After Coronavirus, the Deluge

Administrators have been waiting for the opportunity to finish what they started. Watch out.

By Jacques Berlinerblau  |  March 26, 2020

Through the medium of Zoom, my students are geometrically arrayed across my computer screen in little Brady Bunch boxes. One is a passenger in dad’s car, her seatbelt draped around her like an ambassador’s sash. Unbeknown to another participant, his brother is fixing a sandwich off in the background: ham, cheese, tartare mayonnaise, kaiser roll, all that. Most of the others are reclining on their beds in the rooms where they grew up, played Pokémon, and never once imagined that their college dreams would be waylaid by Covid-19.

I never once imagined anything like this either. The only doomsday scenarios that I ever entertained centered on the unhealthy, compromised organism that is the American教授iate. Talk about getting waylaid! For decades, we watched the slow-motion disintegration of our profession. Suddenly came the Virus King with its infinite crowns to herd us all online. Now the future is here: looks a lot like the past, but with better sight lines and clear resolution.
Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to The Chronicle’s key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- Ritual, Rhythm, Community: Everything Higher Ed Does Best, the Coronavirus Attacks
- As Covid-19 Erases Line Between Work and Home, Professors Learn to Teach Remotely While Watching Their Kids
- ‘Do No Harm’: The Coronavirus Crisis Calls for Compassion, Say Faculty Members Sharing Advice

In the past, critics like myself and others were urged not to fret about the adjunctification, or “casualization,” of academic labor. Again and again, jowly college presidents, rear admirals of learned societies bearing epaulets, line managers at elite doctoral mills, and assorted free-market types in bow ties, assured us that the institution of tenure was doing just swell. When it came to the growing ranks of nontenured, they spoke of “redundancies,” “strategic redeployment of resources,” and riffed about the need to be “nimble” in response to “shifting market demand.” In many ways, these thought leaders were the brainy forebears of our current epistemological moment — a moment in which citizens are implored to ignore relevant data and their own engagement with empirical reality. Everything is perfect.

That things were nowhere near perfect in our vocation was as clear 10 years ago as is the desolate street outside your window today. More contingent faculty taught more undergraduates and were paid less. Those who snared the dwindling proportion of
tenure-line positions taught fewer undergraduates and were paid more. In terms of educational quality and learning outcomes, not to mention the well-being of our ancient guild, absolutely none of it made sense. But you couldn’t beat the price!

It cannot be denied that the apathy of tenured professors to the plight of their nontenured colleagues is a failure of common decency and professional solidarity (about which, more anon). But it pales in comparison to the dereliction of duty of our administrative overseers. It is they who made more or less all of the decisions just mentioned. Once those decisions were put into play, all that remained was for the present Covid-19 crisis to accelerate our free fall to the bottom.

And what do fuddy dudgies like me believe lies down there, at the bottom? The functional disappearance of tenure as an institution within a few decades (with a few elite institutions remaining as outliers); the expansion of the heartless casualization we see today to maybe 80 percent of scholars in this country; the absence of adequate compensation, job security, and health care for all but a few professors; the continued, though admittedly also self-inflicted, decline of the humanities. As for academic freedom — do we really need to have this argument again? — it simply cannot exist without tenure. How the humanities and the interpretive social sciences don’t mutate into entirely different discourses in the absence of such protections is beyond me.

“Don’t let a good crisis go to waste!” If there were a modicum of trust between faculty and administration nationwide, I’d never assume that this type of thinking is in play. The decision to shut down schools was warranted, as was the decision to move courses online. But now that we are here, what guarantees that the word- and thought-defying “cost-cuttingness” of this endeavor won’t be “evaluated”? Some number-cruncher will recognize this crisis for the unprecedented opportunity it actually is.

And not only number crunchers! On the pages of *The New York Times*, Richard Arum and Mitchell Stevens — described as “experts in innovation on college education” — view this moment as an “exquisite” opportunity. “One positive outcome from the current crisis,” the authors observe, “would be for academic elites to forgo their
presumption that online learning is a second- or third-rate substitute for in-person delivery.” The authors go in for the chide: “This is snobbish, counterproductive and insensitive to the nation’s critical need for affordable college options.”

I have a question for Arum, co-author of an important book on the undeniable shortcomings of college teaching: Why is it snobbish to assume, just as higher education is reaching more diverse students than ever before, that a professor at a community college should be offered a decent, living wage so as to better serve the people who study there? Why would we abandon a face-to-face teaching model that has unambiguously benefited a massive professional class since the American Association of University Professors and Association of American Colleges established tenure guidelines in 1940?

What will happen to academic freedom when every lecture is “capturable”? What administrator will stand in the way of a third-party provider’s desire to data-mine the crud out of every undergraduate eye movement and finger click? Why wouldn’t “product placement” be the norm in digital pedagogy? Oh, and in this Age of Lurk, how will professors not be monitored as they expound on the ideas that neither the college, the board of trustees, nor the third-party provider finds helpful? In short, what delicious deplatforming possibilities exist when the platform itself is not governed by faculty?

As we ponder these issues, let me note that the breakdown of the professoriate alluded to above was no “outside job.” The presidents, provosts, deans, vice deans, and mid-level administrators who slowly restructured the budgetary, and hence moral, priorities of our colleges were “one of us.” The overwhelming majority of them were scholars holding the highest degrees in their fields.

In 100 years, some sociologist — assuming those things still exist — will look back at the Great Academic Die-Off and wonder why solidarity was so lacking in this guild. Why did individuals who went to the same graduate schools, earned the same degrees, and climbed the same tenure ladders so thoughtlessly trash their own vocation? Do beat cops that become detectives immediately proceed to dismantle the
unions to which they once belonged? Do lawyers who ascend to the rank of partner set out to reduce opportunities for every associate that joins the firm? Why, our sociologist might ask, did scholars cannibalize their own profession?

Years back, my son told me about a Pokémon named Gengar. He hid in dark corners, poised to pounce on his prey and steal its life force. Just last week the boy was evicted from his own dorm room in New York — a wise and responsible decision made by, yes, college administrators. Next week he’ll be in a Zoom box, looking at an image of a scholar whose livelihood, vocation, and even existence are imperiled in ways the scholar can and cannot see.

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