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Manifesto for the Humanities

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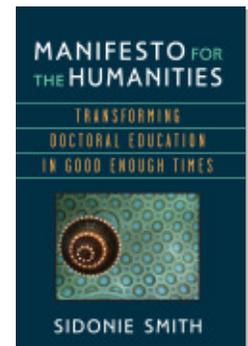
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Realities on the Ground

Elsewhere around the world, in China and India, for instance, academic leaders and government officials are investing in higher education to meet the needs of the growing number of students qualified to enter, but unable to find admission into, institutions of higher education. As they do so, they look to the model of U.S. universities, both private and public, to plan for their entry into the global rankings of research institutions. They marshal the means to build competitive research programs, establish partnerships with American universities, launch joint programs, exchange faculty and students. Elsewhere, universities in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand have become competitive destinations for increasing numbers of international students seeking graduate degrees. The shift in the language of instruction to English in many European universities, including the prestigious Milan Polytechnic University, Italy's equivalent of MIT, means that Europe's educational institutions will be far more competitive in attracting U.S. graduate students.¹ Here, in the United States, however, the will to value and support the long-earned preeminence of higher education has been waning.

The story of state withdrawal of support for this remarkable system of public universities has been well and often told. In the post-World War II decades, investment in American higher education grew exponentially. The G.I. Bill made money available for higher education; degrees promised better futures; and those better futures became the testimony to the superiority of the American Way of Life during the first two decades of the Cold War. The military-industrial complex demanded more and better-educated scientists to develop weapons, launch astronauts into space, and produce the new materials that would transform the domestic economy as well. Sputnik in October 1957 launched an education war fundamental to Cold War politics.²

The high levels of federal and state investment in higher education did not hold through the 1970s and 1980s, though levels differed across the states. The escalation in the cost of the Vietnam War left less money for "butter." The unrest on campuses soured politicians on investment in the education

of the next generations after the Greatest Generation. The oil crisis radically undermined confidence in an ever-expanding economy. The end of the Cold War diffused the sense of intensity to the education war. And the legacy of the Reagan years turned a large swath of the electorate against “big government” spending.

Once considered state-funded, in the last four decades public universities have gone “from state-supported to state-assisted to state-located,” as a common refrain across the country goes. My university, the University of Michigan, for instance, is one of the wealthiest Research 1 (as designated by the Carnegie classification) universities. In the current year, “The state appropriation will be around 16% of the general fund budget,” as students and parents are informed on the university website section entitled “Understanding Tuition.”³ Across the country, the University of California system has been wracked with budget cuts for the last half decade. At regional state universities across the country cuts have been even more severe.

To deal with escalating costs and decelerating funding, public colleges and universities regularly increase tuition, exacerbating the trend that the cost of higher education increases faster than do wages.⁴ To secure tuition dollars, they chase students able and willing to pay higher tuition, including international students bringing a certain kind of diversity to campus, but not economic diversity. Average family income of students across campuses trends upward, thereby decreasing economic diversity.⁵ Research accumulates showing that even high-achieving students with high aspirations for earning a college degree reel under the pressures of cobbling together loans, working one or more jobs, and remaining close to families and communities of affiliation. The debt load for parents and students, totaling in excess of one trillion dollars, has become a crisis-in-the-making. In a comparative framework, the *New York Times* reported on May 13, 2012, that “the size of the average student loan in 2005 was \$17,233. By 2012 the average U.S. student loan debt climbed to \$27,253—a 58% increase in just seven years.”⁶ By 2014 it had risen to an average of \$30,000. The former promise of higher education has been compromised, rendered unattainable, by the dramatic rise in debt and the rise in the number of “indentured” graduates and parents.⁷

The goal of universities and colleges to attract, enroll, mentor, and graduate more first-generation students, those from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, those in liminal positions, such as the college-age children of undocumented migrants, among others, becomes harder to achieve. The stark divide between the have-nots and the haves, between those who do not have to depend on student loans and those who have them, negatively affects the accessibility of higher education, especially for underserved populations. This sobering decrease in the percentage of students from underserved com-

munities and low-income families occurs as major shifts in the demographics of the U.S. population point to a time in the near future (projected at 2044) when the United States will become a majority-minority nation (with less than 50% of the population designated as non-Hispanic whites).⁸ Universities and colleges thus find plans to enhance excellence compromised by the lack of diverse, experientially earned perspectives around the seminar table, the lab, and the offices of those who set policies, budget priorities, and program initiatives.

