

University of Admin

by Roger L. Geiger

The University Unfettered: Public Higher Education in an Age of Disruption, Ian F. McNeely, Columbia University Press, 2025, pp. 344, \$30.00 paperback.

Writing before the Age of Trump II, Ian McNeely could have had no idea of how disruptive conditions would become for universities nor what new fetters were about to constrain them. This is certainly an awkward juncture for assessing the forces that have shaped American higher education in the recent past. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of continuity if not stagnation in the vast American system of higher education. McNeely's fine study provides an encompassing account of how the forces exerted by markets, government, culture, and other parties have affected universities. The focus is a single unnamed public research university from the onset of the Great Recession to the hiatus of COVID-19, principally the decade of the 2010s.

McNeely has labored in "the University" as a faculty member and administrator during these years (he has since departed). The study draws upon the mass of internal documents that every institution generates as well as a famil-

ilarity with the enormous secondary literature published in these years. Above all, this is an account of the travails of the University and universities in general from the perspective of "those who manage it" (8). Although the University was buffeted by external market forces, the administration became increasingly "unfettered" in adapting to them. This administrative revolution, the author argues, resulted in a stronger institution.

The University had a long way to go. It was shackled with outdated governance by a single board that ruled the state's six public universities; and state appropriations had declined to just one-fifth of tuition revenues. This parlous state was challenged by a popular new president in 2009, who advocated for an independent governing board, like those of similar public universities, and a fiscal "New Partnership" that would allow the University to tap private philanthropy. His firing in 2011 enraged the campus but also, if indirectly, sparked a process of reform. Internally,

the first expression of revolt was a faculty vote to unionize—a stark reversal of campus sentiment.¹ Three short-term presidents followed, and an independent board took control in 2014. But little was accomplished until “President Five” (2015-2022) led the extensive modernization described in this book.

The University was challenged on several fronts. Financially it had to deal with rising costs and limited income. Academically, it sought to preserve membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities (AAU), despite performing comparatively less research. And politically it still had to meet the expectations of the state for the education and graduation of its students. Addressing these issues involved a series of organizational changes. However, this was a process of bureaucratization and centralization: the creation and expansion of administrative units and a concentration of authority in senior administrators.

McNeely directly confronts the issue of “administrative bloat.” He denies that it has meant the “fall of the faculty” or an “all-administrative university,” but there is no denying the growth of administration at the University—as occurred throughout American higher education.

At the University, administrative spending for academic support and student services increased at more than twice the average rate of 24 percent (2010-2020). In terms of numbers, the largest increase was in mid-level, para-academic professionals for student advising, financial aid, career place-

ment, student life, etc. These positions, which “support students but do not deliver academic instruction” (115), grew more than any other category. Many of these were in student recruitment, or enrollment management, whose head was elevated to a vice presidency, while the unit’s budget rose by 78 percent. It annexed the student life portfolios to become Student Services and Enrollment Management, or SSEM. With high morale and esteem, SSEM became “perhaps the most thoroughly corporatized organization within the university.” (124) Its budget was the third largest in the university, two-thirds that of the College of Literature and Sciences.

Nonetheless, the author considers its contribution to be critical. Enrollment management raised the percentage of high-paying out-of-state students to nearly 50 percent—the highest proportion for any public research university (all of whom pursue such revenues). And graduation rates rose from 50 to 61 percent, a result of better academic preparation of students as well as the hiring of professional academic advisors.

More significant organizationally and fiscally was the proliferation of senior administrators, once again a national trend. McNeely provides a cogent explanation of the internal and external drivers of this often-lamented phenomenon. By 2021 the salaries of 103 administrators exceeded that of the highest paid professor. Besides 28 in positions of “executive leadership,” most of the other 78 held positions of “associate and assistant vice presidents,

associate and assistant vice-provosts, associate deans and senior associate deans,” etc. In many cases these positions resulted from the expansion and professionalization of “areas that were of central, even existential, importance to the University” (112).

