



THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

16 Bold Ideas to Make Higher Ed a Better Place to Work

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Say No to Mammon!

What the world needs now are zones of respite from the brutalizing instrumentalization of thought and action that characterizes the advancing hegemony of quantification, commodification, and ubiquitous financialization.

Yes, science is real and powerful. Yes, market-based solutions to complex problems “work,” and can even be shown to be highly efficient — provided one sets modeling software just so. Yes, the pursuit and production of knowledge is and always will be deeply entangled with the business of getting and spending — deeply entangled with “business” itself. Nevertheless, values other than money are real, as well as necessary, and markets will never supply them.

And our markets have become market-markets: Finance capitalism (zero-sum betting on the market) has *exploded* in the last half-century, dwarfing our actual productive economies. What this means, among other things, is that purely competitive money-play has become, across the last 30 years, the *runaway preoccupation of a distorting preponderance of educated persons across the globe*.

Teaching at Princeton for 25 years, I have directly witnessed (indeed, one can say, even participated in, by means of countless letters of recommendation) these developments: More elite students than ever now go to work directly in finance. And a plurality of those who don’t find themselves in law or consulting, which increasingly function as support staff to those who are directly sucking and blowing in that titanic vortex of whirligig fatuity known as finance capitalism.

I am not opposed to wealth, and lots of rich people do kind and generous things with their money. The problem here is simply the dwarfing scale and relentless, pervasive monomania of this enterprise, which has not merely suborned our polity but has progressively insinuated the return-on-investment analytics of private equity into everything from the care of our grandmothers to the activity of teaching and learning. And this is bad.

What is, at this time, most special about colleges and universities is that they have a meaningful legacy claim to alternative traditions — to ends and aims and activities that will not be reduced to money value, to other ways of thinking about time, life, and, for that matter, matter itself. This is not to say that higher education has ever existed outside of the worlds of getting and spending. Not at all. But it is to remind us that colleges (like churches and synagogues and mosques and summer afternoons) have long held space for other things — indeed, are born of and in service to that which cannot be bought or sold.

Nietzsche said somewhere that big ideas are like cold baths: Jump in, and get out quick. So I won’t rehearse the charges against for-profit universities, or lament the resort by humanists-who-should-know-better to various supine defenses of their departments in terms of “job preparedness.” And let us leave aside the general list of the higher-ed ship to the flooding bulkheads of “innovation centers,” “entrepreneurship training,” and related profiteering-adjacent subdisciplines. What we need are educational spaces that boldly declare themselves SANCTUARIES, capable of providing some (temporary, partial, essential) respite from worlds that money is making.

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