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Targets of Cancellation

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Camp Heterodox

At their best, universities embody the original meaning of the word campus: a level field

BY DAVID MASCI

Camp is one of those ambidextrous words that has helped to make English into the world's most versatile language. The word can refer to camping, in the tent and sleeping bag sense; base camps, a la Jack London or Sir Edmund Hillary; or different camps, as in various sides or groups in a debate or conflict. And in an interesting twist, camp can also be used to label someone or something as flamboyantly theatrical.

For our purposes, however, it is perhaps most appropriate to note that the word comes from the Latin "campus," which means level field. This is richly relevant, not only for the obvious reason that the original Latin word is now used to describe a university's physical space, but because a level field is exactly what Heterodox Academy is striving for when it argues for universities to embrace open inquiry, viewpoint diversity and constructive disagreement.

In his excellent review of former Columbia University president Lee Bollinger's new book, *University: A Reckoning*, John Mac Ghlionn applauds the author for eloquently reminding us that, at their best, universities provide this level field, a place where "ideas are proposed, tested, refined, and eventually either proven or discarded." But Mac Ghlionn also takes the author to task for not fully acknowledging that the reason many universities fall short of this ideal is not, as Bollinger claims, largely because of political interference and other external threats; it also is due to internal shortcomings, such as campus social dynamics that pressure faculty and students to self-censor rather than openly question accepted orthodoxies.

Such orthodoxies are also the subject of an essay by McKay Stangler, in which he contends

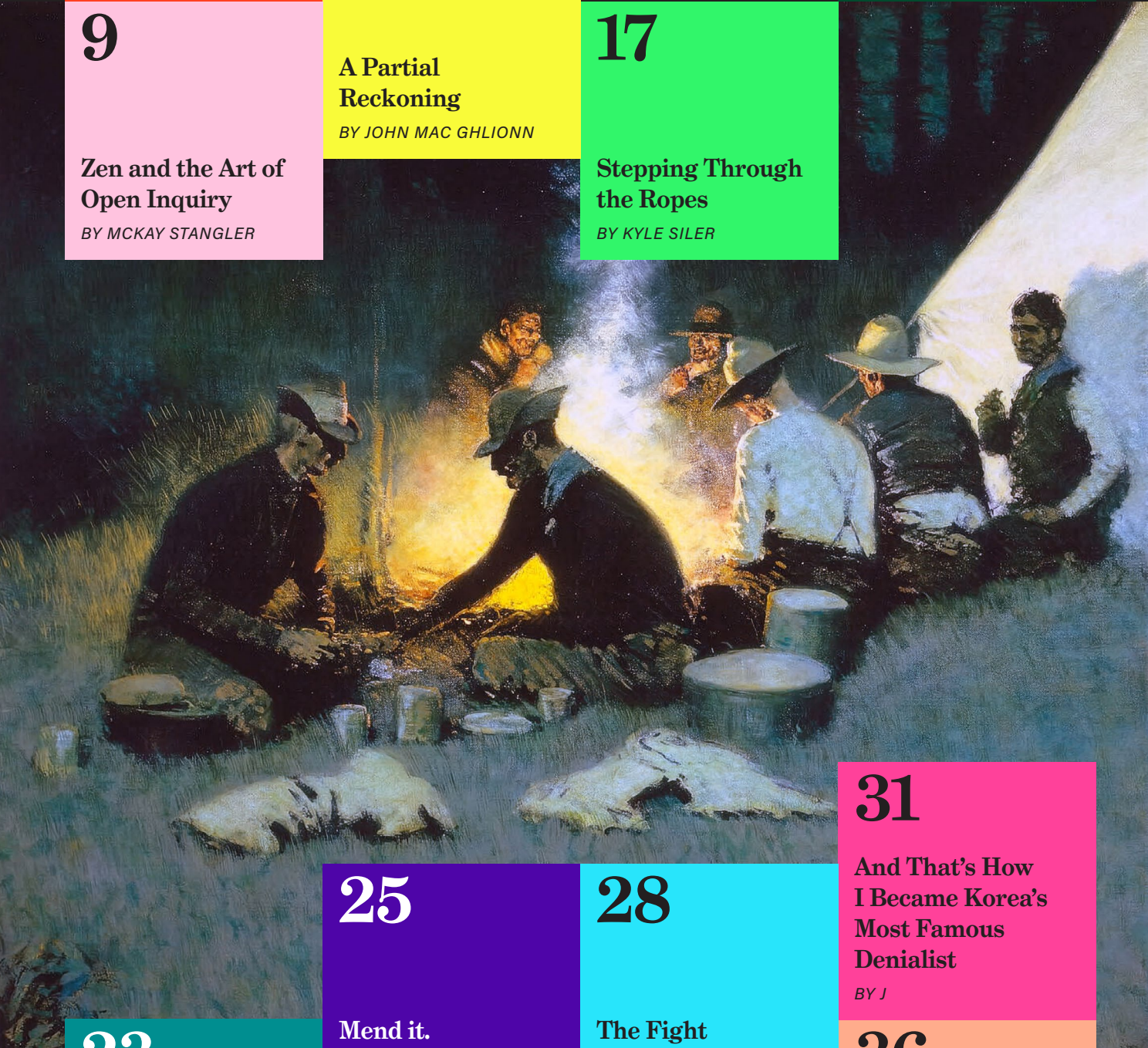
that understanding ancient Zen teachings on nonattachment can help us to stay open to new ideas and discoveries, even when they contradict long-accepted beliefs. Stangler argues that Zen can help us push back against our natural tendency to remain in one camp or, as he puts it, "to overemphasize the importance of fixed positions."

A different sort of camp is the focus of an engaging essay gifted to us by Athena Akipis. In it, she argues that using the campy trope of the zombie apocalypse as a framework makes it easier to address difficult and even dangerous topics. "Academia has a problem dealing with scary futures, such as institutional failure [and] existential risk," she writes. Examining these and other difficult topics with irony, playfulness and just plain zombie silliness can help us overcome our fears and tackle tough issues.

Finally, a wonderfully thoughtful essay by Dan Rothschild looks at the past, present and future of the social compact between higher education and the rest of society. Whereas the 20th century history of the university was about bundling together an ever-greater number of roles and responsibilities, the future is likely to involve "a great unbundling." Thanks to a growing number of non-academic alternatives, he argues that in the future universities are less likely to be at the forefront of everything from policymaking to research and development.

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"The Hunter's Supper" by Frederic Remington, 1909. National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Public Domain.



The Great Unbundling

**The 20th century was about building bigger universities.
The 21st century may be about breaking them apart.**

BY DANIEL M. ROTHSCHILD

Among the strengths of America's higher education sector has been an uncanny ability to change and remake itself in the face of social, economic, political, artistic and intellectual changes—not just superficially and marginally, but significantly and even teleologically.

While the aspirational aesthetics of our universities—a pastiche of the ancient British and European institutions by way of pre-revolutionary New England and the mid-Atlantic—remain largely unchanged over the past century, their activities, outputs, constituencies, and funding sources have changed dramatically.

This adaptive ability redounds to the benefit of universities and to the so-called higher education “system” as a whole, ensuring resilience and a (sometimes begrudging) willingness to change in response to internal and external challenges.

The Great Bundling

American universities have long bundled many different functions together, sometimes logically and sometimes opportunistically. Much of universities' adaptability throughout the 20th century has been due to their ability to take on new roles and add ever more programs and services (not to mention donors and stakeholders) under their aegis. The story of the modern American research university is substantially one of bigger and bigger bundles.

But the period of bundling appears to be coming to an end, and an era of unbundling is beginning. While this has received far less attention than trends and events ranging from stagnating student enrollment to the Trump administration's efforts to change campus policies concerning speech, curriculum, and research, unbundling is perhaps the most under-covered trend on campus

today. The direct consequences of this change can be at least reasonably hypothesized, but it is far less clear what the second- and third-order effects will be—which means universities are closer to the onset of a period of tumult than to its conclusion.

While American research universities share some surface similarities with their older English, Scottish, and German counterparts, the 20th century American research university is not a timeless organization model, nor was it inevitable.

American universities have long bundled many different functions together, sometimes logically and sometimes opportunistically.

Rather, it was the result of a series of choices that were particular to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Starting with the Morrill Act in 1862,

the country began building out a system of land grant colleges to produce useful knowledge and train engineers and applied scientists for the industrial era.

The American professoriate of the era was besotted with the German university model of early 19th century Prussian statesman Wilhelm von Humboldt, which included academic freedom, unity of research and teaching, and a focus that went beyond the traditional liberal arts. They grafted it onto these new institutions, giving birth to the modern American research university. New private universities not covered by the Morrill Act largely followed a similar trajectory. These new institutions combined research, teaching (in the sciences, humanities, and the emerging disciplines of the social sciences), and outreach to the public to create the model we know today. (Notably, these American universities charged lower tuition than their German counterparts.)

Over time, the products of these universities came to include subsidized arts, sports entertainment (including a de facto farm system for some professional leagues), consultancies for farmers through agricultural extensions,

technology transfer to industry, non-academic workforce and vocational training, and much more. For their enrolled students, they provided an array of services, including instruction and intellectual growth, credentialing, certification of mastery, social and professional network formation, opportunities for homogamous assortative mating, and often (to the benefit of the advancement offices) a lifelong sense of membership in and attachment to a semi-exclusive club. They were truly thick bundles, offering something for almost every sector of the economy and society.

fashion, but instead provides organization-level funding for non-university institutions, such as focused research organizations and independent research labs.

Meanwhile, the work of philanthropically funded institutions like the Arc Institute, Speculative Technologies, and Convergent Research, while still small in absolute terms, suggests that fundamentally different ways of funding and organizing the scientific research enterprise are not just possible but viable and fruitful.

Revising the Social Compact

Many of the rationales that might have existed for such bundling a generation ago, such as economies of scale, are today rapidly disappearing. Take scientific research, which since Vannevar Bush's famous 1945 report "Science: The Endless Frontier" has been a core competency of American universities. While the private sector has traditionally been the site of most American scientific and technological research, R&D has been a major part of what universities do and an equally important part of their public narrative.

Universities no longer play an outsized role in incubating original policy ideas and providing analysis, with think tanks and even independent policy entrepreneurs playing an increasingly outsized role.

Intellectual and cultural creation, exchange, and instruction are even simpler to divorce from university structures. For instance, the one-time tight link between universities and policymaking exemplified by people like Woodrow Wilson, Frances Perkins, Rexford Tugwell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, George Shultz, Jeane

Kirkpatrick, and Ben Bernanke is much weaker than it used to be. Moreover, universities no longer play an outsized role in incubating original policy ideas and providing analysis, with think tanks and even independent policy entrepreneurs playing an increasingly outsized role.

Regardless of whether this is for the better, it shows that unbundling is revising the social compact between universities, taxpayers, and the public sector. This trend is no doubt exacerbated by the increasing hostility of many university departments to hiring faculty members who would develop ideas for, much less staff, a Republican administration.

