

To Youth Camp,

a
Long
Farewell

By James J. O'Donnell





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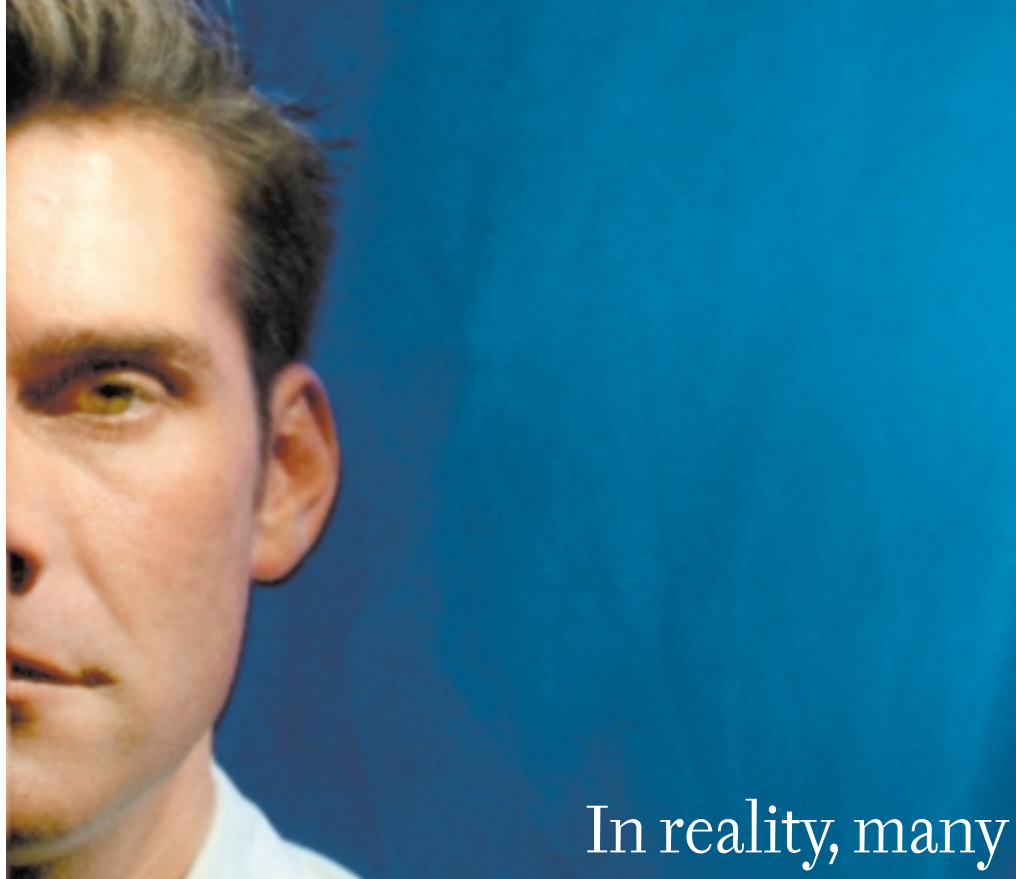
few years back, a colleague returned from the mandatory summer trip to visit campuses with her seventeen-year-old and observed that, based on the sales pitches heard at these institutions, there seemed to be two kinds of schools: institutions of higher learning and youth camps.

I can think of no college or university that I would call, in cold prose, a youth camp, but I cannot think of many that do not harbor at least some of the elements of the youth camp culture. Often this culture affects the sales pitch of the admissions office, but more often it is found lurking in the way campuses, curricula, and even faculty are organized and managed. Some of the elements of such a culture are undoubtedly negative in their impact, but many are—on the surface—quite positive. For example, few in higher education would quarrel with the idea that undergraduates should be adequately and comfortably fed, housed, and cared for.

But the positive and negative aspects of the youth camp culture come together in a common infantilization that ought to be more disturbing than it is. I address this theme because this culture, whatever one may think of its relevance to the old ways of doing things in the academy, stands in the way of some new ideas that are of strategic importance. The connection between the youth camp tradition and our strategic dilemmas is far from obvious and requires some elaboration.

