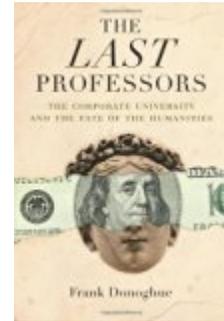


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Donoghue. *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. xix + 180 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2859-1; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2860-7.

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## Universities and Professors: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Peter Brooks begins his recent review essay entitled “Our Universities: How Bad? How Good?” with the observation, “The rhetoric of crisis seems to have become endemic to writing about the American university.”[1] For Brooks, accusations include failing to educate; losing standing in international competition; being top heavy with administrators; pandering to faculty who do little work and to students who do not care about education; and above all, becoming expensive, inaccessible, and unaccountable.

In *The Last Professors*, Frank Donoghue, associate professor of English at Ohio State University, believes “that if we set aside the rhetoric of crisis and first look back at our situation as it existed a century ago and then forward from the present as far we can see, our problems take on a wholly new complexion” (p. xiii). He does not dispute the depiction of the crisis camp but rather observes that “it has been like this for a very long time” (p. 1). The “this” is the antagonism between the corporate sector in the United States and universities. Historically, the antagonism has been aimed at the core of the university (i.e., the liberal arts and humanities—English, languages, history, and philosophy).

Over one hundred years ago a number of the titans of U.S. capitalism criticized liberal education and put academics on the defensive. For instance, in an 1891 commencement address, Andrew Carnegie told the graduates, “I rejoice, therefore, to know that your time has

not been wasted upon dead languages, but has been fully occupied in obtaining knowledge of shorthand and type-writing” (p. 4). And in 1907, Clarence F. Birdseye broadened the critique and argued, “If they had to compete with our ordinary business establishments, the colleges would have been long since distanced and bankrupted” (p. 5).

The scientific management principles of Frederick W. Taylor continue to influence the plans of many contemporary university administrators and reformers (i.e., stress on quantification of measurement in everything from the ranking of universities to the quality of an academic’s work). Of course the works of critical thinkers, such as Thorstein Veblen and Upton Sinclair, warned about the dangerous effects of the corporate infiltration on professors (for example, curtailment of autonomy and standardization and measurement of their productivity). In *Selling Out: Academic Freedom and the Corporate Market* (2009), Howard Woodhouse has analyzed the inherent conflicts between corporate-market values (maximization of private monetary profits and university values [i.e., advancement and dissemination of shared knowledge at Canadian research universities]). In contrast to the sense of inevitability that comes through in Donoghue’s more bleak work, Woodhouse demonstrates the possibility of student and faculty resistance to the incorporation of corporate values and interests.

However, the critiques of the business elite found a

receptive audience among the U.S. public's "unquestioning willingness to view higher education as an investment to be judged according to its return on the original outlay of money and time" (p. 9). The call for job-oriented education, return on investment, and the incorporation of business practices into the administration of universities sounds quite contemporary. And, Donoghue warns, the response from humanists that their subjects make humans wiser or broadens their minds is "hackneyed and ineffective" (p. 20). In other words, "professors of the humanities have already lost the power to rescue themselves" (p. xi).

For the past forty or more years, a strained academic labor market has led to increased competition in graduate schools, for appointments, for promotion and tenure, and for publication opportunities. Donoghue provides a particularly insightful discussion of the role of the monograph in the humanities and thus of the increasing influence of university presses in the determination of what is published, and who is rewarded. Professors can only begin to address these conditions "if they look harder at the connection between research culture and faculty reward systems and in turn at the way those reward systems stratify U.S. universities and isolate the professors who work there" (pp. 49-50). Some of the truisms that must be questioned are: professors are authors; their scholarly work determines their relative prestige; and scholarly work is intimately related to teaching. The problem as I see it is that the academics who have the influence, status, and time to engage in such reevaluation are the very ones who have benefited from the present system and have little, if any, incentive to question that system.

Although the academic elites benefit from the existing system, they account for an increasing small component of that system. The dismantling of the traditional faculty is part of the larger process of the "casualization of labor" that has occurred in the United States since the 1980s (p. xiv). In the specific case of the faculty, this is the well-documented, increasing reliance on contingent faculty to replace the full-time, tenured faculty. These include adjuncts, graduate instructors, visiting professors, and nontenure-track faculty. In an April 2011 article, Tamar Lewin cites data demonstrating that "such appointments now make up more than three-quarters of total faculty, compared with two-thirds in 1995."<sup>[2]</sup> As in the larger labor market, contingent workers represent the acceptance of the cost effective approach to employment (i.e., low salary and a reduction or elimination of fringe benefits).