Meanwhile, initiatives like the Catherine Project, The Clemente Course in the Humanities, and The Paideia Institute offer free or low-cost but serious classes and seminars in classics, great books, and humanities, revitalizing a culture of autodidacticism that was once more widespread before university classrooms became the primary place of instruction in these fields.

But after increasing steadily since the 1950s, universities' share of total national investment in R&D has in the last roughly 15 years declined from a high of 14.3% to 10.9% today. Put simply, as a function of the larger national research and development project, universities are playing a diminishing role. This trend seems likely to continue.

In its first weeks, the second Trump administration took universities to task over what it saw as profligacy in indirect costs that were being used to subsidize non-research functions. More recently, the National Science Foundation launched a new initiative called Tech Labs to invest up to \$1 billion in research labs outside of universities. Notably, this initiative doesn't fund research in the traditional NSF project-based

Finally, we see the rise of alternatives that explicitly unbundle education from traditional certification, threatening the universities' effective monopoly on post-secondary credentialing. Some of these efforts are driven by employers' workforce needs, for instance defense contractors Palantir and Anduril; others are driven by educational accreditors and state-level policymakers.

Once-niche areas like competency-based education, which focuses on skills mastery, are becoming increasingly recognized by students and employers as viable alternatives to traditional instruction-and-assessment methods. From an economic point of view, this unbundling is a function of both lower-cost alternative credentials and the perception of decreasing value of a university degree—including, or perhaps especially, from elite institutions.

Taken *in toto*, these new programs, projects, and institutions demonstrate that the bundling logic of the 20th century need no longer apply to universities. There may be no advantage to having scholarly research, technical development, education, and certification all done under the same roof. Indeed, there may be diseconomies of scale in continuing to do so. This also suggests that universities are becoming less attractive places to launch new research and pedagogical initiatives. Operating outside the constraints of a university may be on balance much more attractive than it was a generation or even a decade ago.

A Time of Profound Change

It is worth considering what all of this means for open inquiry and free expression. Unbundling seems likely to lead to greater institutional diversity, and therefore increased opportunity (and funding) to conduct research, teach, learn, and develop intellectual and cultural projects outside of traditional university structures. This in turn creates more chances for heterodox and post-

disciplinary thinkers, teachers, and researchers to work without the sanction of gatekeepers, like hiring and tenure committees.

Put plainly, if universities shut them out, that is of less consequence than it once was to the overall state of knowledge and its transmission. Individuals and small groups working outside of universities have greater flexibility to focus: The 20th century American research university required faculty to be by turns researchers, teachers, communicators, grant writers, administrators, politicians, and mentors. Unbundling means more opportunity for specialization.

Note however that a net social increase in intellectual freedom does not mean that it will increase within legacy universities. To the contrary, as the costs of exit from bundled systems decrease, there is less incentive for intellectual nonconformists, especially those of a mildly entrepreneurial bent, to stay and work within existing institutions. Exits from traditional academe may induce additional exits at the margin, leaving the academy even less ideologically diverse and open to intellectual

Once-niche areas like competency-based education, which focuses on skills mastery, are becoming increasingly recognized by students and employers as viable alternatives to traditional instruction-and-assessment methods.

diversity, exacerbating an already vicious cycle toward conformity (and, potentially, mediocrity).

Unbundling also means that, as universities become less relevant to the content, manner, and veracity of ideas in general circulation, these ideas will certainly change. The revolution in the news media of the past 25 years offers an example of what I'm talking

about. Media has seen an increase in the variance of quality of news sources.

Consumers now have access to information and analysis that would have been reserved only for small, well-connected audiences at the turn of the century, while at the same time fabricated stories, low-quality analysis, and reportage about the



trivial abounds. Those committed to open inquiry who seek out new ideas will have unparalleled opportunities as universities play less of a role in the circulation of ideas—but so too will those who wish to consume (or allow themselves to be fed) emotionally charged pablum and AI-generated slop.

Finally, unbundling means an opportunity to shake off existing conventions around intellectual inquiry to refocus on its functions not its forms. Academic journals, university presses, and peer review are all of value—but in serving in their role as gatekeepers, they may also serve to induce conformity. This conformity is not just in the substance of ideas, but in their form: The number of peer-reviewed academic journals has increased by a factor of four over the previous 50 years. Surely some of the entrepreneurial energy that went into launching new journals could have been profitably directed elsewhere. Unbundling makes possible a recommitment to meaningful inquiry in whatever format ideas are published, discussed, and debated.

There will no doubt be significant variance in how unbundling affects American higher education. The phrase “system of higher education” is a misnomer. The word “system” implies some sort of planned rationalism or emergent order, while American higher education is anything but. The most elite universities, backed by endowments measured in the tens of billions of dollars, developed different bundles of services during the 20th century than did state flagships, which in turn differentiated their offerings from regional universities or agricultural schools. To take an obvious example, sports plays a dramatically different role in schools in the Southeastern Conference than in the Ivy League.

Arizona State University has developed a significantly different model of bundled services than many of its competitors—preaching excellence without exclusivity, and offering generous support for early-career researchers who don’t fit comfortably into traditional disciplinary categories. In the process, it has changed the social compact between its leadership and

those who pay its bills. Unbundling will create more opportunities for universities to cultivate different bundles of services to increase their differentiation, rather than merely maintain the same programs as they have in the past, or that they feel they must produce to keep up with competitor schools.

The first-order effects of the unbundling of America’s universities are necessarily speculative and won’t be understood for many years. The second- and third-order effects are impossible to hypothesize. Whatever the eventual consequences, this is a time of profound change for American universities, though in ways that typically garner less attention than hot-button debates around campus culture, curriculum, and leadership.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

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Zen and the Art of OPEN INQUIRY

Deep and specialized learning should not be an obstacle to new ideas and discoveries

BY MCKAY STANGLER

For some years now, despite my being a former Roman Catholic and a sort of Burkean conservative, I have maintained a strong interest in Zen Buddhism and Taoist philosophy—much stronger than would perhaps be expected of a middle-aged guy from the Midwest.

It’s one of the things that people tend to find most surprising about me, in a head-cocking and

eyebrow-furrowing and *really?*-ing kind of way. (They have the same reaction when they learn of my deep and wholly unironic passion for reggae.) In the U.S. we tend to have very little knowledge of what Zen truly is; for most of us, it simply conjures images of a peaceful monk, some bamboo, flowing water, or maybe an athlete or performer in a flow state. This is of a piece with our cultural ignorance of what used to be called “Oriental” studies, an impolitic term that is lamentable as a kind of pejorative, indicating an exotic “Other” we lack the depth to comprehend.

There is one element of Zen philosophy that aligns quite nicely with this issue’s theme of “camp,” and it has to do—unsurprisingly—with the principle of nonattachment. Much of Zen thinking relates to nonattachment: the transience of physical things and the embrace of simplicity, yes, but also the even more important principle of nonattachment to ideas or positions.

There is one Zen phrase I internalized during my own Ph.D. work, as I found myself being routinely convinced by the most recent social theory I came across in my years of seminars. It’s a phrase that, like so much in Zen, is possibly apocryphal and that has been variously attributed to many different figures, but for aesthetic reasons I prefer to attribute it to the classical Chinese thinker Linji Yixuan, who wrote: *The man of the Way fundamentally dwells nowhere.*

We should acknowledge up front that this phrase could very well be interpreted literally: The sages



“A Literary Garden” by Zhou Wenju, Song Dynasty, 12th Century. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Beijing, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

and poets of classical China were not exactly known for putting down roots, and a philosophy that emphasizes nonattachment doesn't quite draw the 30-year fixed mortgage crowd. But as with most things in Zen, there is depth to the simplicity and the sentiment of the phrase that can and should be deeply relevant to the work of scholars and academics.

First, let me suggest that we perhaps overemphasize the importance of fixed positions. Both Western tradition and evolutionary psychology suggest that the Archimedean stance—"give me a place to stand and I shall move the world"—holds an innate appeal for us. We have a strong and not totally unjustified preference for the martyr, the sunk cost fallacy, the Patrick Henry, the one who digs in the heels and says *this* is what I believe and ne'er shall I abandon belief.

That's all well and good when it comes to moral stances (excepting cases such as Robespierre's, of course, when moral stance becomes mortal threat). I certainly hope that I shall remain firmly committed to, for example, "Thou shalt not kill." But to see fixed beliefs as an innate virtue, as a sign of moral worth rather than what may be a certain intractability, is rather a hindrance to good scholarship and research. To stay resolutely fixed in one's beliefs is not just to flirt with the boundaries of orthodoxy, which can all too easily color both one's questions and one's interpretations, but it also reveals a stance that belief can, and perhaps even should, trump discovery.

How can this be avoided, particularly in the age of the so-called scholar activist, when competition for social media "likes" can be just as fierce—and, alas, just as personally meaningful—as competition for top-notch journal publications? We are both blessed and cursed to live in an era of instant information and instant pontification, an era when the hunkered-down pose on social media

is praised as principled rather than dismissed as stubborn.

Zen can offer some lessons here. The 11th-century teacher Yuanwu instructs: "You should work to melt away the obstructions caused by conditional knowledge and views and interpretive understanding." The scholar might bristle at this: "After all this learning, all this acquisition of knowledge, all this specialization and training and ever-narrowing research profile, should I treat my achievements as obstructions to be melted away?"

Well, yes, in the sense that all of your learning should serve as *scaffolding*, a means of climbing to an intellectual height at which point you can transcend your learning and scholarship and focus

on what is found there. You kick away the ladder, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, and you find yourself in a realm of openness to new ideas and discoveries that are explicitly not colored by the information you brought there.

Above all else this means an openness to changing one's mind if new information comes to light. We should

always be seeking the way that works best not the way that things have been done before. This gives Zen some overlap with the very American philosophy of pragmatism as devised by Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and others—ideas and knowledge are useful inasmuch as they lay the groundwork for action in the world. If an idea no longer works, or is contravened by something new that has come to light, then rather than laying the groundwork for meaningful action, it chains us to an approach that renders action largely moot.

In this sense we should regularly set up "camps" of intellectual work. Rather than perpetually siloing ourselves in a narrow specialty, we should take on a specific project with some muddy questions surrounding it. We investigate, we research, we ask good questions and we get solid answers.

We make those answers public in a forum of our interested peers, and then we walk away. We have dwelt in that knowledge for a time, and it prepared us to act in the world. Now let it melt, lest it become an obstruction.

Most scholars do not take this approach. The usual method is rather more like digging the same tunnel ever deeper, trying to chip away and expose anything you missed in material you've already covered. Thus, we get a Shakespeare scholar writing five books about different dimensions of *Richard III* or an anthropologist spending each summer with Amish communities in order to keep the papers coming and become the dominant scholar in that sub-sub-field.

But what if that Shakespearean turned her attention to, say, John Donne or Andrew Marvell? Or to contemporary spy thrillers? Surely the methodologies that served her well for *Richard III* could have some bearing on other texts. What if the anthropologist spent a research semester studying teenage behavior in high school cafeterias? The default approach of coming back to the same material, coming back to the same approaches, makes it harder and harder for us to see beyond those things—and this creates the conditions for orthodoxy.