SSEM was one such area; the provost’s office acquired expanded personnel and fiscal responsibilities under a new budgetary model; development and university relations were combined into an office of Advancement, which then hived off a new vice president of Strategic Communications (PR); and after some scandals, the Athletic Department (the second largest budget) was reorganized into “a cadre of well-paid administrators who are consummate experts in their fields” (131).

Administrative expertise does not come cheaply. Compensation often reflects high salaries in nonacademic professions, and turnover tends to be relatively frequent, fueling a highly competitive “seller’s market.” McNeely’s conclusion offers no comfort to academic critics: “the emancipation of public universities ... begets more bureaucracy, not less.... The unfettered university is more intensively managed and administered than the classic public university of the twentieth century.” (135-6)

The University administration faced challenges in what McNeely identifies as its four missions—research, teaching, DEI, and what he calls “impact.” The administration viewed the research mission largely in terms of institutional prestige, fearing for its membership

in the AAU and thus its identity as a research university. As an arts and sciences institution (without engineering or medicine) its research numbers fell well short of AAU norms. “Goal I” of the 2009 Academic Plan was “To Achieve and Sustain AAU Excellence on a Human Scale.”² When benchmarking placed the University near bottom of AAU members, it “embarked on a multiyear effort to use quantitative metrics to visualize and improve the research productivity of its own departments” (152). Data compiled by the firm Academic Analytics produced a “flower chart” with 26 comparative variables. Efforts to act on these data met inherent obstacles, not least from the faculty union. Moreover, progress was stifled by a newly adopted Responsibility-Centered Budget model that tied funding to student enrollments. Starting in 2017, a new budget model concentrated control of tenure-track hiring and Ph.D. programs in the provost’s office and, further, instituted strategic planning. By 2022, 50 percent of tenure-track searches were designated for new fields, especially in STEM. McNeely concludes, “any institution making a concerted effort to boost its research output, reputational recognition, and quantifiable productivity simply had to centralize tenure-track hiring to build the very faculty whose job it is to produce research” (160). Apparently, you cannot rely on faculty to strengthen the faculty.

In 2019 the University opened a five-story Student Success Building in the center of campus. More than a symbol, it embodied a decade-long commit-

ment to enhance and measure student learning, increase graduation rates and efficiency, and lessen achievement gaps. These worthy goals drew the University into the miasma of the decade's prevailing learning fads, promoted by a "new species of advocacy philanthropy" (176). Of course, "universities ensure good teaching by hiring ... and trusting the most talented faculty" (186). But it seems faculty cannot be relied on here either: "the duty of closing achievement gaps ... fell squarely on administrative leaders and staff" (187).

The University first embraced the assessment movement, promoted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment and the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The University adopted the exact rubrics from the assessment literature, but when challenged by accreditors to demonstrate results, it was unable to document the promised student learning outcomes. And for good reason. To do so would have required reverse engineering hundreds of courses away from cognitive content to focus on learning metrics. McNeely cogently concludes "that learning outcomes assessment fails to align with the incentives that animate institutions, departments, or individual faculty members" (181).

Undaunted, faculty and administrators developed "four new pillars of teaching excellence [drawn] heavily from the new science of teaching and learning" (185). These were promulgated by the Office of the Provost as "Professional, Inclusive, Engaged, and Research Informed Teaching." McNeely approv-

ingly refers to this as "shared governance."

A further initiative to steer students onto the shortest possible degree paths was inspired by Complete College America, another firm. However, this scheme proved "simply unworkable in a world where faculty retained authority over academic degree programs" (189). McNeely apparently remains a true believer in administration-led pedagogical nostrums. He regards the University's experience in the 2010s as another faculty failure—a "lost decade of pedagogical reform ... missed opportunities to meaningfully improve student success at the local, face-to-face, institutional level" (194).