Where there is accessibility is in the community college system, which, as Kathleen Woodward observed in late 2014, now enrolls upwards of 44% of all undergraduates across the country, upwards of 50% of students of color in higher education in the United States, and an even higher percentage of low-income students. Yet that system remains woefully “overcrowded and underfunded.” Citing the Century Foundation’s 2013 report *Bridging the Higher Education Divide*, Woodward challenged educators and the public to acknowledge the potentially “separate” and “unequal” conditions of the community college system and to reflect on the ease with which that system is described as the site of vocational rather than liberal arts education.⁹

And what about graduate education? State legislators often view advanced degrees with suspicion, as an education primarily for students coming from outside the state and outside the country, and as an education whose scholarly and research projects threaten the cultural values of religiously and politically conservative constituents. This situation is joined to the dissipation of the synergistic partnerships that colleges and universities formerly enjoyed with the federal government, the states, industry, and philanthropy to build dependably up-to-date, research-intensive, and successful graduate programs. A 2012 white paper from the National Research Council of the National Academies, entitled *Research Universities and the Future of America*, warned of the inadequacy of current relationships to ensure the vitality of the nation’s research universities and the excellence of their physical plants, research agendas, and graduate training programs.¹⁰

Add to this economic and political situation, the almost-daily assaults on the value of baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral degrees, circulated through the public discourse of economic utility. Pundits and politicians proffer analyses and sound bites about how higher education in the liberal arts is overrated, outmoded, and backward-looking, only tangentially important to meeting 21st-century challenges. They pontificate about how certain degrees are undeserving of public support, not worthy of investment, a waste of time and money. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and others observe that the real generators of technological revolutions and new-mode jobs of the last three decades didn’t finish their undergraduate studies (at Stanford or Harvard).

This argument, based on the exemplary singularity of Sergey Brin, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg, is the impoverished version of the narrative that a college education is no longer requisite to becoming (white male) billionaires.

This question, “whether the debt is worth it,” should produce heated debate. Higher education has become increasingly inaccessible for lower-income people and even for many in the middle class. Higher education has changed too slowly; has often not demanded that the climate be inclusive for all students. But many critiques are too formulaic, geared to the sound bite, simplistically fragmentary. They are often lodged by people in power, people with privilege, people quick to distinguish what they term doers from takers, the deserving from the undeserving, the motivated from the unmotivated.

Then too, the impact of politicians and their allies on university policy, value-setting, and governance intensifies. Global warming skeptics continue to attack scientists and the sciences of global climate change, thus exciting the current crop of culture warriors whose distrust of those they label “elites” washes anti-intellectualism with a patina of populism. Culturally conservative activists exert disproportionate pressure on legislators to interfere with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields in such areas as embryonic stem cell research.¹¹ State legislators attempt again and again to demand particular changes in state universities, in granular attempts to affect differential tuition for programs, determined by their utility value. And through it all, the discourse of the elitism of higher education feeds the grievance machine of those who distrust the government and decry the erosion of a “real” or “true” America that is no longer.

Within colleges and universities, the effects of 40 years of decreased funding can be glimpsed in the reach of corporate-inflected discourse, policies, and management practices. They can be seen in the rise of the for-profit university. In the nonprofit sector, they can be seen in the big business of college sports; the appointment of business executives as presidents; the positioning of students as consumers; the expansion of administrative positions and bureaucratic practices; the development of patent incubators and intensification of corporately sponsored research; the spin-off of think tanks; the increasing quantification of the impact of scholarship and research results; the emergence in the curriculum of entrepreneurial studies; and the outsourcing of curricula, as seen in the flurry of investment in MOOCs (massive open online courses) a few years ago. They can be heard in the everyday circulation of market discourse: of branding, accountability management, efficiencies of scale, productivity, profit centers, shared services, centers of excellence, outcomes assessment.

They can be observed in the structural inequality of the out-of-balance ad-

junct system as the cumulative disinvestment in higher education exacerbates the casualization of the academic workforce, a contingent workforce with a demographic that is majority female. As reported by the American Association of University Professors in 2014, “Non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for 76 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education”; and across institutions of higher education in the United States, “More than 50% of all faculty hold part-time appointments.”¹² These effects are surely evident in the assaults, from outside and within universities, on academic freedom, the tenure system, and vigorous faculty governance.

No sector of the university is immune from the impact of these large forces, except, perhaps, large athletic programs; and they too are confronting their own scandals. Colleagues in the sciences and quantitative social sciences face the reality of shrinking support for primary research funded by the National Institutes after years of significant cuts and sequestration. Distinguished scientists find grant funding diminished, applications denied, projects delayed. Emergent scientists worry about careers interrupted. Of special concern is the report that “strapped scientists” are “abandon[ing] research and students,” as Paul Basken and Paul Voosen reported in the survey of 10,000 scientists nationwide for a February 2014 issue of *Academe Today*.¹³ Politicians ride science skepticism all the way to Congress. Local school boards and state legislative commissions neglect scientific expertise in favor of biblical revelation. And on and on.