"Shifting and changing and successfully adapting," wrote Yuanwu, "you attain Great Freedom." The opposite of this approach is the hidebound scholar, doomed to a Sisyphean scholarship of sameness, perpetually returning to the views that first shaped them. If we are to restore universities to their rightful place as centers of open inquiry, then we need more Great Freedom.

References available at inquistivemag.org.

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A PARTIAL RECKONING



In his spirited new book defending universities, Lee Bollinger largely ignores some of higher education's important failings

BY JOHN MAC GHLIONN

Lee C. Bollinger has spent his career inside the American university, not as a casual observer, but as one of its stewards and defenders. He led the University of Michigan through one of the most consequential affirmative action battles in modern legal history, then took the helm at Columbia University for nearly two decades—long enough to test whether his beliefs were genuine or merely convenient. Bollinger's, it turns out, are the real deal.

He taught constitutional law. He thought seriously, and for a very long time, about how a free society protects the free exchange of ideas. And he came through it, not bitter, but battle-tested.

His new book, *University: A Reckoning*, arrives at a difficult moment. American universities are both praised as engines of discovery and condemned as temples of self-satisfied detachment. They are celebrated for producing Nobel laureates and blamed for producing graduates who can't hold a civil conversation with someone who sees the world differently. They carry enormous prestige and, increasingly, enormous suspicion.

Public trust has eroded on both sides of the political divide, though for very different reasons. On the right, universities are seen as ideological monasteries—places where adherence to one set of views is enforced through social pressure dressed up as intellectual consensus. On the left, they are blamed for serving wealth and privilege rather than challenging it. Both critiques contain enough truth to sting. Into this atmosphere of palpable frustration, Bollinger steps forward, not to apologize or deflect, but to defend.

The question worth asking from the very first page is how *honestly* he manages it in this book.

The answer, reached gradually, is this: honestly enough to make the book worth reading, but not honestly enough to fully satisfy the reader.

His central argument is sturdy and stated without hesitation: The American research university remains one of the country's most important institutions. It preserves knowledge, expands it, and passes it forward. It trains the people a society quietly depends on and usually takes for granted—the doctors, lawyers, engineers, and scientists, without whom everything falls apart. In Bollinger's telling, the university isn't a sanctuary for those who'd rather not engage with the wider public. It is, at its best, one of the few institutions

standing between a functioning society and its worst instincts.

He makes this case with skill, and he makes it in plain English. There is no jargon, none of the deliberate obscurity that so often passes

for depth in academic writing. Bollinger writes the way a good lawyer argues: clearly, purposefully, and with an eye on what actually matters.

One of the book's real strengths is its portrait of what academic work actually looks like. The popular image of the tenured professor—insulated, unhurried, writing impenetrable papers for an audience of 12—gets a serious and welcome correction. Bollinger describes what the work genuinely demands: It means mastering a field that never stops changing, producing research that actually advances rather than rehashes what is already known, teaching students at every level of preparation, surviving a review process that can be rigorous and petty, and doing all of it while the world asks with growing impatience what any of it is worth. It is demanding, often unglamorous work. Bollinger gives it the respect it deserves.

The American research university remains one of the country's most important institutions. It preserves knowledge, expands it, and passes it forward.

Original illustration by Tuhina Sharma, 2026 (used with permission).

More than the workload, though, he's interested in describing what he calls the scholarly temperament—the particular cast of mind that separates genuine inquiry from performance. Real scholars must sit with opposing views, not as a courtesy but as a genuine commitment to the truth. They must hold conclusions loosely. They must begin with a question rather than an answer and follow the evidence wherever it leads, including straight back to that question.

“You must entertain—really entertain—the possibility that you are wrong,” Bollinger writes. “And, finally, you must be willing to change your mind if the evidence calls for it.” It is an old-fashioned idea, which is another way of saying it is an idea that used to be obvious. It is also exactly right. This is what the university, at its best, is supposed to produce—not true believers with diplomas, but people who have learned to think honestly under pressure.

His discussion of tenure is one of the book's most compelling sections. To outsiders, tenure looks like a golden shield against accountability, a permanent exemption from consequence. But Bollinger reframes it as something more demanding than a job guarantee. Tenure is a kind of contract: Security in exchange for independence, intellectual rigor, and a life devoted to the work itself. “You, the university, will give me tenure for life,” he writes, “and I will give you my life for tenure.”

This line lands with the weight of a vow. Part contract, part calling—a pledge to trade private comfort and higher earnings for a life of teaching, research, and service to something larger than yourself. There's something faintly ecclesiastical about it, and Bollinger knows it. The sincerity, though, is unmistakable. And the logic holds. A scholar who fears losing his job cannot follow an argument where it leads. Tenure, he insists, is not a sinecure but a safeguard, and the difference matters enormously.

From there, Bollinger turns to the university as a community, and here the book finds its warmest voice. The university is not a place

of rules and hierarchy, but a culture built on conversation. Knowledge advances through argument, challenge, and revision. Journals, departments, conferences, and the informal networks that link researchers across institutions keep a steady, self-correcting exchange alive. Ideas are proposed, tested, refined, and eventually either proven or discarded. The process is slow. It can be maddening. It is also, Bollinger argues, irreplaceable. Much of this will feel familiar to anyone who has spent time in academia. But the reminder is well-placed. Obvious truths still need defending, especially when the institutions that carry them are under pressure to justify themselves in faster and simpler terms.

The book's most ambitious claim connects the modern university to the history of American free speech. Bollinger, a First Amendment

scholar of genuine standing, traces how both developed in tandem across the past century, each strengthening the other. A society committed to open debate needs institutions that model what open debate looks like—that build, through daily practice, the habits of mind that democracy ultimately depends on.

The university, in this account, isn't merely a place where people study things; it is a civic institution. It sustains

the culture of disagreement, the tolerance for unsettling ideas, and the willingness to be persuaded—without which self-government is just a ceremonial exercise. It is a large claim, and Bollinger, to his credit, makes it land.

His point about the difference between a university and a political party is equally sharp and equally necessary. Universities investigate contested questions—race, law, inequality, power—but their purpose is to examine, not to campaign. They study. They do not recruit. At a moment when a remarkable number of universities appear to have lost sight of that distinction, this reminder also lands.

And yet—and here the book's limits come into view—Bollinger is more accurate about what

Tenure is a kind of contract: Security in exchange for independence, intellectual rigor, and a life devoted to the work itself.

universities should be than about what many of them have become. His tone, for long stretches, edges toward reverence. Parts of the book feel written for 1996 rather than 2026, when universities still had the luxury of assuming everyone basically wished them well. He acknowledges problems—conformity, internal friction, scholarship that falls short of the ideals he describes—but treats them as isolated failures rather than signs of something deeper. The cracks are mentioned, but the shaky foundations beneath them are left largely unexamined.

This is most obvious in how he handles political pressure. Bollinger focuses heavily on external threats, including government interference, legislative overreach, and the use of federal funding as a weapon against academic independence. His concern is real, and his argument on this ground is strong. He has been openly critical of the Trump administration and makes no effort to hide it. Governments that punish universities for reaching inconvenient conclusions are governments at war with honest inquiry, and Bollinger says so directly. Fair enough.

But when it comes to examining the university's own role in its troubles, the book discovers a previously unannounced commitment to brevity. The high cost of holding an unfashionable view, the social dynamics that shape what gets studied and what gets left alone, the informal rules about which conclusions are welcome and which are not—these forces are at least as powerful as any government threat, and they receive far less scrutiny here.

A book genuinely committed to the values it describes would press on both sides with equal force. It would ask not only who threatens the university from outside, but what the university has done to earn some of the distrust directed at it. Bollinger is bracing on one front and oddly diplomatic on the other. The scholarly disposition, it turns out, has its limits.

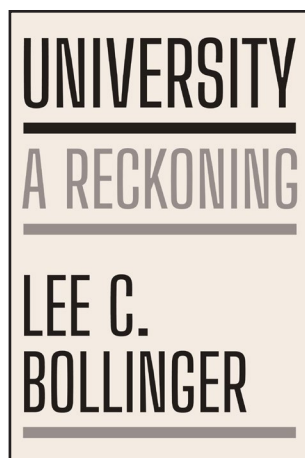
Another issue I have with the book is that the economic picture is acknowledged the way one acknowledges an uncomfortable relative at a family gathering: briefly, warmly, and without further inquiry. Public confidence in higher education has dropped sharply, and not without reason. A generation has been loaded with debt that reshapes their lives for decades. The labor market increasingly rewards practical skill alongside—and sometimes instead of—the traditional degree. A diploma no longer carries the job guarantees it once did. And a growing number of people are asking, with understandable concern, whether a university degree is still worth the price. The answer, it seems, is no.

Bollinger is too intelligent and too experienced to be unaware of any of this. Yet he addresses the financial crisis facing universities with considerably less urgency than he brings to their intellectual defense. The book reads, in places, like a man delivering an eloquent lecture on the architectural significance of a building while the curtains catch fire behind him.

Technology gets a similar pass. Bollinger notes that digital tools have disrupted universities the way the internet disrupted newspapers, and that artificial intelligence is already changing how students learn and how researchers work. The observations are accurate. But they feel cautionary rather than curious.

Online learning has already weakened the university's hold on how education happens. Writing tools, research tools, and tutoring tools are changing what happens inside the classroom and what a degree is actually measuring. Bollinger opens the door on these questions and stops at the threshold. Which is, it must be said, a peculiar stance for a book about the importance of the pursuit of knowledge.

None of this makes the book a failure. Instead, it makes it the best possible version of a book that was never going to tell the whole story. Bollinger



writes with skill, with seriousness, and with an affection for universities that never tips into nostalgia. His defense is not the defense of a flawless institution, but of an essential one whose failures are real and whose value is greater still. He is right that a culture of genuine inquiry, protected by institutions willing to defend it even when it is uncomfortable, is something a free society can ill afford to lose.

But what the book needed, and only partially delivers, is the same candor it so eloquently champions. The disposition Bollinger argues for demands engaging the strongest argument against you—sitting seriously with the possibility that the institution you have devoted your life to has failed, in important and not entirely external ways, to live up to its own ideals. That reckoning is still, in large measure, ahead of us. And it will require exactly the kind of courage Bollinger describes so well but applies so selectively.

America is still home to some of the finest universities in the world. They have shaped the nation's science, law, medicine, and public life in ways many take for granted, precisely because the achievement has been so thorough and consistent. They deserve a defense—clear-eyed, honest, and unsparing about their failures as well as their successes. Bollinger offers most of that. The rest he leaves, perhaps deliberately, for the reader to supply.

University: A Reckoning is an imperfect book. Read it anyway. The gaps it leaves are, in their own way, as instructive as the arguments it makes.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

John Mac Ghlionn is a freelance writer whose work has been published in *The Spectator*, *The New York Post* and *Newsweek*.



