirely different set of rules if they want to play at all.

Yet, we constantly remind ourselves that this is a collegial ‘community of scholars.’ And, the fact is, that it is this collegium that chooses to do business this way. It is very difficult for leaders to overturn any of this by saying we are disserving undergraduates or persons of color or women in science or early career faculty with young children.

We could look at the Harvard President Summers situation as a case in point. Apparently, Mr. Summers was hired to bring Harvard into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; that he was meant to be a catalyst for change. And so, he asked a lot of questions of the faculty. Those questions, in part, were said to have driven out Cornel West; several other prominent African American scholars left thereafter. Earlier this year, he angered many with his remarks about innate differences between men and women in science. He angered Native Americans in a speech prior to that. The faculty voted no confidence, but

the corporation is backing Summers, who apologized profusely and seems to have all but faded into the woodwork. Despite the controversy, people are not leaving Harvard in droves. The endowment stands at nearly \$26 billion. Harvard had record enrollments this year. Harvard is still recruiting outstanding faculty. This can only happen in the academy, where markets function quite differently than in the private sector.

To appreciate the sheer strangeness of his [Summers] situation, imagine the reaction of the CEO of a business firm, and his board of directors, if after the CEO criticized one of the firm's executives for absenteeism, ascribed the under representation of women in the firm's executive ranks to preferences rather than discrimination, dealt in peremptory fashion with the firm's employees, and refused to shared decision-making powers with them, was threatened with a vote of no confidence by the employees. He and his board would tell them to go jump in the lake (Becker 2005).

Would not transformational change require a much deeper cultural change, to reward structures, to tenure, yes—but also much deeper—to whether or not the faculty should be the primary architects of the terms and conditions of their own employment?

Faculty determine process, criteria and standards because that has worked in the past. It has been exceedingly difficult to get to issues of the numbers of full-time non-tenure track or part-time faculty and the effects on undergraduate retention and success. The faculty do not—and, apparently, will not—'own' this problem. As Kirp wrote, the

‘professors who unhesitatingly protest the working conditions of janitors in LA and picket companies like Nike for their treatment of pieceworkers in Indonesia have generally been mute about the plight of these not-quite members of the academy.’ (Kirp 2003, p. 86).

Can you construct a circumstance under which the faculty would take responsibility for improving graduation rates or student retention? The same faculty that sees itself as the owner of the promotion and tenure process are unlikely to say that they are the owner of inadequate undergraduate education. You could probably get a few people organized around that but not many. Can you construct a circumstance under which the faculty would say, ‘No more part-time and non-tenure track faculty. We will teach those classes?’

The trade-off for having a highly democratic institution is that in the absence of market induced crises, you have to accept this. If you believe there is a crisis, it is self-imposed, and to President Kermit Hall’s point, can something twenty years in the making appropriately be called a ‘crisis’? Students certainly are not asking, ‘How many of your faculty are full-time v. part-time, non-tenure track v. tenured?’ and their parents are not saying, ‘We will not attend your university unless you guarantee my kid will be taught by tenured faculty.’

If you will, imagine an institution that unquestionably solved most of these problems. It has a 100 per cent graduation rate and a dedicated full-time faculty committed to undergraduate education. You have Williams. It already exists and it’s doing really well. There is high student satisfaction and there are manageable costs. But,

what if it could be said that the greatest learning gains were made at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In addition, students graduate from Coe with full preparedness to work in a diverse environment. What percentage of market share would Coe College grab from institutions higher than them in the marketplace? Would faculty migrate to Cedar Rapids to be part of all that?

When all is said and done, as I look around, what is really remarkable is what has stayed the same, not what has changed.

Imagine a faculty member who died in 1950 came back in 2005. What would he find astonishing? Very little. He would not say he did not recognize this enterprise. The rules of the game would not have changed so much that he would not recognize the game. The tenured faculty are still in their labs or teaching boutique classes. The most prestigious institutions are still the most prestigious. The faculty at these institutions is still comprised of mostly white males. And many of the same issues are probably still in play at faculty meetings.

The dominant coalition is saying this works, and there is little market evidence to the contrary. There are no conspicuous failures. Students are still flocking to our doors. Faculty are still signing on. The numbers of women and faculty of color are not that different after 35 years of Affirmative Action because the dominant coalition on any given campus cannot conceptualize, let alone, implement an appointment, promotion, tenure and reward system that is constructed for a new workforce—one that is demographically different, yes, but perhaps even more importantly, one that has different values, beliefs and preferences.

For 200 years, no one really challenged the fact that women didn't vote, because it worked. For 200 years, no one really challenged the fact that women did the domestic work and men worked outside the home, because it worked.

The academy is blessedly free of crises and, thus, continues on its tried and true course of intentional continuity.

In the words of Frederick Rudolph, formerly Professor of History at Williams College:

Assemble a cluster of professors in a county town, surround them with scenic grandeur, cut them off from the world beyond, and they will not have much trouble congratulating themselves into curricular torpor. Let someone knock on the door with a vision of change, he will discover that access is blocked by those within the gate. Let him argue on behalf of some perceived need or desire of students, and he will discover his mistake: The institution is really not for the students, after all, but for the professors' (Birnbaum p. 62).

The academy has intentional continuity that has, thus far, served it well. In fact,

...nearly every aspect of the university has a long product life cycle and is associated with a high 'regret function.' The immediate consequence is that it is difficult to envision a new or radically altered condition, and the eventual result is a set of policies and practices that favor the present state of affairs over any

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possible future. It is a portrait of conservatism, perhaps of senescence (Kennedy 1997, p. 272).

As difficult as it is though, I do envision a future academic enterprise:

- That reinvents itself.
- Where rule-makers become rule-breakers and where rule-breakers succeed.
- That spends more time creating its future than defending its past (Hamel and Valikangas 2003, p. 54).
- Where, if tenure is preserved, it may be earned not only through research, but by excellence in teaching and by being actively involved in the community—by making a difference.
- Where shared governance means that everyone on campus with a stake in this enterprise works together, continually, to improve what we do, to periodically look backward together to see what worked well and what didn't and discuss why, and to look forward to construct a better future.
- Where leaders—among the faculty, the study body, the board, the alumni and the administration— can actually lead, dare I say, intentionally.
- That is authentic; it rewards what it says it values and its leaders and faculty at all levels mirror the rich diversity of our world.

In the words of inventor Buckminster Fuller, 'You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.' Perhaps it is time for a new model.

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