Donoghue devotes one chapter, "The Erosion of Tenure," to an exploration of why tenure is such a hot topic among academics and critics, given the reality of its increasing scarcity. And, if this elite, tenured caste needs academic freedom, what about the majority of faculty in the nonelite, casual caste? For Donoghue, the debates about tenure are somewhat of a side trip from the major phenomenon: the changing composition of the faculty.

Whether one talks about tenure, the role of professor, the mission of the institution, or student interests, there are differences among colleges and universities. Donoghue projects a widening in the gap between the haves and the have-not colleges and universities. Over the next fifty years, the approximately one hundred elite colleges and universities are increasingly likely to serve the advantaged members of U.S. society and prepare students in the liberal arts and humanities for elite positions in business, the professions, government, science, and higher education. The majority of other students are likely to be served through job-oriented, shorter-term courses and programs. This reflects increasing demands for practicality, efficiency, and profitability in postsecondary institutions.

Over the long term, these demands have been reflected in the shift within community colleges from an emphasis on liberal arts transfer programs to an emphasis on terminal applied, vocational, and career-oriented certificate and degree programs. A more recent institutional variation on job-oriented education is the for-profit college. At such colleges, administrators have become managers; faculty have become entirely contingent practitioner-faculty whose only responsibility is to teach; students have become consumers; student evaluations are substituted for peer reviews; and courses are increasingly taught online. "More than any other factor, the for-profit universities' commitment to information technology accentuates the status of faculty as delivery people and threatens to hasten the reconceptualization of the job of professor" (p. 99).

The colleges and universities at the top (the elite one hundred) of the hierarchy of the U.S. higher education system and the institutions at the bottom of the hierarchy (community colleges and for-profit colleges) know what their missions are. It is the institutions in the middle (large state universities and university systems) that lack a clear mission and run the risk of becoming obsolete. Donoghue sees their choice in either-or terms: "Each of the schools in between will be pushed to define itself either as a proving ground for the business community or

as a place where students can acquire a prestige marker, an index of their social status” (p. 93). However, the very efficiency models that mass state universities are adopting limit their ability to enhance their academic prestige (i.e., hire highly qualified, full-time faculty and offer liberal arts and humanities programs). As an alternative, such schools are likely to pursue status through athletics and public service programs.

What is to be done? In the preface, readers are warned by the author, “I offer nothing in the way of uplifting solutions to the problems that I describe” (p. xi). However, in the concluding pages, Donoghue suggests two ways in which humanities professors can resist their extinction. The first way is that they should challenge the assumptions of the corporate model (that career-oriented education leads to a secure job and improves one’s quality of life). Pointing to the realities of globalization and increasing inequality at home is more effective than hollow statements about wisdom, a logical mind, or the importance of educated and informed citizens. The second way is that humanities professors must resist the tendency to romanticize their work and become sociologists and institutional historians of their work situation.

To add a somewhat uplifting note, one should be cautious in projecting long- or short-term trends over a period of decades. For instance, in a critique of cuts in the

humanities in British universities, Anthony T. Grafton observes that “the subjects and methods that will matter most in twenty years are often the ones that nobody values very much right now.”[3] There is a possibility that a growing awareness of Donoghue’s work in universities, and the working out of contradictions in globalization and neoliberal economic policies, may result in an alternative future to the one he envisions.

The historical analysis of *The Last Professors* is a significant contribution in that it presents a coherent story of long-term structural developments. This well-written and provocative book is based on data and relevant literature. Count me among those who believe that Donoghue has raised many important issues and that his project calls for a series of books. I am pleased that the author says, “I intend to write more” (p. xii).

#### Notes

[1]. Peter Brooks, “Our Universities: How Bad? How Good?” *The New York Review of Books* (March 24, 2011): 10.

[2]. Tamar Lewin, “Survey Finds Small Increase in Professors Pay,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2011, A15.

[3]. Anthony T. Grafton, “Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities,” *The New York Review of Books* (April 8, 2010): 32.

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