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Shameless Boosters and a Loyal Critic: Two Takes on the Ivory Tower

by Robert Maranto

Commencement: The Beginning of a New Era in Higher Education, Kate Colbert, Joe Sallustio, Silver Tree Publishers, 2022, pp. 560, $24.84 paperback.

"Whatever It Is, I'm Against It": Resistance to Change in Higher Education, Brian Rosenberg, Harvard Education Press, 2023, pp. 224, $38.00 paperback.

> —Education is a business and students are consumers. If you don't understand that, you've already lost.
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> *Joe Sallustio,* Commencement *(433)*

I just read two books on higher education so you don't have to. Despite many blind spots, particularly regarding bureaucracy and ideological uniformity, longtime Macalester College President Brian Rosenberg's *Whatever It Is, I'm Against It*, is well worth reading. In contrast, despite sensible ideas here and there, Kate Colbert and Joe Sallustio's *Commencement* is not worth the effort. Their 500 odd pages could be cut to 30 without losing a thing. Yet it does have value both for the ideas which are there, and as an anthropological document showing the mindset of the EdDs and MBAs who increasingly dominate higher education.

Recent events have exposed many leaders of elite institutions as intellectually vacuous and sometimes authoritarian bureaucrats, a verdict agreed on by serious intellectuals on the right[1] and left.[2] Colbert and Sallustio prove that the rot neither starts nor ends at the top. These authors and many of the hundred odd college presidents they interview seem less educators than worse coiffed versions of the party apparatchiks and budget maximizing bureaucrats running Harvard and Columbia.

Ed Wood's classically awful movie *Plan Nine from Outer Space* shows that

sometimes a creative work is so bad it's good. Unfortunately, *Commencement: The Beginning of a New Era in Higher Education,* is just bad, shallow, repetitious and self-regarding—beware authors who call everyone with a terminal degree "doctor"—and lacking an appreciation of the intellectual and spiritual development that for many of us, made college worth the time and money. The book starts not with wisdom but with boasting how many times (200,000) and in how many countries (163) the *EdUp Experience Podcast*, on which the book is based, has been downloaded. This fits a book produced by the publishing division of a marketing firm, blurbed by a former president of the University of Phoenix and the president of the higher education division of the Qatar Foundation. Generally, *Commencement* is not a book but a collection of somewhat connected interviews, an exercise in branding and buzzwords. This *Commencement* went on far too long: Did the authors have to quote each of the 100+ college presidents interviewed so they would promo the book?

Despite my complaints, *Commencement* could have succeeded as a short book or long white paper, because in the morass of self-promoting interviews, this doorstopper of a manuscript offers some sound, if repetitious and sometimes incomplete points:

- We have massively overproduced doctorates, particularly in fields like English, mainly because professors wanted to. This helped no one except said professors.
- The birth dearth creates more competition for fewer students. Some programs and whole campuses will have to die.
- Increasingly companies (and red state governments) are ignoring the college degree so higher education must seek new revenue sources or cut back. Fewer families will want to sink $30,000 or more annually into college with uncertain returns on investment. Eventually, even Democrats might tire of giant, endless subsidies. (To their credit, contributors generally avoid partisanship.) The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated change, particularly shifting to online teaching, though the authors care little that this dumbed down everything.
- Even pre-COVID, the Internet enabled new competitors, though those competitors often lack rigor, again, something getting almost no attention. The authors praise public universities (including mine) partnering with for-profit institutions, not mentioning their academically questionable reputations.
- Colleges can pay the bills by offering classes "from k to grey" (64) to keep credentialing alumni through "lifelong learning" or at least tuition paying and socializing. Even with this and other new markets like training firefighters, cops, and army medics (56), to repeat, some campuses will close. Given k-12 failings, I would hope some dying colleges

might reinvent themselves as k-12 schools.

- Relatedly, colleges should partner with k-12 schools, the authors say to maintain market share and cut costs for students via faster matriculation; I would say because colleges can provide academically strong students more rigorous options.
- Artificial credit hours and semesters may have outlived their purpose, the authors say because of high costs, but I would say because they no longer signify learning. As Arum and Roksa show empirically in their classic *Academically Adrift*, in most majors at most colleges, students study and learn little—not that words like "study" and "learn" occur much in *Commencement*.
- Attending community college, with smaller classes and teaching-centric professors, may work better for most students than attending a flagship state university "spending a lot of money and hating their roommates" (309).
- Colleges should increase transparency about costs, enable three-year degrees, and if possible, freeze tuition for six semesters after freshman year (177). As one college president notes, if you can erode a culture of drinking, graduating in three years becomes possible (465).
- Colleges should partner with employers to offer students workplace experience. Of course, I would argue that many would do better to enter paid work directly, skipping college entirely.