Stepping Through THE ROPES



Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant during the Superdome Showdown, December 1980. *The Wrestler Magazine*, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

What the campy world of professional wrestling can teach academics about truth, performance, and the courage to break character

BY KYLE SILER

The high-brow world of academia can learn a great deal from professional wrestling. Although the two worlds are rarely equated, the parallels are more substantive than they first appear.

Professional wrestling is one of the great populist art forms: campy, visceral, yet surprisingly sophisticated in how it navigates tensions between performance and authenticity. But, much like academia, it also is a world where unique individuals build careers through creativity, navigate rigid status hierarchies, and learn early that the performance is the point. Given these similarities, two key concepts from wrestling's campy lexicon are also worth considering in the world of higher education: kayfabe and the shoot interview.

Professional wrestling is one of the great populist art forms: campy, visceral, and yet surprisingly sophisticated in how it navigates tensions between performance and authenticity.

Understanding both of these concepts will help academics do their work more impactfully and with greater candor. Academics can benefit from acknowledging tensions between performance (which is central to kayfabe) and authenticity (which is the purpose of the shoot interview) in professional settings, as well as having safe outlets to communicate openly and honestly as part of their search for truth.

Carnival Culture

Kayfabe, now enshrined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, refers to the convention of presenting staged performances as genuine. The term, pronounced kay-fayb, likely originated in carnival culture, where wrestlers and promoters guarded the scripted nature of their craft as a trade secret. For decades, wrestlers maintained kayfabe with near-religious devotion: Heroes and villains stayed in character in public, and exposing the business as something staged could end a career. Eventually, the secret trickled out.

Since 2000, use of the word kayfabe has skyrocketed in print, and wrestling vernacular in particular has seeped into the broader cultural consciousness. Today, kayfabe is routinely invoked to describe the performances of politicians, executives, and other public figures whose public personas may not reflect their private beliefs.

Sociologists will recognize this territory. In his landmark 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman argued that social life is fundamentally dramaturgical: We all perform on a “front stage,” carefully managing

impressions, while reserving our unvarnished selves for the “backstage.” Goffman could have been describing professional wrestling. The squared circle is the ultimate front stage, a place of exaggerated heroes,

dastardly villains, and melodramatic betrayals. The locker room is the backstage, where bitter public rivals share road stories and talk shop.

But Goffman's binary of front and back is too clean. Professional wrestling is instructive precisely because it has developed an elaborate vocabulary for the gray areas between performance and reality, areas where the front stage and backstage bleed into each other in ways that Goffman's framework did not anticipate.

In wrestling parlance, a “work” is anything done in service of kayfabe: scripted, strategic, performed. A “shoot” breaks kayfabe entirely; it is unscripted, candid, real. And then there is the paradoxical “worked shoot,” a performance designed to invoke the feel of authenticity, a controlled breaking of the fourth wall—the barrier separating performer and audience—that serves a greater narrative purpose.

When famed wrestler CM Punk sat cross-legged on the entrance ramp in 2011 and delivered his famous “pipe bomb” promo, airing real grievances about backstage politics while technically following a script, fans could not tell exactly where the performance ended and the truth began. That was the whole point. Modern wrestling lives in these gray areas. Today’s fans know that matches are predetermined and that rivalries are largely fictional, yet they remain captivated precisely because the boundaries between real and performed are perpetually blurred. Even kayfabe can betray glimmers of truth.

Anyone who has spent time in academia will find these dynamics painfully familiar. Consider the academic conference, that great arena of scholarly kayfabe. Attendees deliver polished performances, reenact status hierarchies, and strategically position themselves for advancement. Job candidates feign enthusiasm for positions they would never accept.

Senior scholars fake magnanimity toward junior colleagues whose work they privately dismiss. Panel Q&As devolve into thinly disguised self-promotion performed as intellectual curiosity.

At a recent conference, an especially ambitious colleague of mine proudly posted selfies with high-status scholars whom I have repeatedly heard her disparage in private. In academia, the distance between kayfabe and authenticity can be vast.

To be fair, kayfabe is not entirely pernicious. For instance, scientific communication is, and often should be, a carefully constructed performance. We present findings with measured language, we situate our work within existing literature, we perform the rituals of peer review. These conventions exist for good reasons. However, we lose a great deal of understanding when we

refuse to acknowledge, let alone interrogate, the unbridled truths lying beneath the performance.

Get Real

The cost of unchecked academic kayfabe can be severe. Consider the case of Zoé Ziani. While completing her Ph.D., Ziani was among the first researchers to detect statistical anomalies in the work of Francesca Gino, a celebrated Harvard Business School professor who was later found to have fabricated data across multiple studies. When Ziani included a detailed critique of Gino’s research in her dissertation, Ziani’s

committee members balked. One compared academic discourse to “a conversation at a cocktail party,” advising Ziani to adopt a more deferential tone. Another called her analysis “inflammatory” and accused her of striking a “self-righteous posture.”

Under pressure, Ziani removed the critique. She later collaborated with the investigators

at Data Colada, who ultimately exposed Gino’s fabrications, vindicating the very concerns Ziani’s mentors had suppressed. This is academic kayfabe at its worst: a culture where deference to status hierarchies and performative collegiality is enforced even when the data is screaming that something is wrong. Even worse, the privilege to communicate honestly in academia can be constrained for less powerful scholars, often at the behest of the interests of their more powerful counterparts.

This is why I believe academia needs its own version of the shoot interview. In wrestling, the shoot interview is a genre unto itself: a long-form, candid conversation in which a wrestler drops the character and speaks honestly about their career: the politics, the injuries, the grudges, the regrets, the creative battles, the moments of genuine joy. These interviews run the full emotional continuum from bitter to hilarious to deeply

In academia, we get plenty of performances, whether in print or in person. We need to complement those performances with truths, both the ugly and the beautiful kind.

reflective. They are compelling precisely because they offer something the performance cannot: the truth, or at least something much closer to it.

Unlike in wrestling, academic shoot interviews need not be dramatic or inflammatory. They could take the form of intellectual biographies that go beyond the sanitized origin stories we tell at job interviews and conferences. Or they could focus on how scholars actually arrived at their ideas, what failures shaped their thinking, which professional norms they find stifling, and what they really believe about the state of their fields.

Imagine a senior scholar candidly discussing a published paper that he no longer believes, a department chair acknowledging the political dynamics that actually drive hiring decisions, or a journal editor admitting which review practices she considers performative theater. These would be extraordinary learning opportunities, both intellectually and professionally.

In academia, we get plenty of performances, whether in print or in person. We need to complement those performances with truths, both the ugly and the beautiful kind. Viewpoint diversity, after all, is only possible when people feel empowered to speak honestly.

Even in a world of predetermined outcomes, professional wrestlers put their bodies and careers on the line every single night. The risks

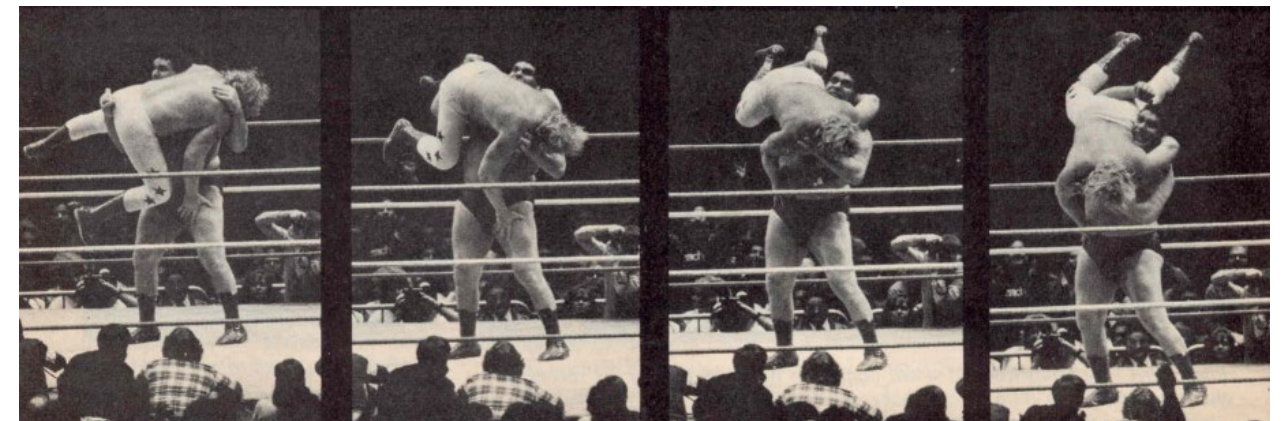
are real, even when the storylines are contrived. Mick Foley, the wrestler, bestselling author, and unlikely philosopher, titled his second memoir *Foley Is Good: And the Real World Is Faker Than Wrestling*. He was onto something. The paradox of kayfabe is that the performance can be simultaneously fake and profoundly honest.

I am not arguing that scholars should be bashing each other constantly, nor that we must bare our souls at every opportunity. Sometimes there are good reasons to be taciturn, to play along, to maintain a polite fiction. And I will freely acknowledge the worked-shoot quality of this very essay, using the language of entertainment to make serious points about intellectual honesty.

But right now, the continuum in academia is badly skewed. We get far too much kayfabe and far too few shoots. We need more candor, more willingness to break character, and, crucially, the institutional courage to let people do so without reprisal. The squared circle and the ivory tower have more in common than either would care to admit. It is time for more academics to put their public personas aside, step through the ropes, and cut a shoot.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

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Andre the Giant bodyslams John Studd at Wrestlemania I, July 1985. Wrestling's Main Event Magazine, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.



Frank Frazetta cover from Beware #10, July 1954. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

All You

ZOMBIES

Because camp doesn't take itself seriously, it can be used to tackle difficult, even scary concerns

BY ATHENA AKTIPIS

I'm sitting in the audience at the Nightmare in the Ozarks Film Festival watching a panel I helped organize, and I have the feeling that something I've been building for years is actually working.

On stage, comedian Shane Mauss and evolutionary psychologist David Pinosof are in conversation with Justin Best, the writer-director of the supremely campy horror film *Sheryl*, and Anthea Neri Best, the movie's lead actress. The topic is dark comedy: what it is, why it works, and why it matters. Pinosof is explaining how humor helps us recognize and correct coordination failures, how laughing together at something scary is not a form of avoidance but of shared reckoning. The audience is half horror fans and half open-minded interdisciplinary academics, and they are completely with him.

This is horror meets cooperation science (the study of cooperation in nature) meets epistemology, and nobody seems to find that strange. That's the point.

Camp as Epistemic Technology

Academia has a problem dealing with scary futures, such as institutional failure, existential risk, influence and manipulation, and, more broadly, the genuine possibility that things could go very, very wrong. Talking about these topics carries reputational risk. Engaging with them can mark you as alarmist or fringe, or simply not serious. The result is a kind of collective epistemic avoidance: We know we should think carefully about catastrophic risks and uncomfortable possible futures, and yet the social environment of higher education makes it genuinely hard to do so openly.