Five years ago, the revolution in “distance learning” (or “distance-independent learning” or “distributed learning”) seemed to be upon us. Two or three years ago, the sounds of the revolution could be heard in all quadrants of the sky. Yet as we go into the fall of 2001, the rumblings are much quieter. What appeared inevitable only a couple of years ago now looks puzzlingly remote. To be

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faculty hard to recruit, and production costs impossible to bring in line with the results that can be demonstrated. At least one university that made a splash announcing its for-profit subsidiary for distance learning has now quietly closed down the operation.

Nothing is as easy as it seems.

Think now of the youth camp traditions. Much of higher education is attached to a model that privileges the baccalaureate student who is eighteen to twenty-two years old, studying full-time to obtain a degree in four years, and residing in institutional housing.

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sure, evidence of the revolution can be seen here and there: new products are becoming available, many more courses are available in some location-independent form, and Western Governors University already has its first Chancellor Emeritus and an enrollment of five hundred students. And there is wisdom in persistence and patience. If the dot-coms have gone dot-bust, it's reasonable to think that the inflated expectations in the not-for-profit sector¹ would also deflate, and what was overvalued two years ago would be undervalued today—making this a good time to invest.

It baffles some that the revolution has not occurred. But when a question won't answer itself, chances are you're asking the wrong question.

Distance learning was certainly high concept for the 1990s in higher education. But like the "horseless carriage," this notion materialized through an unimaginative extension of traditional forms. The key insight was that networked informa-

tion technology makes it possible to reorganize the process of learning and to redistribute what takes place face to face so that it takes place when learners and teachers are separated in space and time. Traditional students could learn in new ways, and new kinds of students could join the academic community for the first time.

Many of those who felt keenly the clarity of that vision also thought that existing institutions harbored some excess capacity of instructional time and attention that could be sold cheaply in bulk. This was a shimmering dream, never realistic. Much time and energy was spent trying to prove that concept, with precious little to show as a result. Nobody has succeeded in building outlet malls for the mind—offering cheap and serviceable merchandise of sometimes dubious origin more or less protected by prestige name brands. That is, in fact, good news. And even where more realistic projects were put in motion, markets have been slow to evolve,

These students are the privileged few—already a minority in American higher education in actual numbers but still dominant in the myths of what higher education is about. These privileged few are granted a special opportunity in life: to spend four years of adulthood, mainly withdrawn from productive employment, in the exploitation of their physical and mental capabilities for their own purposes—some high-minded, some frankly bent on the pleasures of youth—while being protected from most of the ordinary consequences (often even the legal consequences) of irresponsible conduct. (It is no accident that drug abuse has historically been a phenomenon among the unemployed young—with the graciously unemployed upper-class youths buying their supplies from the unwillingly unemployed lower-class youths. The two groups have more in common than we like to imagine.) Dormitories and fraternity/sorority houses and student ghettos are the scenes of a wide variety of childish

behaviors to which the denizens feel entitled. Many students living in the same settings are disgusted by some of what they see and refrain from much of the behavior around them, but they rarely succeed in overthrowing the dominant culture.

Colleges and universities are deeply and complexly attached to this infantilization. The social position of higher education in European and American societies is firmly rooted in a notion of prolonged and irresponsible childhood. Though only a fraction of students actually have the opportunity to live such a life, servicing their needs still provides the conceptual and bureaucratic structure of higher education institutions. A new administrator in my university asked me how “the typical student” gets computer support—and when I pressed the question, I found that “the typical student” is the undergraduate, even though undergraduates make up less than 50 percent of our FTE population.

Parental anxiety plays a significant part in encouraging institutions to establish and preserve these patronizing cultures. Parents want levels of security that would be unreasonable to expect if their eighteen-year-old son or daughter instead moved off to the big city to get a job. They want to be absolutely sure that their children have easy access to three super-abundant meals a day and don't have to worry about paying for the food. They expect health care, counseling, and other services that would be preposterous to expect elsewhere, and colleges and universities compete aggressively to deliver all these services.

