

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Higher Education Is Drowning in BS

And it's mortally corrosive to society



By Christian Smith | JANUARY 09, 2018

I have had nearly enough bullshit. The manure has piled up so deep in the hallways, classrooms, and administration buildings of American higher education that I am not sure how much longer I can wade through it and

retain my sanity and integrity.

Even worse, the accumulated effects of all the academic BS are contributing to this country's disastrous political condition and, ultimately, putting at risk the very viability and character of decent civilization. What do I mean by BS?

BS is the university's loss of capacity to grapple with life's Big Questions, because of our crisis of faith in truth, reality, reason, evidence, argument, civility, and our common humanity.

BS is the farce of what are actually "fragmentversities" claiming to be universities, of hyperspecialization and academic disciplines unable to talk with each other about obvious shared concerns.

BS is the expectation that a good education can be provided by institutions modeled organizationally on factories, state bureaucracies, and shopping malls — that is, by enormous universities processing hordes of students as if they were livestock, numbers waiting in line, and shopping consumers.

BS is universities hijacked by the relentless pursuit of money and prestige, including chasing rankings that they know are deeply flawed, at the expense of genuine educational excellence (to be distinguished from the vacuous "excellence" peddled by recruitment and "advancement" offices in every run-of-the-mill university).

BS is the ideologically infused jargon deployed by various fields to stake out in-group self-importance and insulate them from accountability to those not fluent in such solipsistic language games.

BS is a tenure system that provides guaranteed lifetime employment to faculty who are lousy teachers and inactive scholars, not because they espouse unpopular viewpoints that need the protection of "academic freedom," but only because years ago they somehow were granted tenure.

BS is the shifting of the "burden" of teaching undergraduate courses from traditional tenure-track faculty to miscellaneous, often-underpaid adjunct faculty and graduate students.

BS is states pounding their chests over their great public universities even while their legislatures cut higher-education budgets year after year after year.

BS is the fantasy that education worthy of the name can be accomplished online through "distance learning."

BS is the institutional reward system that coerces graduate students and faculty to "get published" as soon and as much as possible, rather than to take the time to mature intellectually and produce scholarship of real importance — leading to a raft of books and articles that contribute little to our knowledge about human concerns that matter.

BS is third-tier universities offering mediocre graduate programs to train second-rate Ph.D. students for jobs that do not exist, whose real function is to provide faculty with graduate RAs and to justify the title of "university."

BS is undergraduate "core" curricula that are actually not core course systems but loose sets of distribution requirements, representing uneasy truces between turf-protecting divisions and departments intent on keeping their classes full, which students typically then come to view as impositions to "get out of the way."

BS is the grossly lopsided political ideology of the faculty of many disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences, creating a homogeneity of worldview to which those faculties are themselves oblivious, despite claiming to champion difference, diversity, and tolerance.

BS is hypercommercialized college athletics and administrations sucking the teats of big money, often in the process exploiting and discarding rather than educating student athletes, and recurrently corrupting recruitment programs, tutoring services, and grading systems.

BS is second- and third-tier universities running expensive sports programs that do little but drain money away from academics, when some of their ordinary students cannot find the time to prepare for classes because they work two and three part-time jobs to pay their school bills.

BS is the ascendant "culture of offense" that shuts down the open exchange of ideas and mutual accountability to reason and argument. It is university leaders' confused and fearful capitulation to that secular neo-fundamentalist speech-policing.

BS is the invisible self-censorship that results among some students and faculty, and the subtle corrective training aimed at those who occasionally do not self-censor.

BS is the only semi-intelligible outbursts of antagonism from enraged outsiders incited by academe's suppressions of open argument, which primarily work to validate and reinforce the self-assured superiority of the suppressors, and sometimes to silence other legitimate voices.

BS is the anxiety that haunts some faculty at public universities in very conservative states about expressing their well-considered but unorthodox beliefs, for fear of being hounded by closed-minded students and parents or targeted by grandstanding politicians.

BS is the standard undergraduate student mentality, fostered by our entire culture, that sees college as essentially about credentials and careers (money), on the one hand, and partying oneself into stupefaction on the other.

BS is the failure of leaders in higher education to champion the liberal-arts ideal — that college should challenge, develop, and transform students' minds and hearts so they can lead good, flourishing, and socially productive lives — and their stampeding into the "practical" enterprise of producing specialized workers to feed The Economy.

BS is administrators' delusion that what is important in higher education can be evaluated by quantitative "metrics," the use of which will (supposedly) enable universities to be run more like corporations, thus requiring faculty and staff to spend more time and energy providing data for metrics, which they, too, know are BS.