Camp is one solution to this problem. By camp I mean the deliberate embrace of irony, humor, and self-aware playfulness, with more than a touch of subversiveness running through it. Camp doesn't take itself seriously, which is precisely what allows it to help us take scary and difficult things seriously. It creates a framework in which engaging with frightening or heterodox ideas is leavened with play. And that shift in frame is not

merely psychological. It has real consequences for how we think about the world and how we work together. In other words, it is an intellectual tool with power to shape shared epistemologies and our capacities to coordinate effectively with each other.

The power of camp as an intellectual tool rests on three things. The first is shared attention on a counterfactual reality. When a room full of people imagine the zombie apocalypse together, they are building a shared mental model of a possible world. This is much harder to do with abstract risks like nuclear war, infrastructure collapse, or AI misalignment. The zombie apocalypse is a stand-in for all-hazards preparedness, and it works better than imagining real disasters because it is specific enough to allow for everyone's shared attention, while playful enough to engage in without triggering the fears and defensiveness that make grappling with real risks often difficult for us to do, both individually and collectively.

When a room full of people imagine the zombie apocalypse together, they are building a shared mental model of a possible world.

The second is common knowledge. Common knowledge is when we all know something and we all know that we all know something. This plays out in zombie apocalypse camp. When we imagine a zombie apocalypse counterfactual reality together—especially in a participatory, embodied way—we generate something uniquely valuable: Everyone knows that everyone else is also playfully imagining a zombie apocalypse. This common knowledge is the foundation of coordination, in this case coordination around thinking through and preparing for a variety of risks and hazards we might face in the future. Coordination requires that knowledge is shared and visible. Camp creates that visibility through participation.

The third is honest signaling. Engaging seriously with the zombie metaphor in your research is not a costless act. It requires a willingness to be seen as a little weird, to risk the raised eyebrow from colleagues who may think you're not being serious enough. That cost is, from a signaling perspective, part of what makes participation meaningful. People who show up to the various zombie-

related events my colleagues and I organize have already demonstrated that they can hold rigor and irreverence simultaneously, that they are not so invested in their professional persona that they can't play. This self-selection means that the people in the room are the people you want in the room.

A Camp Proof of Concept

Zombified Media is an education nonprofit that has been operating in this deliberately camp space since 2018, hosting a number of different programs. For instance, the Zombified podcast (which I co-host with Dave Lundberg-Kenrick) uses the idea of zombification—the hijacking of behavior by parasites, pathogens, and social influence—as an

entry point for thinking seriously about how biology, technology, and ideas shape us individually and collectively. This camp approach allows us to have fun with these

challenging issues and also to be playful with intellectually serious topics that might otherwise be a little dry.

The Zombie Apocalypse Medicine Meeting takes the same approach, weaving in disaster preparedness and existential risk with zombification topics. The meeting brings together researchers, policymakers, artists, humanities scholars, and doctors to 'share brains,' through a combination of traditional talks, workshops, livestreams, art installations, and public events. We collaborate with the Nightmare in The Ozarks Film Festival to produce crossover programming, like the Dark Comedy panel I described earlier.

But it's not just horror crossover events that have come out of Zombified Media. The kind of free inquiry and intellectual exploration that our approach affords has led to 'serious' science as well. Two years ago we received a \$1.5 million National Science Foundation grant to study collective risk management, looking at the rules of life that allow organisms across the tree of life to do so effectively. This grant explicitly includes game development and funding for public engagement.

The most recent Zombie Apocalypse Medicine Meeting generated a research collaboration spanning multiple labs, focused on AI and cooperation. This is real science, with real stakes, that emerged from a room full of people thinking seriously about zombies. We are now launching the Cooperative Futures Institute at Arizona State University, a serious endeavor that grew out of our engagement with the real world, yet facilitated by playful shared attention on a counterfactual reality where we are all navigating the zombie apocalypse.

We have seen in academia the erosion of intellectual space for dissent, unconventional thinking, and genuine engagement with uncomfortable ideas.

We can think of camp as a viewpoint diversity technology. It suspends the normal social penalties for heterodox thinking by relocating the conversation to a space where the rules are explicitly different. You can't be accused of being alarmist about the zombie apocalypse. You can't be accused of not taking AI risk seriously enough when you're at a show called *Surviving AI* (more on that in a minute).

It is not about making serious topics frivolous, but rather about recognizing that trying to be too serious—the grave tone, the careful hedging, the avoidance of anything that might seem too weird—is itself an epistemic constraint, and one that can be broken by embracing camp.

All the Camps

Which brings me to *Surviving AI*—a variety show with music and comedy and an ironic '80s retro-futurist aesthetic focused on how we build a positive future with AI. For example, at our inaugural show we had a battle between AI-generated bluegrass music and live bluegrass musicians. (The AI bluegrass was technically impressive, but as soon as the live musicians started playing, the room filled with collective energy and people spontaneously started dancing.)

Surviving AI's camp tone is deliberate. We think the future with AI is genuinely open, genuinely scary, and genuinely worth imagining together—with rigor, with humor, and with the honest acknowledgment that none of us knows exactly how this will unfold.

Here's where I want to play with the word "camp" for a moment. In contemporary discourse about AI, there are the *camps*—the doomers, the accelerationists, the cautious optimists, the technopians. These camps often talk past each other, locked into positions that feel more like identities than arguments.

What *Surviving AI* tries to create is an epistemic space that can hold all the camps. Not by flattening the differences, but by creating a shared playful context in which those differences can actually be productive. A room where doomers and accelerationists can watch an AI bluegrass battle together and feel, for a moment, that they are working on the same problem.

That is what camp does. It creates the shared attention, the common knowledge, the honest signaling of investment in a shared future. It is a tool for collective risk management and positive future-building. And the key word is *collective*. We cannot manage the risks of transformative technologies alone, through individual analysis or institutional positioning. We need to imagine them together, which means we need frameworks that make that imagining possible.

The futures we want won't build themselves—but they might just emerge from a room full of people willing to imagine them together, zombies and all.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

Athena Aktipis, Ph.D., is the founder and executive director of the Cooperative Futures Institute at Arizona State University, the founder and president of *Zombified Media*, and the author of several books including *A Field Guide to the Apocalypse: A Mostly Serious Guide to Surviving Our Wild Times*.

Photomontage by Janelle Delia, 2026 (used with permission).



Next Time, Try DIALOGUE

When performative outrage replaces real inquiry and debate, everyone loses

BY MARTHA MCCAUGHEY

Oversized inflatable beach balls get bounced out on college campuses by student organizations that invite everyone to write on the "speech ball." Students scrawl political slogans, insults, and provocative symbols. On some campuses, it might be a speech wall or a boulder. In all these cases, the idea, we're told, is to exercise free expression. But what actually happens is a spectacle of empty rhetoric, where showboating and shock masquerade as meaningful discourse and campuses become stages for provocative performances rather than spaces for genuine intellectual exchange.

Students sometimes scribble penises and swastikas, or write "Women shouldn't have the right to vote" on these speech props. Rather than reading such messages as expressions of genuine belief, I see them as deliberately exaggerated gestures meant to provoke reaction and generate spectacle. In this way, participants turn a profound civic and intellectual freedom based on the hard-fought guarantees in the First Amendment into a moment of rebellious posturing. The more obnoxious the gesture, the quicker the audience reaction, and the more visible the performance. Such public provocation is hardly Socratic inquiry; it is agitprop wearing a civil-discourse costume.

But the campus provocateurs are only part of the cast. The audience of the outraged and offended also is an active participant in this performance, shaping meaning through their indignant responses. This audience, including the students, social media followers, alumni, advocacy organizations, and the press, magnifies the spectacle. After the provocateurs scrawl the

predictable images and words on the speech ball, multiple people will take to social media—amplifying, denouncing, and circulating the offending expression as proof of their enemies’ depravity—and demand that the university punish the students responsible.

Both the slur scribbled on a plastic ball and the social media rant that follows are pieces of political theater. Each is the intellectual equivalent of cotton candy: brightly colored, briefly exciting, and nutritionally void. Both the offensive statements on a speech ball and the demands to punish them are dripping with the same rage-baiting syrup. Both sides substitute audience engagement for healthy intellectual exchange. And when outrage becomes a substitute for sound argument and reasoning, censorship is always the next step.

Both sides, knowingly or not, play roles in a predictable script: One side gets to showcase its opponents as histrionic and censorious, while the other side gets to point to the provocateurs as hateful, bigoted bullies. What we get is not intellectual debate but campy political theater in which extremism is stylized in a spectacle rather than articulated as argument. Like camp, the actors rely on hyperbolic symbolism, turning themselves into caricatures rather than participants in serious inquiry and debate.

Would that the spectacle of moral signaling stopped with the student scribblers and their outraged audience. But on many campuses, especially those that have not embraced institutional neutrality, another set of actors enters the scene: the risk-conscious university administrators. Pressured by moral warriors to “do something” about the provocateurs, and aware of a wider public watching the culture war unfold, these administrators must consider reputational concerns, political scrutiny, harassment claims, and the potential impact on student recruitment before taking any action.

Ever watchful for these risks, administrators might issue a statement on expressive freedom that sounds principled but that is laced with escape clauses and vague commitments. Like the speech balls and the reactions to them, such pronouncements are performative: a kind of

governance theater that projects virtue while preserving institutional flexibility in hopes of shielding their university from socio-political risk.

At the university, we don’t exclude ideas because they cause moral or emotional distress. While we must take unprotected behavior seriously—harassment, true threats, defacing property, and conduct that undermines safety—ideas themselves should remain open to debate. But debate requires something more demanding than a marker and a camera phone. It requires slow, good-faith, reasoned exchange structured by shared standards of evidence, accountability, and intellectual humility.

We cannot stop our students from bringing society’s toxic polarization to campus—indeed, doing so would only get us accused of quashing free expression, or being “woke” or “fascist” (depending on whom you ask). But we can try to find ways to better provide students with a compelling opportunity to think deeply, engage seriously, and speak thoughtfully.

Universities need not be theaters for rehearsing the culture war. As Michael Rohd, a leader in the field of civic practice theater, demonstrates, theater can be designed as a venue for fostering structured, participatory dialogue. In this light, perhaps we should set up a giant speech umbrella with a big blanket beneath it, where students can sit and actually discuss something. Unlike the staged spectacles of campy performance, this space would reward thoughtfulness over grandstanding, slow reasoning over instant reaction, and curiosity over posturing.

Likewise, university administrators could move from managing expression as reputational risk to cultivating it as an intellectual good that helps foster the university’s knowledge-seeking mission. And we could all remember the distinct reason universities embrace free expression and civil discourse: not to rehearse democracy on a campus stage, but to create the conditions under which ideas can be examined, evidence weighed, and knowledge advanced.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

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“The Fence Builders” by N.C. Wyeth, 1915. Brandywine Conservancy & Museum of Art, Public Domain.

Mend it. Don’t End It.

Critics of peer review have a point, but the process is still invaluable

BY JONATHAN THIGPEN

According to academic publisher Wiley, peer review is the process whereby experts “assess the validity, quality, and often the originality” of a peer’s research with the aim of “safeguarding the quality and integrity of scholarly research.” And while it is often thought of in the context of academic circles (research papers and grants), the basic concept of peer review is integrated throughout our everyday lives, from the judicial system (“jury of one’s peers”) to sports refereeing and even job references.