These insights are not bupkis. Yet they are overwhelmed by endless pages of blather about relevance, twenty-first century skills, driving change instead of change driving you, being flexible and entrepreneurial, upskilling, serving the fortnight generation, value creation, institutional instructional designers (professors seldom appear), stackable micro-credentials, brand trust, brand experience, student wraparound services, and as one college president said (438), "[t]he future higher education is about re-imagining the use of technology." To cut to the core, higher education involves "accessibility, inclusion, financial acumen, student-centric cultures, affordability, the power of partnerships, serving new populations of students, applying pandemic lessons, improving educational flexibility, increasing higher education's value, and developing innovative programs." (461)

Or is the real center of the book Taylorist praise of "chunking out those competencies, skills, and knowledge you need into smaller forms of learning that allow you to demonstrate—through badging or micro-credentialing—that you've mastered something, put that on our LinkedIn profile, and be able to demonstrate to your employer that you're ready for that next promotion?" (63).

This seems the logical conclusion of a century-plus of education schools dumbing down education, leaving only marketing.[3] It goes without saying that

Dr. Joe Sallustio's last book, *Think Like a Marketer* is mentioned many times; Shakespeare is not. I'll end with three final grievances.

First, the authors constantly praise college presidents, as on page 329: "Despite the pressure placed on higher education's chief executives today, we heard nothing but passion and resolve when we spoke with more than 100 college and university presidents in preparation for bringing you this book." One might think college presidents were motivated only by service, not by sycophantic staffs and the mean $273,814[4] made by community college presidents, far more by leaders of four-year institutions.

Second, with rare exceptions like the leaders of Stetson University and Carthage College, no one mentions the importance of the liberal arts, and even those leaders defend liberal arts mainly as vocational preparation. Notably, the oft-quoted Carthage College president ended his campus's philosophy, classics, and Great Ideas requirements, programs, majors, and minors, not that it gets mentioned in *Commencement*.[5] He must think college students need *less* depth. I mean it's not as if college graduates, not to mention our democracy, are facing issues.[6]

Third, not surprisingly, these corporate authors do not seem to care for free inquiry, or decency. They praise San Jose State President Mary Papazian (354, 467) for working on behalf of all stakeholders, not mentioning that those stakeholders included a high-level athletic administrator whose sex abuse SJS covered up. Valued stakeholders also included Native American activists, some of whom were not actual Indians but "pretendians" who got SJS to expend enormous resources to fire tenured, award-winning Anthropology professor Elizabeth Weiss for her research questioning tribal folklore, a tale Weiss tells with gallows humor.[7] I fail to see these as good uses of tuition and tax dollars, and it isn't just me. I did not vote for Mr. Trump, but this is exactly the kind of bad institutional leadership that motivates MAGA. If academics do not fix our own house, others will do it for us.

After all this, it's a relief to read Brian Rosenberg's "*Whatever It Is, I'm Against It": Resistance to Change in Higher Education*, whose title copies Groucho Marx's Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff of *Horsefeather*s. At least Rosenberg has written a real book. Before joining the black hole of administration, he was even a real literature scholar—of Dickens, no less. Rosenberg spent seventeen years leading Macalester College, a top thirty liberal arts college in St. Paul. In 200 breezy pages, Rosenberg slaughters colleges' sacred cows in ways grounded in history and experience. Among other things, Rosenberg calls for rethinking practices including the scholar-teacher model, shared governance, and strategic planning, getting more right than wrong along the way.

As in *Commencement*, Rosenburg starts with the obvious: colleges are in trouble. Previously, they shored up enrollments through Pell grants, more

women and international students, and tuition discounts, which have reached over 50 percent for private nonprofit colleges. To his credit, Rosenberg recognizes that unlike discounting tuition to help the less affluent, steep tuition cuts and making college "free for all" would heighten inequities by subsidizing the rich.

Anyway, these tactics have reached their limits, so colleges must cut what they value less, often the liberal arts (as Carthage did). Rosenberg notes such atrocities as Minnesota's St. Mary's University slashing theology, and Ohio's Hiram College replacing art history, philosophy, music, and religion with "The New Liberal Arts"—they trademarked it—including intellectually deep majors like sports management (12). Perhaps Trump University's time has come.

Rosenberg knows this is about more than just money. We pay far more for medical care than we used to but also get more in return, not so for our "industry" (a word often used in *Commencement*): "When Bernie Sanders and Ron DeSantis can both generate enthusiasm among their supporters by criticizing your work, you have a real problem" (165). And though Rosenberg carps about politicians, especially Republicans, he also notes that faith in higher education is lowest among adults under 25, who presumably know all about us: "When your target demographic is the one that views you least favorably, you've got a problem" (24).

Student alienation reflects the marginalization of teaching. Rosenberg argues that in practice, the scholar-teacher model imported from Germany in the late 1800s ended up both distorting research and diminishing teaching, as individual professors and whole institutions pursued prestige via mass produced publication. Even liberal arts colleges which supposedly prioritize teaching slash teaching loads to copy research universities once they gain sufficient funding—even though there is little reason to think that less teaching means better teaching.

Generally, academia "created a structure of perverse incentives within which the most coveted reward a faculty member can receive is having to spend less time with actual students" (84). Today, most teaching is done by low-status graduate students and non-tenure track (NTT) faculty. Colleges might have done better, especially for students, by dividing research and teaching roles across institutions and individuals. "Try as I might," Rosenberg laments, "I cannot convince myself that the world is a better place because I published a book on Dickens's *Little Dorit*—though it did help me get promoted—nor can I convince myself that writing that book was more valuable to society than teaching my students to write and read carefully and to appreciate the power of literature" (20).