So when most people think of higher education, they think of something that happens to people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two and that lasts for about four years. In reality, many students are already well into their twenties, still working on a first degree while taking a responsible economic role in society as well. Many others, in their twenties and thirties, are engaged in professional education, whether for the academic Ph.D. or in the myriad professional disciplines. Higher education institutions serve a huge variety of adult learners, some working for a bachelor's degree, some for professional degrees, some for continuing professional education, and some for

reasons of cultural and personal enhancement. But on the traditional campus, all those adults are in one way or another made to feel marginal. Even—one might say especially—the search for a parking space often reminds them that they are second-class citizens.²

The campus-intensive academic structure depends heavily on expensive physical plant, rich support services, and costly extracurricular possibilities. These are not insignificant drivers of the proverbially high cost of a college education. The economic model for this bastion of privilege is state socialism. It lives in our campus worlds—in the way housing and dining services are priced to ensure egalitarianism, for example, or in the abundance of services offered either freely or in return for nominal fees designed to encourage use without measuring or recovering the full cost. Though American higher education is thus a miracle of egalitarian access, there is the constant tendency to reprivilege these environments. When they become a form of subsidized luxury for the *nomenklatura* of our society, we all should worry.

Moreover, when “diversity” becomes the buzzword for deciding how many and which of the less-privileged members of society should be allowed to join the *nomenklatura*, an opportunity is lost. Institutions worry about their inability to identify and recruit members of traditionally underrepresented groups without fully accepting that they make access harder by privileging the golden youth. People who grow up with significantly disadvantaged schooling systems may not be ready for higher education until they are twenty-five or thirty-five; single mothers struggling in school cannot behave as though they are carefree nineteen-year-olds; and of course, those who simply cannot afford full-time study have always been at a loss. The traditional solution to this last problem is instructive: institutions try to offer sufficient financial aid to a few students so that the students are artificially promoted into the domain of privilege—in short, institutions prefer to change the students (in small numbers) rather than change themselves so that they will be genuinely more welcoming.

So traditional students tend to buy (or think they ought to buy) a “bulkpack,” so

to speak, of education: four years at a time on one campus, even though the merchandise may be quite variable in quality and the buyer may change direction several times. Nontraditional students, on the other hand, have limited time to spend on campus and little interest in the support services and the extracurricular facilities (or little opportunity to take advantage of them). They thus show far less loyalty to a given supplier (except when forced to do so by the anticompetitive practices of credentialing and tuition pricing) and do not hesitate to find another supplier if price, convenience, and quality dictate. These students see the campus as a shopping mall for the mind: a place within their lives, not the place within which their lives unfold.

Meanwhile, many aspects of today's colleges and universities really don't make sense; they are legacies of a feudal/infantile mode. Faculty still too often grade on the curve, accepting in advance that it's not possible for every transaction to be successful and that a certain number of students have to fail. Grade inflation, the evil that all deplore but few address, makes the opposite mistake, in a similar spirit. Faculty take it as their right and responsibility to overdetermine the curriculum, based on their expertise (even when that expertise is entirely abstract and a priori, as when faculty construct required courses for freshmen in the absence of any quantitative evidence of the value of such requirements). Faculty do an abysmal job of scheduling classes—relying on instinct, tradition, and convenience. And institutions are organized around an agrarian calendar redesigned a generation ago by one of the lesser pupils of Rube Goldberg.³

But let me return to my point of departure and discuss the relevance of these thoughts to the 1990s concerns with distance learning. One point that was highlighted in the debates and experiments of the last five years was the immense institutional weight that seemed to impede transformative change. The rock on which many an experiment foundered was the reality that faculty are *not* underutilized, are not a stockpile of excess capacity that can be thrown into action on a moment's notice. Faculty work hard, are generally overcommitted, and cannot be

withdrawn from what they and administrations regard as the core mission of the institution.

The definition of that core mission has developed around the two-tier vision of higher education: the privileged few and the marginal many, with age discrimination at the heart of the matter. Colleges and universities cannot move effectively to better serve the many, or to reach new audiences, unless they reconceive their broad structure. The institutional discrimination in favor of the young both patronizes and inhibits traditional students while disadvantaging other students. If faculty “load” is defined



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around the traditional student population, then the nontraditional student will be permanently marginalized. If senior faculty visit campus only during the day and nontraditional students can take classes only at night, the two groups will never meet—unless institutions act to facilitate their meeting. If student services dollars privilege the full-time late adolescent and offer little for the single-parent or the midcareer learner, colleges and universities are not doing their jobs.