There are an estimated 2.82 million academic articles published every year, partly attributed to the “publish or perish” culture in academia. While this high volume is putting an increasing strain on peer review, the practice is still generally supported and is currently the norm. And yet, there is growing sentiment that peer review should be abolished, or at a minimum, undergo major reform. After all, the “peers” in peer review are people, with all the usual biases and blind spots, and so, unsurprisingly, peer review carries these same flaws.

Calls for Reform

The primary criticism of peer review is that it serves as a “gatekeeper” dedicated to preserving

the status quo. And since peer review holds substantial influence over what research ultimately gets funded, critics say it stops, or at least slows, progress in science and other scholarly areas. When serious consideration of new ideas can only occur after the gatekeepers literally die (“science advances one funeral at a time”), it’s obvious that there’s a problem. As author David Sinclair put it bluntly, “Peer reviewers are in fact the midwit, careerist paradigm enforcers. They shut down all new thinking.” Even Nobel Prize-winning research gets rejected.

Sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman sums up the outdated and bureaucratic system this way: “With my tongue in one cheek only, I’d suggest that were our paleolithic ancestors to discover the peer-review dredger, we would be still sitting in caves.” With these sentiments in mind, calls for reform are not surprising.

In addition, critics of peer review point out that it has not been able to assuage the public’s mistrust of research reliability. In particular, they point to the continuing replication crisis, which has plagued so much of scientific and other research. While these critics all have a point, there’s reason to be wary of viewing peer review solely as an outdated, useless, and status-driven process. This

perspective is overly pessimistic and misses peer review's value and unique strengths. Which is why, rather than eliminating peer review or staunchly defending it, the best way forward is to find ways to improve the process.

Start with Transparency

One possible way to make peer review better would be to improve its transparency. The lack of transparency, particularly the anonymity of those conducting the review, sows mistrust and leads to questions like, "Who are these reviewers?" and "Why did they reject my research?" Most review processes maintain the reviewers' anonymity and provide limited rationale for their decisions, especially when the decision is "no."

So as a start, one way to lessen the sense of "gatekeeping" could be to ensure that peer reviewers are made known to researchers and that meaningful feedback is provided, even if that feedback is highly critical. This could help strengthen trust, accountability, and fairness in the process.

Losing anonymity could also have the added benefit of curtailing some reviewers from being "outright cruel" and unprofessional

with their feedback. The leading scientific journal *Nature* is already adopting these kinds of strategies and now publishes all reviewer reports and author responses for every research article. Furthermore, the open-access journal *eLife* uses an alternative approach to the traditional "accept or reject" decision and publishes all pieces that undergo peer review, along with their reviews, even if reviewer feedback is uniformly negative. This removes the power of reviewers to decide which ideas get through while maintaining a form of peer review, but without the gatekeeping.

Although worthwhile, these and other transparency efforts might have an uphill battle to gain wider acceptance. For instance, modern

academics often self-censor, and research suggests that only a small minority of academic referees would remove anonymity in their peer reviews.

Can AI Make a Difference?

Other reformers look to AI as another possible way to make peer review fairer and more efficient. Proponents of AI in general view it as a *deus ex machina*, a one-size-fits-all solution to many of society's problems. However, when it comes to peer review, we should be cautious about integrating AI too quickly into the process.

In many ways, AI embodies the same flaws of human-led review—errors, bias, and lack of transparency. A recent editorial in *Leadership Quarterly* clearly presents the risks, detailing special considerations for AI in publishing, such as tendencies to reinforce biases, reward what's popular over what's needed, and tolerate a lack of accountability. I'm reminded of the writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley when he quipped that "progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards." Just because

it's new, doesn't necessarily mean it's good. On top of these concerns about accuracy and bias, overreliance on AI takes away the reviewer's unique "voice."

Still, there may be a role for AI in peer review. For instance, we could possibly use AI for task-oriented work (e.g. proper formatting), while reserving the artistry of reviewing for reviewers. This could help address the criticism that peer review is laborious and slow. Who will make the distinction between "tasks" and "artistry" is up for debate, but these delineations are needed, and soon.

Meanwhile, scientific publishing is already making its position known. For example, Elsevier, the world's largest scientific publisher, states their policy is for AI to support human judgment, not replace it. Overall, when used appropriately, AI, like any tool, can enhance our efforts. But

additional wisdom and guidance are needed to help clarify the optimal use of AI in peer review.

A New Paradigm

Finally, we must commit ourselves to continuously improving the process, in large part because getting rid of peer review would be disastrous for the simple reason that it remains an indispensable tool. Indeed, while rigorous review is resource intensive, it also is crucial for developing and disseminating high-quality research. The very fact that those who submit their work for review know it will be under scrutiny by definition raises standards. A less rigorous process might speed efforts, but would also likely lead to false, misleading, and poor-quality information, as was seen a few years ago with COVID-19

research dissemination. Furthermore, inadequate vetting could lead to disastrous effects, as evidenced by the U.S. Public Health Services' Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

We should choose to live by the mantra "Feedback is a gift," and embrace our work being challenged. When done right, peer review refines ideas via an iterative process. What's more, since academics are infamous for their lack of intellectual humility, peer review is a critical opportunity to receive feedback and get outside of one's echo chamber. As the late Carl Sagan pointed out, while most scientists don't like criticism, "the hard but just rule is that if the ideas don't work, you must throw them away."

Indeed, it takes humility and vulnerability to submit one's ideas to external criticism, but peer review is a powerful tool in promoting self-reflection and professional and even personal growth. Peer review also has relational benefits. We often forget about the "peer" in peer review. Sharing ideas with colleagues is one of the great benefits of going to a workplace. Academic life, and life in general, is filled with the proverbial

"faculty lounge" and "water cooler talk." Specific feedback from colleagues in your discipline is an especially important part of developing as a scholar.

Unfortunately, growing mistrust of peer review puts these benefits at risk. So, one important step forward then is to improve the review process while simultaneously coaching researchers to be more receptive to feedback. The goal here is to entirely reframe the perception of peer review from an adversarial dynamic to a welcomed, colleague-based relationship, assuming the positive intent of reviewers who are focused on open inquiry and constructive disagreement.

We should choose to live by the mantra "Feedback is a gift," and embrace our work being challenged.

Researchers would be wise to heed John Stuart Mill's argument in *On Liberty* when he writes, "Nor is it enough that he should hear

the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations.... He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them.... He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form."

At the same time, reviewers should adopt an open mindset as described by C.S. Lewis: "The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way."

There's no obvious solution or "silver bullet" to peer review's problems. Even though there are clear flaws in the process, the alternative is much worse. Completely open publishing with no quality checks or rigor? Total AI control of research, funding, and resultant policymaking? No thanks. I'll take the system we have and trust that moving forward we can reform it for the better.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

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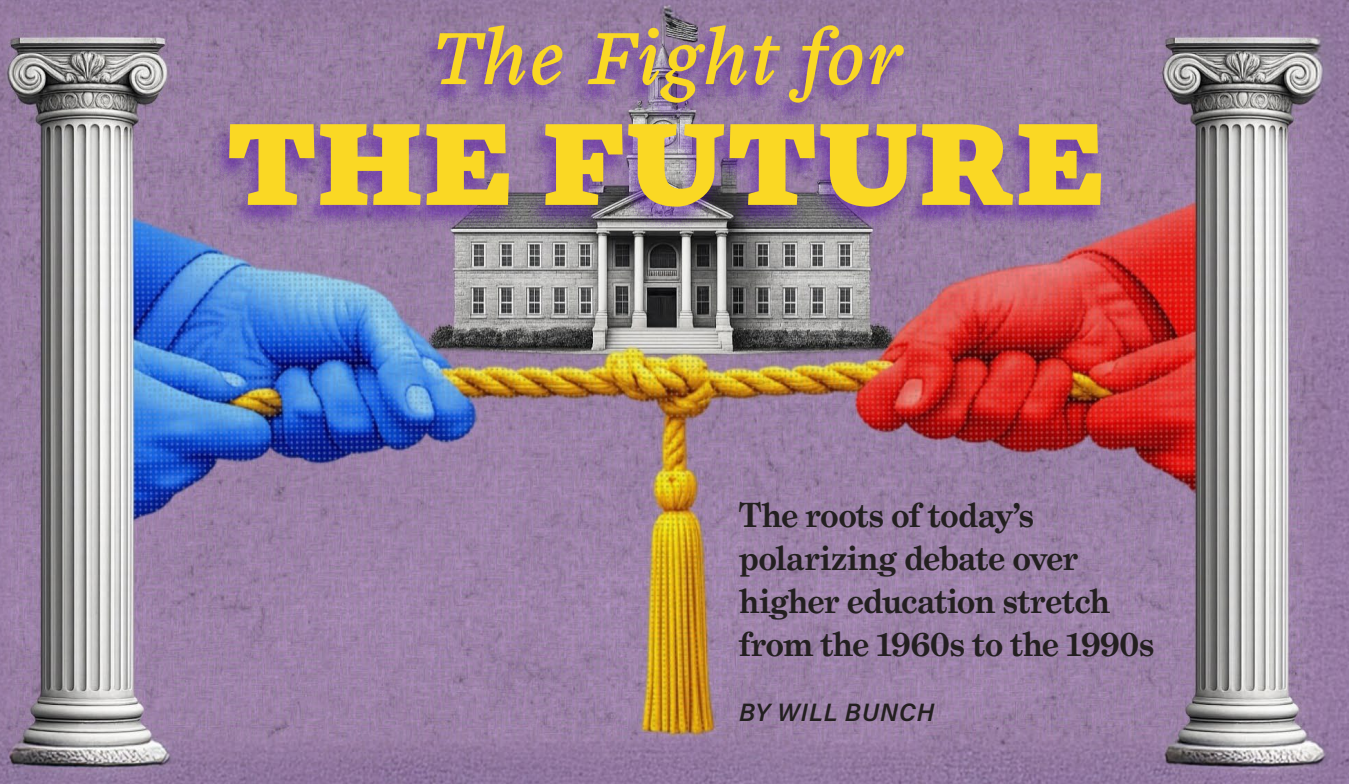


Illustration by Wadijah Boughdir, 2026 (used with permission).

It's hard to imagine two cultural figures who cut more different profiles during the 1990s than Todd Gitlin and Rush Limbaugh. Gitlin, at the time a professor at the University of California-Berkeley, had been a pioneering campus activist and anti-Vietnam War protester in the mid-1960s, while Limbaugh was then the most popular conservative radio talker in America.

A college dropout, Limbaugh had exploded from one small station in Sacramento to an estimated 20 million listeners thanks to his attacks on what he saw as liberal elites—especially elites in the world of higher education, which he blasted as a bastion of what was then a new term: “political correctness.”