But the fields of the humanities are vulnerable in their particular ways to the current troubles of higher education. So let me summarize the concatenation of forces, external and internal, affecting the corner of the academy identified with humanities disciplines and humanistic modes of inquiry beyond those disciplines, turning first to the external forces.

For a significant number of commentators and pundits, what humanists do seems elitist, narrow, and irrelevant for the concerns of the day. The humanities are thus consigned to the reliquary of a 19th-century concept of education in which privileged young men inhaled “the best” that had been thought and expressed in the hallowed halls of the liberal arts college. In an era of accountability management and corporate number-crunching, the argument goes, the humanities can’t quantify their value. In the current global economy of uncertainty and hardship, the humanities are impractical to study, or just plain expendable. On the way to a job, some say, who thinks about the origins of life, the question of evil in the universe, the history of the Antinomians in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the sounds of almost-extinct languages, the metrics of medieval verse or Sanskrit epic, or the experience of reading in 12th-century China, 14th-century Spain, 19th-century Peru, or the 20th-century outback of Australia. In the context of what Gary Carnivale of

the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce describes as an economic capital concept of education,¹⁴ such preoccupations seem to be much ado about nothing consequential to future careers and to the nation.

Particularly vocal among the humanities skeptics are the public servants. Recall Governor Rick Scott of Florida—the state doesn't need to educate any anthropologists because Florida doesn't need them. Recall Governor Pat McCrory of North Carolina—the state doesn't need to educate any gender studies majors when there are obviously no jobs for which the degree is a preparation. In 2014 McCrory stated over radio: “If you want to take gender studies, that's fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job.”¹⁵

In part, these dismissals constitute the afterlife of the political and social turmoil of the 1960s, the feminist movement, the consolidation of ethnic studies programs in the academy, and other hot-button issues of culture warriors on the right. In part, they derive from the corporatist logic of utility applied to the academy, with its discourse of comparative usefulness of majors to landing the first job out of school, and its discourse of the nonefficiency of spending so much time studying subjects not immediately applicable to the everyday needs of a job or “strategic” to solving problems. The rush to quantify utility can be observed in the 37 states who by 2015, as reported by Lance Lambert, “have now built—or are in the process of building—systems that can pinpoint what graduates earn,” data that can be used to make funding decisions for public colleges and universities.¹⁶ The national conversations about differential tuition and the utility of majors continue in think tanks, legislatures, and boardrooms. Those conversations reproduce for the public at large a narrative of nonutilitarian, nonstrategic humanities education; of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields as lightweight expendables on the way to achieving economic efficiencies, filing entrepreneurial patents, and affirming capitalist values.

And within the academy, the status of the humanities sector is troublingly precarious. Academic humanists have lived with the reality that since the great expansion of higher education in the post–World War II era enrollments have shrunk in economic downturns. But the dramatic rise in the cost of higher education, coupled with the decrease in public funding and the adoption of corporate discourse and practices, now intensifies the doom-and-gloom prognosis of the future of the humanities in the 21st-century university. With the economic downturn of 2008, and in its wake, enrollments in humanities courses and declarations of humanities majors have decreased, dramatically in some units and at particular universities and colleges. For regents and members of university boards, and for administra-

tors, then, the problem of the humanities is that they cannot justify their claims for resources by recourse to course enrollment counts in times of economic distress.

Further troubling to some administrators is that the curriculum in humanities disciplines cannot be easily scaled up. Those pursuing management efficiencies often find the practices at the heart of humanities teaching difficult to translate to huge lecture courses or virtual classrooms of hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of students: the expectations of significant and deep reading; the slow time spent developing and supporting interpretive approaches to cultural texts; the writing, and revision, and more writing that is difficult to assess through Scantron technologies. With regard to graduate programs, the difficulty of adequately funding fellowships in departments without grants to support students leads to questions about the value of graduate education considered irrelevant to the pressing issues facing the nation and the world.

The management imperatives of efficiency and quantification render humanities units problems in need of solving. Decreased enrollments and the inability to attract external funding contribute to the mismeasurement of the cost of humanities programs to the university. As a result, in times of severe budget cuts, humanities units are often the first to be downsized; or forced into marriages with multiple partners, willing and unwilling; or eliminated altogether. Small language units have been common targets in projects of efficiency.¹⁷ Just recall the drastic cuts that the University of Albany made in 2010–2011, cuts that ultimately eliminated the Department of Classics and scaled back majors in French, Italian, and Russian to minors. And Albany was only one institution to retrench humanities degrees after the 2008 economic collapse.