If those in higher education place a high value on using new techniques and new technologies to reach more students more effectively, which institutions will flourish as a result? It will be the institutions that succeed in making disinfantilization a strategic priority. This does not mean tossing the partying freshmen out of the dorms and onto the streets to look for apartments overnight. The established culture, tradition, and economics of the present system are too deeply rooted even to imagine such a thing—

or for such a thing to be at all desirable.

Rather, disinfantilization can be a beacon at the horizon, a light toward which to steer. If we in higher education face economic issues pressing our housing and dining systems, what assumptions about those services underlie our solutions? Are we deciding which forms of misconduct to address with our in-house discipline systems and when to call the police? Are we fretting about our ability to recruit minority students? Are we thinking about faculty workload and how to define responsibility to the institution? Deciding in favor of strategies that progressively move away from the standard age-discrimination practices will better position us to reach all students—nontraditional and traditional—more effectively.

Such thinking will not turn ocean liners around overnight. The institutions most likely to profit from it are the ones already struggling to match resources to mission and to find the right students to recruit and retain. For them, the opportu-

nity is more appealing than for those still comfortable in old practices. To the extent, great or small, that institutions move toward disinfantilization in explicit and implicit practice, they will be readying themselves to achieve their fundamental goals of disseminating knowledge broadly and deeply in our society. Moreover, institutions organized this way will be better and more transferable models for institutions in other societies still building higher education infrastructures. Distance or distributed learning will then spring up and propagate itself as a consequence of strategic vision. If institutions really want to reach those students who can work only at night (and think these students are as important as other students), campuses can and will find ways—some technological, some organizational—to do so.

The first step is to bring the topic into the conversation. This means going against a variety of established patterns. The academic left is conditioned to im-

pede anything that seems to restrict the freedom of youthful idylls, whereas the academic right is conditioned to attack anything that seems to threaten discipline and order. Meanwhile, parents' anxieties must also be allayed. Administrations in successful institutions are wary of upsetting a delicate balance of aspirations and markets.

Most perverse is the kind of Faustian bargain that all too often obtains across the gap at the front of the classroom. When faculty and students, each group bent by a variety of inclinations and incentives, face each other, it is still too easy for them to agree to let each other off the hook. "I'll just talk for fifty minutes, and you'll just take notes, and there will be a test later, right?" Learning happens in these settings more often than might be expected, but it is precisely such sober, ordinary, disciplined, and tolerant places that produce the greatest waste of higher education resources and opportunities.

The pioneer institutions of today have an important role to play. Even when structured on a small scale, they are places

where the future is being invented. The competency-based approach of Western Governors University, for example, offers a powerful alternative to the traditional academic model of measuring progress by time spent in classrooms and credit hours amassed. California State University, Monterey Bay, has been deliberately designed as a laboratory for alternative models of organization and experience. Whether or not these particular institutions succeed on a large scale is irrelevant—they could disappear tomorrow and the impact on American higher education, as measured by numbers of students directly affected, would be marginal. But whether or not their *ideas* succeed is vital to all our futures. What we need is to shape the right institutional framework for the conversations in which those ideas can take root and enact fruitful and productive change. Institutions and parts of institutions that go on thinking they're in the youth camp business will increasingly be seen as failing at their core mission. The challenge today is not unlike that of fifty years ago, when the GI Bill brought a

wave of new kinds of students to the doors of colleges and universities nationwide. We all benefit still from the success then in opening those doors.

The lesson is simple: every learner is an adult learner. Institutions that live by that mantra will flourish, and will deserve to. *e*

Notes

1. I mean here the *deliberately* not-for-profit sector, to distinguish traditional colleges and universities from that new sector of the economy that would really like to make a profit if they could, but . . .
2. Notice that complaints about the failings of higher education rarely include the astonishingly successful system of professional education. Although we may argue about the specifics of curriculum and the focus in, say, law and medical school, few dispute that those schools do what they do extraordinarily well. Likewise, nobody writes best-sellers complaining about the quality of community college education; yet few outside those institutions hear anything about the extraordinary and beneficial impact they have on students' lives.
3. The infantilization of the professoriate over the last thirty years is another topic entirely, and a sad one. Suffice it to say that treating students *and* faculty as responsible adults (which means both giving them power they do not now have *and* holding them accountable for its use) is a powerful facilitator of positive change.