

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



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THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By *Johann N. Neem*

MARCH 21, 2022

**U**niversities might be facing a moment similar to what befell early modern English monasteries under Henry VIII. For generations, Ronald G. Musto explains in *The Attack on Higher Education* (2021), monasteries were the center of English intellectual and religious life. They were innovators that developed new ideas. But, following the dissolution acts of 1535 and 1539, “the monasteries’ daily routines, chants, liturgical hours, processions, rituals, instructions, and labors concentrated in particular places simply ceased to exist.”

Could the same happen to universities?

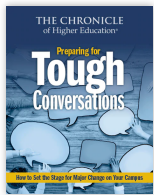
It's already happening. Today, we walk among the ruins of an institution that once had a larger purpose. It's not clear what role universities should play in society, and to what or to whom they are accountable, other than their corporate interests.

To some, that's not a problem, at least according to Arthur Levine and Scott J. Van Pelt in *The Great Upheaval* (2021). They see higher education undergoing the same transformation that reshaped the music, film, and newspaper industries. Rather than place-based education overseen by tenured professors, they anticipate "the rise of anytime, anyplace, consumer-driven content and source agnostic, unbundled, personalized education paid for by subscription."

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Between Musto's existential fears of disruption and Levine and Van Pelt's embrace of it lies a third path. It takes the form of a wager — outlined by Ronald J. Daniels in *What Universities Owe Democracy* (2021) — that universities can and should continue to matter because of their importance in civic democratic life.

How did we get here? Under globalization, the modern university lost its referent, as Bill Readings wrote in his book *The University in Ruins* (1996). By this, Readings meant that the university no longer understood "the end and meaning of its activities." Universities had once connected the education they offered to preparing citizens and the knowledge they produced to serving national interests and "uphold[ing] national prestige."

But today, these purposes no longer animate our institutions. Even in 1996, Readings concluded that the university no longer functioned as "an ideological apparatus of the nation-state." Instead, he warned, it had become "a relatively independent bureaucratic system." It is this context that makes the wager Daniels offers in *What Universities Owe Democracy* so urgent.

Daniels is the president of the Johns Hopkins University, which is billed as America's first research university. The pandemic reminded us of how essential these universities are, as

Hopkins and others took the lead in generating and sharing information about the coronavirus. Hopkins, in this sense, lived up to its founding president Daniel Coit Gilman's 19th-century aspiration that universities be places that acquire, conserve, refine, and distribute knowledge. Amid the ruins, Daniels argues for the need to reconnect this important work to higher civic purposes in order to rescue universities from a skeptical public, tight-fisted policy makers, and culture warriors on and off campus.

Universities, Daniels asserts, have four essential functions: (1) providing access in ways that encourage social mobility; (2) educating democratic citizens; (3) creating expert knowledge; and (4) encouraging students — and citizens — to engage in dialogue across difference. These four purposes are not particularly novel; indeed, other writers have made similar claims. But the purposes are crucial at a time when elite institutions, in particular, often re-create existing inequalities and when universities are being pressured to replace liberal education with vocational majors. Daniels recognizes that the public's willingness to support higher education's democratic mission depends on universities re-engaging with the nation-state.

Daniels believes not only that universities "serve and enrich liberal democracy" but that they have the obligation to do so. By seeking truth, speaking truth to power, and creating campuses in which dialogue across difference checks dogmatism, colleges "are among liberal democracy's cornerstone institutions." Although Canadian by birth, Daniels gives his book an American focus. Universities must make the case that they serve not just democracy, but *American* democracy.

Will Daniels's wager work? It's not clear. Administrators and faculty members these days do not seem particularly committed to the nation-state. "Internationalization" and "globalization" are all the rage. Cynically, one might view that as a way to bring in tuition dollars from foreign students, but it also reflects the professoriate's genuine intellectual and political commitment to a world that overcomes parochialism. On many campuses, it is suspect to call oneself a patriotic American, as if love of country is something reserved for those other people — typically in red states.

Daniels thus will first have to start with his colleagues. He will have to remind them that universities should not seek to free students from the nation but help them understand their responsibilities to it. As Daniels intuits, without a larger purpose to hold them fast, there is

nothing to prevent universities from being buffeted by winds until they have lost direction. That is what Readings foresaw: Globalization liberates universities from national fetters, but at the risk of ruin.

Ruin may well be upon us, if Levine and Van Pelt's *The Great Upheaval* is correct. They might read *What Universities Owe Democracy* and laugh at Daniels's naïveté. Sure, Johns Hopkins may be rich and prestigious enough to survive the coming disruption, but other institutions are facing extinction, according to *The Great Upheaval*. While Daniels urges universities to chart a course through the storm, Levine and Van Pelt anticipate that many, if not most, will be thrown against the rocks.

It is hard to review Levine and Van Pelt's book, not just because of its simplistic argumentation, but because this book has been written so many times before. I could anticipate every word, every sentence, every paragraph. There is not a single new idea in the book. It is ironic that books about innovation are so imitative. But that is how ideas become ideology.