Humanities departments have had to adjust. Many departments have pared down the size of doctoral cohorts over the last decade because the costs of educating them cannot be sustained and cannot be off-loaded to grant funding. For some, the size of cohorts hovers at the limit of viability for a “respectable” program. The normal course load for faculty at many places is increasing, dependent on institutional mission, status, and resources. Undergraduate directors are asking faculty to “grow” lecture courses. At some institutions, humanities programs have been delegated to provide general education and skills courses necessary for students in popular undergraduate programs. In other words, they have been managed into the status of “service providers” within the academy.

And there are further issues of academic status particular to humanities units. The pay gap continues to widen between the salaries of humani-

ties faculty and the salaries of those in the social sciences, STEM fields, and professional schools, based on competitive salary setting by disciplines. That gap is exacerbated by another factor, the longer time-to-tenure and time-to-promotion for humanities faculty as compared to faculty in the professional schools, sciences, and quantitative social sciences. Within humanities departments there is also the widening gap between tenure- and tenure-track faculty and those in contingent and non-tenure-track lectureships. Across humanities units, but especially in English and other language departments, large numbers of people off the tenure track, and often on one-term appointment, provide service courses to meet composition and language requirements in the general education curriculum. They work with few benefits, little professional support, and often no job security. This dramatic imbalance in the distribution of teaching across tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty results in a two-tier faculty, with those in the contingent category earning a median pay per course of \$2,700 and an annual average income of \$21,600 (according to the 2012 survey by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce).¹⁸

The demographics of humanities departments also impacts issues of academic status. Humanities departments have a relatively high proportion of female faculty within liberal arts fields. According to a report of the Humanities Indicators, that proportion hovers around 50%, though the figure varies by discipline, with philosophy and religion reporting figures of less than 33% for the 2013–2014 year.¹⁹ The gender demographic in the contingent rank in humanities departments is majority female.²⁰ No wonder activists in and scholars of higher education talk about the “feminization” of the professoriate in the humanities.²¹

Finally, there are pressing concerns about the realities confronting doctoral students in the humanities, the future professoriate. Since these realities along with the data will be elaborated in Part III, I will be brief here. A large proportion of humanities doctoral students now spend more than seven years earning a degree. Many accumulate substantial debt, the underrepresented students among them even greater debt. When they complete the degree, they confront grim job prospects. The humanities job search for the first tenure-track position now takes three to five years. A modest percentage of newly minted doctorates find tenure-track positions the first year out; a larger percentage by three years out. Many spend one or two or three years in postdoc positions, sometimes with modest teaching obligations, sometimes with demanding teaching obligations. Others spend time in temporary lectureships, joining the contingent faculty. In those positions they work to gain enhanced teaching credentials and publish essays off the dissertation. They also hope for the conversion of the lecturer position to a tenure-track position and for

a more robust set of job openings the next year. They hear around them talk of more purposeful and expanded programs in professional development, programs now geared to preparing graduate students for alternative careers inside and outside the academy.

Here then, in condensed form, is my set of particulars about the political economy of the academy and the conditions particular to the academic humanities. This summary sketch does not aim to be comprehensive. Nor are my comments intended as a deep reading of the confluence of forces in play. I tried for that in an earlier draft of this book, but it soon overwhelmed my focus on transforming doctoral education. And besides, over the last decade, in book after book, column after column, and blog after blog, scholars and public intellectuals have chronicled the troubles of higher education. Passionate, and often pessimistic, they have railed at the loss of a vibrant academy and a robust humanities. They have tracked with prodigious research and through trenchant argumentation the “rise” of the knowledge corporation and the “decline” of the U.S. university system after a century of ascendancy and pre-eminence. They have warned about diminished academic freedom and the deplorable exploitation of contingent faculty.²² These books address the large political and economic formations, with bleak assessments or messianic fervor or frustration at the glacial pace of change. In this book, the focus is on the transformation of graduate education in the humanities even in the midst of these bleak conditions.

There are plenty of reasons for anxiety. There are plenty of concerns to stoke a malaise. There are plenty of critiques to turn on the shortsightedness of politicians, the corporate imaginary, and the neoliberal logic of utility. That’s for sure. But critique is not enough now. Intervention is all. Which brings me back to my mantra that the times are good enough. It’s a usable slogan, effective in marshaling energy to avoid a sense of despair before the forces out there.

So, what is to be done?