**Why We Should Fear University, Inc.**


 By Fredrik DeBoer, New York Times Sept. 9, 2015

Here at Purdue University, where I recently completed my Ph.D. in English, we have a little garden on the far west side of our enormous campus, where students and their families and professors and nearby residents tend to tomatoes and sunflowers. It’s one of my favorite places here. Overgrown and seemingly unmanaged, this western fringe of campus is perhaps the only place left at the university that is not meticulously landscaped and stage-managed for tour groups and the website. There’s nothing specific to Purdue in this aesthetic conformity. Over the past two decades, financial crises notwithstanding, the American university writ large has undergone a radical physical expansion and renovation, bringing more and more campuses into line with grand architectural visions. That’s precisely why I love the garden: It’s one of the last little wild places left at Purdue. Naturally, it’s slated for demolition.

The administration needs more room for our research park, an immensely impressive and utterly lifeless collection of buildings where few undergrads ever have reason to go. The first expansion will increase the research park by only about 160 acres, but the second phase will add several hundred, consuming far more than just the garden. (The university says it will rebuild the garden elsewhere.) The new construction will be devoted to aviation technology, at a school that could scarcely enjoy a better reputation in that field. Surely the work that goes on at the research park is valuable, but its ongoing expansion literalizes the way the entire campus is being made to look and feel exactly the same — no room left for the **ungroomed**, the weird or the wild.

This orderliness is just a secondary symptom of a more **pernicious** trend: the creeping corporatism of the American university. I don’t mean the literal corporations that are taking over more and more of the physical space of universities — the Starbucks outpost, the Barnes & Noble as campus bookstore, the Visa card that you use to buy meals at the dining hall. Enrolling at a university today means setting yourself up in a vast array of for-profit systems that each take a little slice along the way: student loans distributed on fee-laden A.T.M. cards, college theater tickets sold to you by Ticketmaster, ludicrously expensive athletic apparel brought to you by Nike. Students are presented with a dazzling array of advertisements and offers: glasses at the campus for-profit vision center, car insurance through some giant financial company, spring break through a package deal offered by some multinational. This explicit corporate invasion is not exactly what I mean.

No, I’m talking about the way universities operate, every day, more and more like corporations. As Benjamin Ginsberg details in his 2011 book, ‘‘The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters,’’ a constantly expanding layer of university administrative jobs now exists at an increasing remove from the actual academic enterprise. It’s not unheard-of for colleges now to employ more senior administrators than professors. There are, of course, essential functions that many university administrators perform, but such an imbalance is absurd — try imagining a high school with more vice principals than teachers. This legion of bureaucrats enables a world of pitiless surveillance; no segment of campus life, no matter how small, does not have some administrator who worries about it. Piece by piece, every corner of the average campus is being slowly made congruent with a single, totalizing vision. The rise of endless brushed-metal-and-glass buildings at Purdue represents the aesthetic dimension of this ideology. Bent into place by a small army of apparatchiks, the contemporary American college is slowly becoming as **meticulously** art-directed and branded as a J. Crew catalog. Like Niketown or Disneyworld, your average college campus now leaves the distinct impression of a one-party state.

Which is why, whenever the conversation inevitably turns to campus political culture these days, I think of the garden. It has become fashionable to argue that leftist language policing has mingled with the service vision of higher education — where students are the customers and professors their servants — to curtail the free expression of ideas that most see as the natural purpose of higher education. Minor campus incidents, magnified through the powerful lens of the Internet, become the focus of vast, binary arguments, picked apart by interested parties.

In April, student activists at the University of Michigan temporarily shut down a screening of ‘‘American Sniper.’’ Critics saw students unwilling to be exposed to points of view that they disagree with; defenders saw members of a campus community rallying against Islamophobia and the celebration of war. In May, students at Columbia called for trigger warnings on Ovid’s ‘‘Metamorphoses’’ for its depiction of rape and assault. Critics saw sensitivity taken to the point of inanity; defenders saw students righteously invested in the content of the courses for which they are paying. With its rigid **dichotomies** and teams mentality, the usual discussion of campus intellectual culture seems to reflect all of our worst political debates and has little to offer anyone who isn’t already a dedicated **partisan.**

Defenders of the current state of campus politics are right to combat the insulting presumption that today’s undergraduates are oversensitive and incurious, correctly insisting that many of our college students are smart and committed to the fair exchange of ideas. But these defenders ignore the very real threat that student activism poses to intellectual and political freedom on campus, which is the firmament of academic inquiry. Critics are right to note that there is an unhealthy sensitivity to perceived offense on campus, a sense of ambient incrimination that does more to pre-empt potentially unpopular ideas than to punish the ones that are actually expressed. Yet those critics are strangely quiet about the structural racism and sexism, and other forms of inequality, that shape life on the average college campus.

This debate focuses far too much on personality flaws and individual agency. In so doing, critics of campus political culture almost always misidentify where the problems arise: not from passionate student activists, though like all activists, they can sometimes be misguided, but from corporatism, the corporatism that has come to infect the soul of the American university.

Consider, for example, the infamous case of Laura Kipnis, a professor of film at Northwestern University. In February, she published an essay in The Chronicle of Higher Education **lamenting** a supposed culture of sexual panic on campus. Writing in response to a student-requested administrative ban on student-faculty relationships, Kipnis argued that such relationships were not inherently destructive or exploitative. She further argued that the common contemporary perception that colleges are sites of mass sexual exploitation is indicative of a new Victorian take on the sexual lives of young adults. While making her case, Kipnis presented a not entirely sympathetic summary of a complaint of unwanted sexual interest that had been made by a Northwestern undergraduate against a philosophy professor. In response, students held a protest, some of them carrying mattresses, calling for formal censure of Kipnis. Worse, multiple Title IX complaints were filed against Kipnis, claiming that her essay had created a ‘‘chilling effect’’ that prevented students from feeling safe to pursue claims of sexual harassment or abuse. Incredibly, another university employee who attended Kipnis’s Title IX hearings in her support also had Title IX charges filed against him. Kipnis was initially unable to even know the names of her accusers.