The author posits DEI as the third mission of the University—diversity, equity, and inclusion. That is, a cardinal mission of this state university should be to promote the advancement of specific segments of the population—"a panoply of identities centered on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural tradition, religious belief, physical disability, cognitive style (neurodiversity), and intersectionality," all of which are assumed to have experienced "past racial oppression and sexual discrimination" (199). Or in practice, "Blacks Hispanics, gay, transgender, or members of any other minority group," (223) as well as women. Of course, all universities offer offices and services to address the special needs of a broad range of groups, and those DEI identities deserve no less. However, the elevation of DEI to a sacred mission has warped the entire nature of this and other universi-

ties: “DEI is almost universally a strategy that seeks to reprogram the culture of university life” (206).

To do this, “the best way to implement DEI is through executive leadership appointments, strategic planning efforts, and other managerial practices” (206). He provides a superficial and sanitized account of the standard DEI playbook followed at this and other major universities. The University adopted a modest plan in 2006 establishing a vice provost for diversity, an institutional Office, and required diversity plans for units. Although these steps were initially controversial, more far-reaching steps were taken in 2011, without apparent opposition. The vice provost was elevated to vice president of a Division of Equity and Inclusion, with four subunits to administer and a budget of more than \$2 million. In 2015 a new strategic plan paved the way for a succession of further measures: a new Black cultural center and a Black residential facility; “strategies groups” were formed for each identity; the Senate passed several resolutions condemning racism; the required course in multiculturalism was strengthened to one stressing “U.S. Difference and Inequality”; diversity committees were required in all (70) departments and administrative units; and a commissioned campus climate study found “too many workplaces had become toxic environments” (210-11). (Hm.3)

More fundamental was the political tilt imposed on personnel and hiring. For tenure and promotion, the union contract required faculty to describe

their contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Search committees had to endure a video on “implicit bias” (a discredited concept) and include a diversity observer. An Institutional Hiring Plan required academic units to explicitly justify how new hires would enhance their “racial, ethnic, and gender diversity.”⁴ (211) Such developments were apparently favored by the state, which awarded more than \$6,000 to public universities for each in-state, under-represented minority they graduated.

McNeely takes a benign view of all this. DEI has not infringed upon academic standards nor caused reverse discrimination against “white men and other [?] privileged groups.” He laments the limited effectiveness of these steps. In fact, DEI is inherently unquenchable, since it is scarcely able to affect the oppressive conditions that it assumes to exist in society. Women, for example, “gained power as well as in numbers” (55 percent of students; 41 percent of faculty), but were supposedly “still subject to harassment, discrimination, and structural disadvantages.”⁵ “DEI as implemented in the 2010s amounted to a noble but unfulfilled quest” (224). However, McNeely nowhere considers—and given his administrative standpoint was perhaps unaware—of actual consequences of this noble quest.

Most consequential was DEI influence over hiring and promotion. Imposing support for DEI goals at every stage of evaluation constituted a political test. Not every employee need be a zealot, but the process intention-

ally screened out persons not wholly sympathetic. Largely informal at first, political screening was fully institutionalized by 2015. This same process occurred throughout American higher education with striking results: As measured by Eric Kaufmann, the left-right ratio in academia rose from 1.5 to 1 in the mid-sixties to 6 to 1 currently (13 to 1 in the social sciences and humanities).⁶ Hence, today's monochrome progressive university. McNeely is so enamored of DEI that he is apparently oblivious to the inherent politicization it creates.

The fourth "cardinal mission" of the University is "impact"—the commitment to contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship through applied science. McNeely portrays this as stemming from a dearth of public funding and impact-driven philanthropy. He also argues that "impact" extended beyond science and technology to social commitments, such as DEI. The University benefited from enormous donations for the establishment of two new applied science campuses. Like other administrative units, "the central Research Office was overhauled from top to bottom," in part to incorporate the "new instrumentalism" into the Arts and Sciences as well. This new emphasis mirrored developments that swept research universities in the 1980s—intellectual property offices, research parks, corporate research, start-up companies.⁷ The difference seems to be that this "old instrumentalism" generated criticism, mostly from those not

involved, whereas the new instrumentalism has been uncritically—enthusiastically—embraced. It is hard to avoid the impression that the University was simply a latecomer to the market logic of technology transfer.