And yet Gitlin, who'd written the definitive history of 1960s protest culture, and who still viewed politics through a left-leaning prism, also believed the cultural values of the academy had veered far off course. In a sense, Gitlin was offended by the same thing that animated Limbaugh—the dominance of a new “identity politics” around race, gender, and sexuality—but for radically different reasons.

While Limbaugh believed that programs like gender studies or campus critiques of Western colonialism were dangerous assaults on traditional American society, Gitlin felt the insular squabbles around identity politics (such as a protest he witnessed at Berkeley over the hiring of a French white man to

teach race and ethnic studies) were a distraction from the issues that really mattered, such as social injustice and income inequality.

In a 1995 book titled *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*, Gitlin complained that in the wake of Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980, campus activists had retreated from big and important political issues in favor of small, internecine battles over questions that mattered only to faculty and students. Activists “were marching on the English Department while the Right took the White House,” he wrote.

Three decades later, understanding the increasingly negative zeitgeist around American higher education in the 1980s and 1990s, and what was behind those “culture wars” that inspired Gitlin's book and Limbaugh's on-air diatribes, is critical to explaining the long decline of public trust in U.S. universities.

Consider this: In the 1960s—a decade in which the nation's college enrollment more than doubled amid not only population growth but the availability of low or even free tuition—a diploma was largely viewed as the fastest ticket to the American Dream. Indeed, we don't have good polling data from that era around public faith in higher education—probably because the aspirations attached to college amid the years of

America's booming post-war self-confidence were so close to universal.

Today, the situation has dramatically reversed. The public's trust in higher education has declined significantly, especially over the last decade, with polls showing confidence plummeting from 57% in a 2015 Gallup Poll to just 28% in a 2025 Pew survey. Meanwhile, the growing attitude that a bachelor's degree isn't worth the time or, especially, the exorbitant cost is now a key reason behind declining enrollment.

So what the heck happened?

Like any perfect storm, a number of ill winds pushed in the same direction at the same time, including rising tuition that has propelled the national student debt to more than \$1.8 trillion, or more than Americans owe on all of their credit cards. But the seeds of doubt about higher education in the United States were unquestionably sown during those culture wars that metastasized during the 1980s and '90s. And nothing drove that conflict more than the push to center some college curriculum, and increasingly the bulk of campus politics, around so-called identity issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Those trends would generate a backlash in the wider body politic.

The roots were planted at the end of the decade that triggered so much of the next half-century of cultural conflict: the 1960s. Although the best-remembered protests of that tumultuous time focused on the big events of the day such as civil rights and the Vietnam War, by 1969 much of the focus had shifted to reforming education—specifically to get the academy to better emphasize Black empowerment, women's liberation and related causes.

In 1969, for example, there was a series of contentious and sometimes violent campus strikes at California's tuition-free public universities—most famously at San Francisco State—demanding the creation of ethnic studies departments and the recruitment of more nonwhite faculty and students. The protests inspired similar efforts on campuses from coast to coast, even as a conservative backlash in California ultimately propelled San Francisco State's anti-strike president, S.I. Hayakawa, to the U.S. Senate as a Republican.

Due in part to these and similar protests throughout the next decades, campus agitation over identity politics continued to rise while protests over more traditional national and global issues largely petered out. This coincided with my own years as a college student, from 1977-81 at Brown University, where I saw firsthand how the new consciousness around race and gender permeated campus life. This ranged from the annual Third World Transition Week for incoming Black and brown freshmen to the Third World Coalition offering justifications for the 1979 Iranian revolution.

There was, not surprisingly, an equal and opposite reaction on the right, boosted by the oxygen of the Reagan revolution and a president who'd launched his political career during his time as California's governor with fiery rhetoric against mid-1960s student protests. The right's grievances with campus identity politics centered on the diminution of the great artists and thinkers of Western culture (the so-called “dead white males”) in favor of previously obscure Black, brown or female thought leaders.

The reaction on the right was perhaps best embodied by University of Chicago philosophy professor Allan Bloom, who decried the devaluation of the Great Books of the Western canon in his 1987 surprise No. 1 bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Few readers paid attention to the fact that much of Bloom's research at Chicago was backed by the ultra-conservative John M. Olin Foundation.

Arguably, this wasn't a coincidence. The idea of a conservative, pro-capitalism movement to counteract leftist orthodoxy on college campuses started in the early 1970s—embodied by the now-famous 1971 Powell Memo, drafted by future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, which called for the creation of more right-leaning academic centers like the one that John Olin had funded at the University of Chicago, and also for a new conservative mass media.

The second half of this equation was boosted in 1987 when Reagan's appointees on the Federal Communications Commission scrapped the broadcast Fairness Doctrine, paving the way for right-wing talk radio. Limbaugh's trailblazing show launched a year later, and unlike the intellectually sophisticated Bloom, his on-campus liberalism

was loud, profane, and tailored to his working-class audience.

The ultimate example of how Limbaugh popularized college culture wars for his listeners came in 1993, with an incident on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. There, an Israeli student named Eden Jacobowitz was charged by the university with racial harassment after yelling at some Black sorority sisters who were making noise outside his dorm late at night, calling them “water buffalo.” Jacobowitz was largely successful in arguing that the term wasn’t a racial slur but a translation of a common phrase back home in Israel. But the fracas epitomized the growing uproar over what by then everyone was calling, a la Limbaugh, “political correctness.”

Still, it’s important to note that even as college identity politics became a standard *bête noire* on the right, conservatives had not truly lost faith in a diploma as the ticket to the American Dream—not yet, anyway. Their main critique at the end of the 20th century centered around a call for more conservative professors and a return of classical Western literature to the academy, not a demolition of the ivory tower.

But the culture wars of the 1980s and ‘90s had shattered the once widely shared consensus of American higher education as a public good. That softening of support would soon be reinforced by other developments that would convince a growing number of Americans that the university had lost its way.

The carping around political correctness and strange-sounding new majors like gender studies started to overlap with other questions and concerns. To begin with, many wondered why students were paying so much more to go to college, with inflation-adjusted tuition rising around 150% between 1980 and today. Meanwhile, critics asked why the same students were studying less (down from an average of 40 hours in a week to just 28 today), while at the same time getting higher grades thanks to runaway grade inflation.

To a growing legion of critics, four years of overpriced college in the 21st century was less about learning and personal growth and more about simply getting the credential that recruiters demanded in a dog-eat-dog job market. Those complaints gained

currency after the 2008 financial crisis, when stories of recent grads with \$100,000 in college debt working as low-wage baristas abounded and helped fuel protest movements like Occupy Wall Street.

The outrage over the student-debt crisis is currently the centerpiece of a much broader progressive critique of modern universities: that they have become far too corporate and far removed from the 1960s and ‘70s, when faculty played a much greater role in institutional governance. To naysayers on the left, predatory loan policies walk hand in hand with the growing clout of venture capitalists or Republican politicians as university trustees and donors, the increasing use of poorly paid adjuncts as classroom instructors, and anti-union policies meant to discourage organizing by grad students or campus workers like food service and janitorial employees. Meanwhile, they argue, administrators are overpaid and overly concerned with their school’s U.S. News and World Report ranking, while legacy admission policies favor children of the wealthy.

But the current crisis stems largely from conservative control of government. Many leading politicians who came of age during the culture wars of the latter 20th century are building on the cultural grievances that blossomed during that era to punish the academy. They support President Donald Trump’s cuts to university research and his determination to end the diversity, equity and inclusion programs, which they see as the cornerstone of higher education’s embrace of identity politics.

In a 2021 speech on his way to the vice presidency, then-Ohio Sen. JD Vance declared that “we have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities in this country.” There was no turning back. The simmering conflicts identified back in the 1990s by leftists like Gitlin and ultra-conservatives like Limbaugh have boiled over into a full-blown war for the future of higher education in America. The fight over who has a voice on our college campuses is louder than ever, and the only certainty is that the U.S. university of the mid-21st century is likely to look vastly different than it did during the golden age of the mid-20th century.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

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Korean Comfort Women with U.S. Marines, after their liberation in 1945. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

And That’s How I Became Korea’s Most Famous

DENIALIST

Even sensitive and painful topics must be subjected to open inquiry

BY J

Following a longstanding request from the author’s university department leadership, certain names in the essay, including the author’s, have been removed.

In March 2021, students starting the spring semester at my South Korean university were greeted by a banner suspended across a central walkway calling for my removal from the faculty. Inside the social science building where I worked was a poster listing virtually every campus student organization also petitioning for my dismissal. Fifteen hundred students—including most in my department—had signed the petition. Meanwhile, national media writers, such as The Korea Herald, labeled me as one of the “different shades of denialism” regarding Japan’s colonial and war crimes in Korea.

How did I become Korea’s—or least my university’s—most famous denialist? The immediate trigger was an essay I had co-authored in the foreign policy journal *The Diplomat* calling for more open, self-reflective debate about the “comfort women” issue—which involves

allegations that during World War II tens of thousands of women from Korea and elsewhere in East Asia were forced into sexual slavery to serve the needs of Japanese military personnel.

Specifically, the piece was a response to the controversy over Harvard law professor J. Mark Ramseyer’s article on the status of comfort women that deviated from the accepted narrative that these women were simply sex slaves. My co-author and I argued that “debating not censoring” was the more principled and productive path to finding out the truth about this episode in history.

But the deeper story is the long path—personal and intellectual—that brought me back to Korea and eventually into collision with one of its most powerful taboos.

A Second Chance in My Birth Country

When a tenure-track position at a teaching-focused American university did not work out, returning to work in Korea offered a chance

to reset. I taught two years at one Seoul-based university before formally joining “H University” in 2013. The position was non-tenure track, but provided long-term employment (renewable two-year contracts), time to focus on research, and access to family housing in the bustling capital of Seoul.

I was born in South Korea, in Gwangju, the epicenter of the progressive opposition to the nation’s authoritarian regimes (1945-87), and was eager to teach and contribute to the country’s development. By 2015, I had settled into my new role and was teaching and publishing regularly. The next year, I was named one of H University’s 23 “Excellent Scholars,” prompting the social science administration team leader to predict that the division would promote me to a tenured position. But this promise quickly turned to controversy over perhaps the most sensitive topic in Korea: Japanese colonialism, and specifically the use of comfort women for the Japanese military during their occupation of Korea both before and during World War II.

The Biggest Taboo

Like most Koreans, I had grown up with a simple and morally satisfying binary: Japanese Imperialists were oppressors; Koreans were victims. It wasn’t a narrative one usually questioned. But several incidents pushed me to look more closely—especially one involving Junko, a Japanese exchange student in my class, who was verbally abused on the Seoul subway simply for speaking Japanese on her cellphone. I quoted her reflections in an article for The Korea Herald:

[The man] said, ‘Hey damn the child of disseizor [sly invader]. Go out from Korea as soon as possible!’ I shall never forget this word. The word ‘disseizor’ was too cruel. It was like a stab in the chest

to me. Intellectuals should stop using [these kinds] of harsh words because they have a big effect on people.