Levine and Van Pelt argue that while traditional universities can adapt around the edges, changing socioeconomic contexts and technology will force a broader disruption. (Is this sounding familiar?) We are living, they write, through "a time of profound, unrelenting, and accelerating change of a magnitude and scope unequaled since the Industrial Revolution." (Ugh.) Indeed, "the United States is hurtling from a national, analog, industrial economy to a global, digital, knowledge economy." (What do these words even mean?) Their book is a *Reader's Digest* of arguments made by scholars and "thought leaders" in myriad books, essays, and TED Talks.

The book opens with a series of potted histories. The authors claim that the Industrial Revolution produced new knowledge needs, which the modern university arose to meet. They posit a direct correlation between social needs and institutional change. Their point is to show both that institutions must meet the needs of the moment and that we are living with outdated institutions designed for an earlier era.

The story lacks complexity. It presumes an easy fit between institutions and a changing world. This simplistic understanding of history and institutional change is what permits the authors'

larger argument: Given that we are living through a moment of intense upheaval, higher education better change quickly.

The new order is already here, embodied in Arizona State University's online program, Southern New Hampshire University, and Western Governors University. These institutions offer degrees cheaper and faster and more conveniently for most Americans' busy lives. They don't demand the money or time that traditional institutions do. Indeed, they don't really require a faculty. As Levine and Van Pelt [put it](#), in these new model universities, "faculty members, whose numbers can be expected to decline, will also undergo a shift. Currently composed of subject-matter experts engaged in teaching and research, the ranks will be diversified to include learning designers, instructors, assessors, and technologists." This is euphemistically called the "[disaggregated faculty model](#)." If this is the future, what lies ahead for the institutions Daniels considers essential for a democracy?

Perhaps nobody cares. Students, Levine and Van Pelt write, want "the same kind of relationship with their colleges that they have with their banks, supermarkets, and internet providers." Today's students — especially adult learners — are not seeking the deep transformation that comes from spending time in communities of learning. That's inconvenient and expensive. That's why students seeking "a stripped-down version of higher education are prime candidates for consumer-oriented, anyplace, anytime instruction."

I object. While universities must find ways to reach nontraditional students, the answer is not to treat education like banking. We do not ask banks to change people's hearts and minds. And because education is not like banking, universities must resist. Levine and Van Pelt might respond that students want convenience. Indeed, that is why professionals have a responsibility to understand the nature of their service. When companies like Wells Fargo offer customers easy credit even when they are aware that it will harm some of the most vulnerable Americans, we know that they have behaved immorally and irresponsibly, even if their customers wanted the money. But when Levine and Van Pelt invoke a similar, "customer is always right" mentality at ASU, SNHU, and WGU, they want us to call it innovation.

Levine and Van Pelt's envisioned future looks back to the distant past. It's as old as the displacement of artisan shoemakers in early 1800s Massachusetts by the mills that would dominate the 19th-century New England countryside. That factory model doesn't meet any of

the intellectual, civic, or economic needs of today. Instead of bringing people together to think creatively, they offer canned curriculums made easy to complete and assess. It's mass production, not innovation. If Charlie Chaplin were alive today, he could remake *Modern Times* using ASU, SNHU, and WGU as models. The setting is already there: staff at SNHU's College for America are housed [in an old mill](#). You can't make this up.

The biggest irony is that somehow these familiar models are labeled innovative. How do intelligent people fall for this?

**L**evine and Van Pelt's predictable predictions still might come to pass. If so, Musto, in *The Attack on Higher Education*, helps us understand what that will look and feel like for those of us who inhabit the university. It will not be fun.

Musto does not agree with Levine and Van Pelt that universities will die off because they have outlived their usefulness. Instead, he argues, they might disappear for reasons similar to those that led to the closure of monasteries in 16th-century England. According to Musto, those monasteries lost — or were perceived to have lost — their capacity to maintain authority, to retain their separateness (physical, intellectual, and temporal), and to be sites of innovation. Protestant critics argued that monasticism had “no direct benefit to society.” But once their “authority and reputation for innovation” was lost, others saw the monasteries as “hoarders and squanderers of both material and spiritual wealth.” It was not lost on Henry VIII that, at a time when he needed funds, monasteries had property and large endowments.

Much of Musto's book is devoted to demonstrating the myriad ways that American universities lost their cultural authority, because of both attacks from without and criticism from within. He then explains how headline scandals concerning everything from rising tuition to activist governing boards, corrupt admissions practices, and culture wars combined to further undermine the public's confidence in universities. Universities sought to shore up their autonomy by maintaining separateness, but both campus activists' and external stakeholders' demands for relevance broke down the campus walls. By the 1980s, universities, despite their wealth, no longer earned the public's trust.