Indeed, in most of the administrative initiatives described above the University was well behind the higher education mainstream. But rather than discounting the book's analysis, it heightens the story. The University concentrated in a shorter time developments that had been occurring across higher education for decades.⁸

As related by the author, the University was not a follower, but rather invented its own version of the all-administrative university. The book explicates the administrative contortions and expansions that were required to accommodate these fundamental changes: the fiscal necessity of recruiting out-of-state students; the additional services for students; the dilution of tenured faculty through "adjunctification"; the necessity of mobilizing 'strategic communications' to hype the University's image for donors, politicians, and the public; professional management of the immense budget and inherent turmoil of the athletic department; and adaptation to the heightened competition and increased instrumentalism of the research economy. One could add the irresistible pressures for social inclusion underlying (and now perhaps undermining) DEI.

The hegemony of administration has spelled the end of traditional shared

governance. McNeely attributes this to administrative dominance over these central operations, but as this occurred, Steven Brint has noted, institutional culture changed as well: “those who occupied senior managerial positions separated themselves more completely from the faculty.”⁹ Administrators dress differently from faculty, have their own status hierarchies, and prize efficiency. They value loyalty above all, do not share knowledge beyond their own circles, and never criticize senior administrators. The faculty side of shared governance, McNeely notes, was weakened by the fragmentation of increased specialization, as well as greater organizational compartmentalization. Faculty influence was further diluted at the University by unionization and especially by the market forces underlying adjunctification. Insofar as shared governance now survives, much diminished, it consists of the faculty’s circumscribed authority over curriculum and departmental affairs.

“Universities used to adhere to non-market values and ideals of public service” (7). Academic values and ideals were predicated on the special nature of university knowledge, characterized by rationalism, universality, and objectivity.¹⁰ This was the domain of the faculty and leaders with such values who had risen from the faculty. Such values had little role to play in *The University Unfettered*. Rather, the hegemony of rational organization was largely a response to external market force by an administrative culture. The managers accom-

modated society’s demands for student services, technology transfer, strategic communications, social inclusion, and of course athletics. These developments were by no means a repudiation of university knowledge, but rather the institutional machinery developed to meet an immense social demand for the benefits universities produced in economic development, social mobility, and cultural affirmation. Meeting these creative demands upon the university was the underlying driver of the burgeoning administrative structures described in this volume.

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1. Research universities have historically resisted unionization, and the University was the only one in recent decades to adopt collective bargaining: Roger L. Geiger, *American Higher Education Since World War II: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019) 210-12;
2. “Excellence is the term reached for by the bureaucratic mind when it has no idea how to identify real achievement”: Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, p.188. “Excellence” appears 55 times in *University Unfettered*, invoked in university documents or used by the author.
3. Objective studies of diversity training have found it ineffective and often detrimental to workplace morale: Alexandra Kalev, “The Impact of Diversity Training Programs in the Workplace and Alternative Bias Mechanisms,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, (20 Sept. 2023).
4. McNeely implausibly writes that such DEI procedures “made no real incursions into established faculty and staff hiring and promotion policies” (210)!

5. Women comprised 44 percent of provosts, 61 percent of administrators, and 52 percent of assistant professors (2020), figures undoubtedly higher in 2025: CUPA-HR.
6. Eric Kaufman, *The Third Awakening* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2024), 193. See also, Warren Treadgold, "We Cannot Give Up on Research Universities," *Academic Questions*, 38, no. 1 (Spring 2025), 59-66.
7. Roger L. Geiger, *Knowledge and Money: Research Universities and the Paradox of the Marketplace*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 180-231; Roger L. Geiger and Creso Sá, *Tapping the Riches of Science: Universities and the Promise of Economic Growth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
8. Steven Brint, *Cheers for Higher Education: Why American Universities Are Stronger Than Ever—and How to Meet the Challenges They Face* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2019).
9. *Ibid.* 249-65.
10. Roger L. Geiger, "The Brain of Society: Knowledge and American Higher Education Since 1945," *Annali di Storia delle Università Italiane*, 28, no. 2 (2024): 9-32.