Her experience made me ask why Korea’s anti-Japanese narrative had taken on such intense moral absolutism. And the more I questioned, the more I realized that the narrative—like all grand narratives—contained truths, half-truths, and politically convenient simplifications. The most devoutly held, but empirically contested, narrative was that the Japanese military had kidnapped, enslaved, and mostly killed 200,000 Korean girls; that the current Japanese government was hiding or denying these crimes; and that any deviation from this view reflected “far-right denialism.”

The Korean media explicitly compared comfort women to Jewish Holocaust victims. For instance, an editorial in The Korea Times argued that “by no means would the suffering of the comfort women be less painful than that of those killed en masse in the Nazi gas chambers” and the world needs to “see Korea’s misery as compelling[ly] as they see the Jewish Holocaust.”

But rigorous, “revisionist” research, such as Korean-American anthropologist C. Sarah Soh’s 2008 book, *The Comfort Women*, critiques each of these claims. Instead of comparing Japan’s Korean comfort women to the Jewish Holocaust, a more realistic comparison is to other military brothel systems, such as those operated by France during World War I and the U.S. military in post-1945 Korea.

Soh revealed how some former comfort women changed their personal testimonies over time, coinciding with the nationalist abduction narrative, and how academics and journalists declined to question the shifting testimonies and instead labeled any critique as right-wing denialism. Reading her book profoundly challenged my worldview, as much as Allan

Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) had years ago before I started graduate school.

Heterodoxy in the Classroom

Virtually none of my students had heard of Soh’s book, as no publisher would translate it into Korean. But her book was *not* an exercise in denialism. Instead, it was scholarship—rigorous, meticulously sourced, and praised by even progressive historians such as the University of Chicago’s Bruce Cumings. Starting in 2013, I introduced Soh’s book to my students, including those in my Civil Society & Social Movements class, along with more mainstream views of the issue. For the latter, I assigned the U.N.’s 1996 Coomaraswamy Report on sexual slavery during World War II and organized field trips to the House of Sharing (a home to surviving comfort women).

Most of the young people in my classes—a mix of international and Korean students—appreciated the balance. Some pushed back. A few expressed discomfort. But the disagreements were civil—until 2016. That fall semester, a large group of Korean students enrolled. They didn’t talk much or challenge me in class. But after the semester ended—and after I had already flown to the U.S. for winter break—I received a terse email from the Student Council president:

The Student Union of the College of Social Science and Department of Politics & Diplomacy heard of your statement in class. We and many students seriously worried about your statement because it can be advocating war crimes and totalitarianism.... So we need your official position and apology for this issue. Please refer to the attached document. P.S. I sincerely hope that this will not happen again.

Student activists then contacted sympathetic reporters, sparking a national controversy. The department chair—who believed only a trivial number of comfort women had voluntarily joined—declined to communicate with me throughout the entire winter break. My family and I were paralyzed for two and a half months, wondering whether I’d lose my job.

When I returned to Korea, I endured hours-long meetings with a faculty committee and student representatives. Finally, the committee issued a formal “warning” and prohibited me from assigning Soh’s book for one year, a compromise from its initial demand to never assign the book again. That was my first strike.

A Deliberately Edited Misquote

After 2016, I redesigned my curriculum, assigning Soh’s *The Comfort Women* along with Katharine Moon’s book about U.S. military comfort women, *Sex Among Allies*. Students were required to submit weekly reading reactions to assess comprehension. Sensitive topics were introduced only after discussions of less politicized cases, such as human rights abuses in North Korea. I encouraged students to compare the rhetorical patterns of comfort women testimonies with those of North Korean defectors, to examine how narratives of suffering function within advocacy movements.

The classroom atmosphere remained volatile, even though activist students were mostly silent throughout the semester. They then submitted highly negative course evaluations. But after 2016, the number of such students was minimal, as most simply boycotted my elective courses.

Starting in the 2018 fall semester, I was asked to teach the Political Science Methodology course, required for all undergraduate students. I received excellent student evaluations for my teaching: I invited guest speakers and organized various field trips, including to the nation’s largest mosque.

I expected the same in 2019, but that year coincided with the publication of former Seoul National University economics professor Lee Young-hoon and colleagues’ revisionist bestseller, *Anti-Japan Tribalism*, criticizing Koreans’ anti-Japanese views and arguing that many were based on historical falsehoods. The book sold over 130,000 copies and triggered a flood of media coverage. To connect my course to current events, I discussed Lee’s book as an attempt to overturn historical consensus and usher in a paradigm shift.

One or more students secretly recorded my lecture, edited out my attribution, and circulated the clip as if the statement were my own to like-minded

reporters. Without contacting me for verification, the national public news agency Yonhap published the headline: “H University professor: ‘Korean scholars researching comfort women are liars’... Student Council pushes back.” The incident solidified my reputation as a member of Korea’s far-right or “new-right” who deny Japan’s war crimes and personally insult our nation’s historians. Meanwhile, the Student Council president requested that I acknowledge that *Anti-Japan Tribalism* is bad social science. I declined since I do not publicly endorse or reject any book that we may discuss in class.

That was strike two, for allegedly stirring political controversy that hurt H University’s reputation and consuming the time of tenured faculty. My department subsequently banned me from teaching Political Science Methodology, or any other mandatory undergraduate course. (I was, however, still assigned to teach the methods class for graduate students.)

As my number of undergrad courses shrank, I was assigned to teach general English writing classes for graduate students university-wide, mostly in the sciences and engineering. Some would consider this a humiliating demotion, but I feel that all teaching is honorable, whatever the subject. I adapted by assigning various writing and communication exercises—short stories, essays, research papers, small team meetings, and games—and earned nearly 100% positive student evaluations.

Defending a ‘Privileged Denialist’

I had already suffered two strikes in 2016 and 2019, with ever-diminishing chances of tenure promotion at H University or at any other university in Korea, when another potentially difficult situation arose. In 2020, Harvard law professor Ramseyer published an article theorizing that most Korean women signed contracts to become comfort women, and that such contracts offered more pay

and shorter terms during wartime than during peacetime because of the difficulty of recruiting wartime workers.

I felt immense pressure not to defend the academic freedom of such a supposedly incendiary and privileged scholar. But to not speak about academic and civil freedoms, when no one else would, would violate my core beliefs.

In the end, I chose the “hard” that I could best live with. The response was immediate, intense, and inevitable. Posters across campus demanded my removal. Student Councils issued similar statements. Media outlets repeated earlier allegations against me. A confidential university panel reviewed my case and voted 11–2 against termination, but I was neither invited to speak in my defense nor even informed that the review had occurred.

My department requested that I permanently refrain from writing about comfort women. We ultimately agreed that I would pause writing for one year and that any future publications would not mention my university affiliation.

Choosing My ‘Hard’

Academics often respond to controversies with the fight-or-flight response. A silent majority probably choose flight, promising to avoid sensitive topics or never to touch them again, at least until they receive tenure. A vocal minority choose to fight, to lean into oppositional activism. I choose neither flight nor fight, but the Heterodox Way—an ethos of rigor, curiosity, humility, and openness. I want to engage, not retaliate. To understand, not demonize. To criticize systems and practices, not individuals.

By God’s grace, I found a community where this ethos was not only accepted but encouraged. When colleagues at H University and at the Korean Studies Association disavowed me, Heterodox Academy accepted me. Through HxA, I found

Open vetting of claims—even painful ones—remains the foundation of legitimacy in liberal, pluralistic societies. When institutions suppress heterodox ideas rather than examine them, they erode their own moral authority.

colleagues who believed, as I did, that intellectual diversity and open inquiry are essential to a healthy academic culture and to what should be every university’s core mission: the unfettered pursuit of truth.

Together with Kyushu University’s Shaun O’Dwyer, and later joined by scholars like Frances An from the University of Western Australia, Wondong Lee from South Korea’s Inha University, Meredith Shaw from the University of Tokyo, and Alexandre Erler from Taiwan’s National Yang Ming University, we created the Heterodox East Asia Community, hosting four to six forums a semester on sensitive topics across East Asia. Our community shares the premise that curiosity flourishes where fear recedes.

Why I Still Believe

Some may assume that my ordeal radicalized me—turned me against the left, activists, or even Koreans. It did not. In fact, it deepened my understanding and appreciation of the liberal principles of procedural fairness, viewpoint diversity, self-criticism, and institutional openness. Open vetting of claims—even painful ones—remains the foundation of legitimacy in liberal, pluralistic societies. When institutions suppress heterodox ideas rather than examine them, they erode their own moral authority.

I believe Korea can embody a more open, self-reflective and intellectually pluralistic culture and that classrooms should be safe spaces for criticism, and not only for conformity. I believe in its many citizens—students, journalists, scholars—who quietly told me they wanted open debate, even if they could not say so publicly. The core principles of academic freedom helped persuade the 11 faculty members who ultimately voted not to terminate me—and for that, my family and I remain grateful.

In the end, heterodoxy is not rebellion, it is responsibility. And that is how I became Korea’s most famous “denialist”; not because I denied anyone’s suffering, but because I refused to deny the values of open inquiry and the pursuit of truth.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

J, Ph.D., teaches political science at H University in South Korea, and has received Heterodox Academy’s Open Inquiry Award for Courage.

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LEFT OUTSIDE THE CAMP

Questioning addiction treatment orthodoxies shouldn't lead to academic exile

BY ANDREA CLEMENTS

I am an experimental psychologist, and my goal throughout my career has been and still is to find the truth and to teach my students to do the same. How do we do that in science? We disprove our own and others' faulty claims and methodically arrive at truth. Or at least that's the way it's supposed to work.

My own research is in the area of addiction. I want to eradicate it—a big goal, especially as vast amounts of money and manpower have been invested in addressing addiction without actually reducing the problem. So, there is much work to be done.

The scientist in me wants to “build a better mousetrap”—to find the best ways to reduce dependence on substances. I particularly want to investigate the effectiveness of non-pharmacological treatments, methods such as intentionally increasing the patient's interpersonal connections. However, whenever I question the status quo, which involves using medication as the (almost) universally recommended, “evidence-based” treatment for addiction, I am accused of endangering people, stigmatizing addicts, and bringing up questions that have already been answered.

But those questions have *not* been answered. In fact, the questions haven't even really been asked yet because the “evidence” base is comprised of studies comparing one medication to another, rather than comparing medication to non-pharmacological interventions.

Unfortunately, when it comes to treating addiction, there is an ironclad orthodoxy. Research funding for additional treatment almost always requires medication to be provided to patients. Treatment guidelines call a failure to medicate unethical. And trying to publish articles questioning medical intervention for addiction has been nearly impossible for me and my colleagues.

Seeking effective treatment alternatives threatens several multibillion-dollar industries—from Big Pharma to the prison system, from lab testing to treatment centers. Those protecting these industries are far better positioned to lobby and to curry favor with funders, publishers, and guideline gatekeepers. Is that what is happening or is their ideology just so strong that they truly can't fathom any alternative being viable, let alone superior?

I would like to see head-to-head comparisons of treatments. Let the chips fall where they may. Let the most effective treatments win. But because I dare to question the pharmacological bias, I feel as if I am left (or being sent) outside the camp.

References available at inquisitivemag.org.

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