It is into this space that narratives like those offered by Levine and Van Pelt flood, Musto suggests. Universities are endangered not because they failed to meet the needs of a changing

society, but because the loss of authority and separateness left the public and policy makers open to “negative narratives” proffered by those who hoped to displace universities’ (and the faculty’s) central role in American society. For reasons good and base (there’s a lot of money to be made), critics wove a tale about institutions that had outlived their usefulness. Unfortunately, the university was not well positioned to challenge the “growing narrative of those who would destroy it.”

The dissolution of the monasteries “saw the vast majority of religious houses abandoned, their communities dissolved and scattered, their physical plants left for sale, pillage, and ruin.” It is hard for us to imagine this happening to universities, but it would also have been hard for monastics to have imagined such a fate — monasteries had been around for centuries. Musto reminds us that monasteries were vulnerable because both the crown and the people no longer valued the work they did — the knowledge they produced and the practices they sustained. And if Levine and Van Pelt are correct, the same is true today for academic knowledge and practices.

Daniels’s wager is that the end is not inevitable and that universities can reassert their centrality to the American liberal democratic project. I hope he’s right. With public funding and ingenuity, maybe we can make quality higher education accessible to more Americans and reinvest in research. But if Daniels is wrong, Musto would urge academics to foster new ways to sustain scholarly communities and produce knowledge. The future is not fixed. We must be creative because the dominant narrative makes us forget that other futures are possible.

*A version of this essay previously appeared at [Public Books](#).*

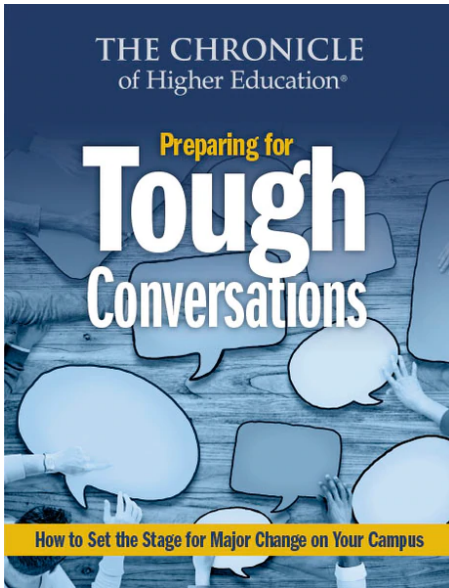
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OPINION

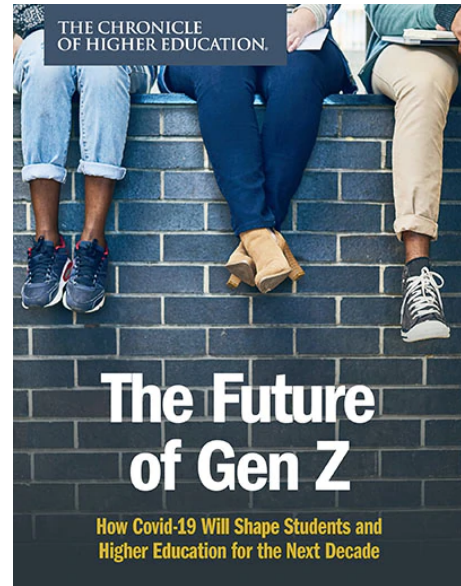
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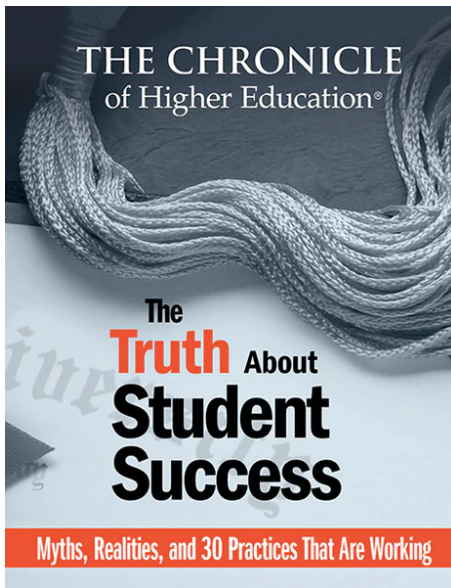
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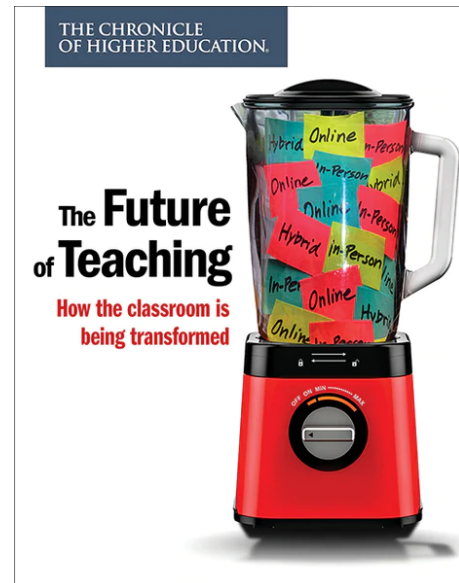
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