Real reform would mean less emphasis on research, more on teaching, all year round. After all, no hospital closes a third of the year. This matters in ways I had never considered. In the 1990s Macalester College faculty voted to end

J-term (January) instruction, meaning the college has classes under 30 weeks annually, just enough for accreditation (19-20). This means professors *can* take long vacations or publish, and students *cannot* gain enough credits to graduate in three years, as is common in Europe.

This typifies a broader problem, shared governance in which senior faculty outweigh (and outnumber) junior faculty, professors can block administrators, and everyone protects their turf. Macalester College has 2,100 students, thirty-two departments, thirty-eight majors, thirty-nine minors, ten interdisciplinary concentrations, and dozens of interweaving administration departments from academic programs and advising to web services—no department ever ends. (Where's DOGE when you need it?)

With alumni help, faculty protect their interests. That kept President Rosenberg from shifting resources even as the percentage of STEM majors doubled, because "[h]igher education has more third rails than a train yard." After Rosenberg failed to win the required faculty vote (including emeriti!) to cut a tiny department even while guaranteeing continued employment for its few professors, one activist prof expressed delight that Macalester College had rejected "a cost-effective model, a capitalist model." Rosenberg mused that he "spent my time on matters of little importance like raising money and building a budget, trying my best not to make the mistake of being cost effective" (93). Though he does not fully connect the dots, one reason for faculty tunnel vision is bureaucratization. In 1970 faculty ran processes like budgeting and admissions, so they saw the big picture. Now those and other functions are *professionalized* in costly and often ineffective bureaucracies including DEI,[8] which the author nonetheless defends (106-7).

Rosenberg is more perceptive in savaging strategic planning: "the pattern goes as follows: new president, new strategic plan, fund-raising campaign to support the strategic plan, departure of president. Rinse, wash, repeat" (101). Governing boards and accreditors want strategic plans and firms like McKinsey make fortunes doing them; yet their predictions prove "mostly useless." Rosenberg's first plan failed to predict the Great Recession; his second, a global pandemic. Anyway, wide participation means plans end up saying little or nothing. They disable more than enable change. Picking on Williams College since it has been the top ranked liberal arts college for years and has a $4 billion endowment, Rosenberg writes that "Williams, of course, needs no strategic plan other than 'keep being Williams,' but it has one … described in detail on the requisite strategic planning website. The planning process began in the fall of 2018 and concluded at some point in 2021 (long timeframe, check)." Williams did the usual eight working groups, three strategic academic initiatives, and over 120 outreach meetings, only to state "wholly self-evident and generic

priorities—*anodyne* comes to mind" resembling all such plans (103).

Rosenberg ends with reforms, some borrowed from relatively new institutions from Vermont to Africa, which, lacking vast resources, must be nimble. Colleges must exist to serve students, not professors or alumni, so shared governance should go. We need fewer professors teaching more students, in part via technology. We could likely do away with the Ph.D. as a union card for college teaching without losing teaching quality; ditto tenure, which is dying anyway save at elite schools. Many majors, and perhaps the major itself are outdated, shackling knowledge within specializations dictated by professorial habits, not objective needs.

Anyway, as Rosenberg points out, while STEM majors are often structured along clear paths, others "can be a hodgepodge of courses that bear no particular relation to one another, with students sometimes taking introductory-level courses in their senior year" (151). Campuses should have more power to determine distinct missions rather than trying to be all things to all students. Tiny, environmental and outdoors focused Sterling College in Vermont, which has minors in areas like draft animal power systems, may serve society better than nearby, elite Middlebury.

Much of this is at least plausible, and yet I fear Rosenberg buries academic rigor, without which we might as well end college, and perhaps high school as well. For all their flaws, professors (and majors) seem more likely than administrators (and offices) to teach students content and skills rather than just cash their checks. Rosenberg correctly decries the high cost of college but fails to acknowledge that (often well-paid) administrators and support staff have outnumbered professors for over a generation, driving expenditures like lazy rivers, and safety bureaucracies which impose fear rather than enable learning.

Rosenberg also dismisses the empirically verified free speech crisis on campus,[9] the tendency for professors and sometimes students with unpopular views to face harassment, interminable bureaucratic processes, even exile. Unless he knows something I don't, he gets wrong the particulars of the Joshua Katz case at Princeton (131), failing to consider the peculiar timing of events.[10] Can we blame centrists (much less conservatives) for distrusting higher education when it is risky to express "normie" thoughts, or even mainstream scientific paradigms like binary sex? Or should colleges expunge reason and focus only on vocation, with a dash of social justice? For all its strengths, there is remarkably little discussion of this in *Whatever It Is, I'm Against It.* Rosenberg has written an insightful, lively book, skewering higher education's accepted best practices and professorial special interests. *Whatever* would be even better had he seriously grappled with heterodox critics of our "industry."

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