I could continue to list much more BS that has piled up in higher education, but I have shoveled through enough already to make the point. Lest readers think this is only sour grapes, let me clarify a few facts. I absolutely love scholarly research. I am a fortunate winner in the research university system. I know it takes money to achieve excellence. I have worked to help raise and sustain my universities' program rankings and institutional status. I have taught classes of more than 300 students. And I really love college sports, especially football, volleyball, basketball, and soccer. So naming the BS is for me actually painful and morally complicated.

But calling out the BS is not about my personal experience, limits, or feelings. It is not even only about the unconscionable fact that countless millions of students are receiving compromised and sometimes worthless college educations, as sickening as that is. Ultimately, we must grasp the more dreadful reality that all of this BS in the academy is mortally corrosive of our larger culture and politics.

Ideas and their accompanying practices have consequences. What is formed in colleges and universities over decades shows up for better or worse in the character and quality of our public servants, political campaigns, public-policy debates, citizen participation, social capital, media programming, lower school education, consumer preferences, business ethics, entertainments, and much more. And the long-term corrosive effects on politics and culture can also be repaired only over the long term, if ever. There are no quick fixes here. So I do not speak in hyperbole by saying that our accumulated academic BS puts at risk decent civilization itself.

The world is always being overrun by political, economic, religious, and social unreason, violence, stupidity, deception, and domination through sheer power. But I have long believed that, despite its flaws, American higher education should, could, and often did stand as an elevated island, a protected reserve for the practice of open inquiry, reasoned debate, critical and self-critical reflection, persuasion through argument and evidence, and genuine progress in shared learning.

Grievously, for me that belief has become implausible. Under the accumulated weight of the mounds of BS, the island has been swamped, the reserve polluted, by many of the destructive outside forces that the academy exists to hold in check and correct. Much of American higher education now embodies the problems it was intended to transcend and transform: unreason, duplicity, refusals of accountability, incapacities to grasp complexity and see the big picture, and resorts to semi-masked forms of coercion.

The most disturbing consequences of this long-term corruption are now playing out in our national political culture and institutions.

Dramatic political polarization, fake news, legislative paralysis, torrents of blatant lies told with impunity, violent radicals in our city streets, scandalous ignorance of large swaths of Americans about the basic facts of our most pressing national problems, some top officials boasting about their sexual harassments and assaults without consequence, international diplomacy conducted through schoolyard taunting and self-contradictory tweets, and the growing frustration and increasingly desperate rage of large sectors of ordinary Americans: These are exactly what develop when even the "educated" citizens of a country are for too many decades not educated well, and when the institutional centers of enlightened learning and debate become havens of ideology, intimidation, and

mission drift. With academe in this condition, what hope can we have for the exercise of important social virtues in politics, law, diplomacy, the media, and the marketplace?

This is colossally tragic. But can we even comprehend tragedy anymore? I fear that, in the collective imagination of contemporary American higher education, as with our culture more broadly, tragedy itself is a category no longer recognizable. Compromising acquiescence? Sure. Late-career cynicism or fatigue? Of course. But tragedy? What is that?

No, the idea of tragedy is incomprehensible in institutions drifting in a Bermuda Triangle marked by the external-funding addictions of the STEM fields, the obsequious scientism of the social sciences, and the intellectual fads, ideological doctrines, and science-envy that captivate and enervate the humanities. And when the protagonists and victims of such a tragedy cannot even recognize their own tragic condition, the situation is even more dreadful and pathetic.

Essential to realize in all of this is that most of the BS is produced not by pernicious individuals, but instead by complex dysfunctions in institutional systems. It is easy to be a really good academic or administrator and still actively contribute to the BS. So we need to think not individualistically, but systemically, about culture, institutions, and political economies. Pointing fingers at individual schools and people is not helpful here. Sociological analysis of systems and their consequences is.

Many thoughtful people in higher education today are well aware of different piles of BS around them. Fewer seem to recognize the magnitude of the mounds of it that have accumulated and how badly they defile us. Most people involved also feel helpless to fight it, don't want to risk careers that benefit from the status quo, or are professional boosters of the existing system and so are obliged to yammer on about how great everything is.

I too feel helpless. It seems the most I can do now is to try to preserve whatever valuable remains in undergraduate liberal-arts education. Real change will most likely happen long-term and be forced on academe from the outside against its own lumbering inertia. That will not be pretty, nor will it necessarily produce anything better. We cannot take for granted a happy self-correction. In my view, genuinely positive changes in higher education, if they ever do happen, will have to combine some forms of visionary traditionalism and organizational radicalism. We will need people with the capacity to retrieve and revitalize the best of higher education's past and restructure it organizationally in ways that are most effective in the future.

History gives us some reason to hope that creative women and men will, over time, develop fruitful experiments and build new institutions that lead to a reblossoming of excellent higher education worthy of the name and help revitalize culture and political life. As the mounds of BS continue to pile up, the more immediate question is just how much waste, idiocy, and destruction inside and (as a result) outside the academy we will all have to suffer in the meantime.

Christian Smith is a professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame.

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