The Kipnis affair was extreme, but it demonstrates the double-edged sword that is Title IX. The law, designed to enforce gender equality on campus, grants members of campus communities broad latitude in charging gender discrimination and mandates formal response from universities. The law can be a powerful tool for justice, but like all tools, it can be misused — especially as it ends up wielded by administrative and governmental functionaries. In this way, it becomes an instrument of power, not of the powerless. And because the law compels the self-protective, legalistic wings of universities to grind into gear, for fear of liability and bad publicity, **invocations** of Title IX frequently wrest control of the process and the narrative from student activists themselves, handing it to bureaucrats, whether governmental or institutional.

Rather than painting student activists as censors — trying to dictate who has the right to say what and when — we should instead see them as trapped in a corporate architecture of managing offense. Have you ever been to corporate sexual harassment training? If you have, you may have been struck by how little such events have to do with preventing sexual harassment as a matter of moral necessity and how much they have to do with protecting whatever institution is mandating it. Of course, sexual harassment is a real and **vexing** problem, not merely on campus but in all kinds of organizations, and the urge to oppose it through policy is a noble one. But corporate entities serve corporate interests, not those of the individuals within them, and so these efforts are often designed to spare the institutions from legal liability rather than protect the individuals who would be harmed by sexual harassment. Indeed, this is the very lifeblood of corporatism: creating systems and procedures that sacrifice the needs of humans to the needs of institutions.

If students have adopted a **litigious** approach to regulating campus life, they are only working within the culture that colleges have built for them. When your environment so deeply resembles a Fortune 500 company, it makes sense to take every complaint straight to H.R. I don’t excuse students who so zealously pursue their vision of campus life that they file Title IX complaints against people whose opinions they don’t like. But I recognize their behavior as a rational response within a bureaucracy. It’s hard to blame people within a system — particularly people so young — who take advantage of structures they’ve been told exist to help them. The problem is that these structures exist for the institutions themselves, and thus the erosion of political freedom is ultimately a consequence of the institutions. When we identify students as the real threat to intellectual freedom on campus, we’re almost always looking in the wrong place.

Current conditions result in neither the muscular and effective student activism favored by the defenders of current campus politics nor the emboldened, challenging professors that critics prefer. Instead, both sides seem to be gradually **marginalized** in favor of the growing managerial class that dominates so many campuses. Yes, students get to dictate increasingly elaborate and punitive speech codes that some of them prefer. But what could be more corporate or bureaucratic than the increasingly tight control on language and culture in the workplace? Those efforts both divert attention from the material politics that the administration often strenuously opposes (like divestment campaigns) and contribute to a deepening cultural disrespect for student activism. Professors, meanwhile, cling for dear life, trying merely to preserve whatever tenure track they can, prevented by academic culture, a lack of coordination and interdepartmental resentments from rallying together as labor activists. That the contemporary campus quiets the voices of both students and teachers — the two indispensable actors in the educational exchange — speaks to the funhouse-mirror quality of today’s academy.

**I wish that committed student activists would recognize that the administrators who run their universities, no matter how convenient a recipient of their appeals, are not their friends. I want these bright, passionate students to remember that the best legacy of student activism lies in shaking up administrators, not in making appeals to them. At its worst, this tendency results in something like collusion between activists and administrators.**

As a result, our campuses are becoming simultaneously too safe and too dangerous, with every safe academic space balanced by a space of socially desirable danger out of activists’ reach. Our students emerge from classrooms that, we complain, have been sanitized to the point of ridiculousness, and then spend their evenings in Greek houses and dorms that are in a state of perpetual alcoholic fugue. (And let us not be so naïve as to doubt that universities quietly cultivate their reputations as party havens, knowing how essential such a reputation can be to attracting potential students.) At Purdue, I watched what I said as an instructor, for fear of having to show up to answer a complaint in some dean’s office, but I couldn’t ride my bicycle past the fraternity houses on Slayter Hill on a Saturday afternoon without being accosted with homophobic slurs. That’s the future I fear the most: that the educational function of the university will become **sanitized** and smoothed over, while the spaces that have always resisted fair treatment of difference will continue to do so. It is as if the left is grasping more tightly the few spaces it can control — classrooms, publishing, academic conferences — out of frustration toward all the places it cannot.

Having spent a life in the academy, I now find myself in the increasingly common position of having one foot out and one foot in. I have finished my Ph.D., and I have no long-term job. I am an instructor but not a professor; I am on campus but not of it, an **itinerant** visitor. In this standing I join countless thousands of others whose contracts don’t extend past the next semester. Meanwhile, a new generation of students has become **acclimated** to the experience of college as luxury resort hotel, one they will pay for in student loans for the rest of their lives. Every day, there are fewer who remember what campus once was, or would want to fight for it. The colleges themselves, motivated by only the desire to please their alumni and their boards by advancing in the relentless competition up the rankings, cannot conceive of a world beyond the viewbook.

But perhaps something wild can be preserved, or revived, at the contemporary American university. If so, students will have to be the ones who lead the way, not by making appeals to institutions that will never truly serve their needs but by creating a new, human — as opposed to corporate — campus politics. Until then, we will have to wander, looking for those remaining places that are still untamed, still a little wild.

Fredrik deBoer is an academic and writer. He lives in Indiana.

*Sign up for*[*our newsletter*](http://www.nytimes.com/newsletters/magazine/)*to get the best of The New York Times*