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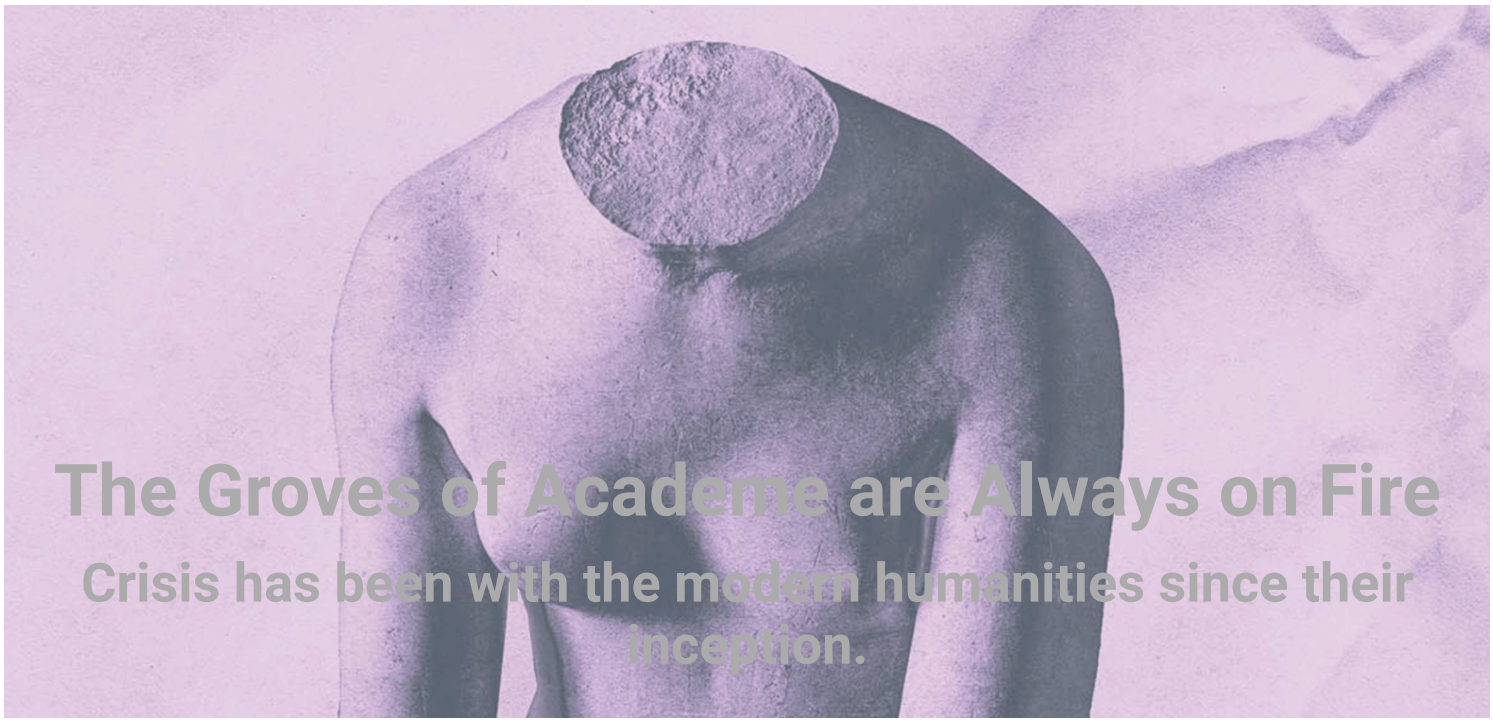


The Groves of Academe are Always on Fire

Crisis has been with the modern humanities since their inception.

THE REVIEW

By Merve Emre and Len Gutkin

AUGUST 17, 2021

That the academic humanities have been in "crisis" since the 2007-9 recession is a piece of received wisdom that *The Chronicle*, along with academic journals like *Profession* and national newspapers like *The New York Times*, has had a hand in consolidating. And no one would deny that hiring has been severely constrained — in some fields, all but eliminated — over the last decade or so. But at its most provocative, crisis talk goes beyond a jobs report; it is concerned, for better or for worse, with questions of meaning, legitimacy, and mission.

In *Permanent Crisis*, just out from the University of Chicago Press, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, professors of German, respectively, at Ohio State University and the University of Virginia, suggest that today's preoccupation with crisis in the humanities is historically and conceptually overdetermined, less a response to current material realities than baked into the modern humanities' self-conception. For the authors' purposes, the humanities in their current institutional form are a product of the German-language universities of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, rather than the terminus of a lineage from the Renaissance or antiquity. Germanophone humanists established a set of binaries that continue to structure the modern humanities, "pitting the utilitarian, technical, and vocational rationality of the sciences against the disinterested, liberal, and critical humanities."

Perhaps the earliest articulation of this worldview appeared in Friedrich Schiller's 1789 University of Jena lecture, "What Is Universal History and Why Study It?" As Reitter and Wellmon summarize, Schiller "used the study of history to consider a … threat facing the university: an instrumental and utilitarian relationship to education and knowledge among students — and faculty." Against the so-called *Brotgelehrter* — which Reitter and Wellmon translate as "careerist scholar" — Schiller counterpoised the truly "philosophical mind." Put schematically: The human sciences would become the repository for a set of idealist impulses thought to countervail the alienating rationality of industrial modernity.

We talked recently with Reitter and Wellmon about the history of crisis talk, the lessons of Max Weber, the humanities outside the university, and whether the current crisis might truly be different from past ones, after all. This discussion has been edited for length and clarity.

Gutkin: "Crisis talk in the humanities," you say, "is often peevish, self-serving, and lacking in historical perspective." Restoring that historical perspective is the task of this book. But one takeaway of this historicization is that, going back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the humanities as such are constituted by crisis talk.

Can we do without it? Is the trick just to make it less "peevish," more historically self-aware?

Reitter: Can the humanities do without crisis talk? Probably not, unless there was some massive reorganization of society where there didn't seem to be a fundamental tension between the pace of capitalism and the pace of humanistic thinking. It's natural, and not necessarily bad, for the humanities to think of themselves as providing a kind of counterweight to various modern forces that seem to have productive effects but also get in the way of what a lot of people think of as human flourishing.

But it's a sad irony when humanists don't bring historical perspective and self-understanding to discussions of the humanities. When they say, "Well, the humanities weren't really in crisis, but *now* they're in crisis, and all this previous crisis talk was overblown," they draw the lines very arbitrarily, and they leave out a lot of crucial context, both discursive and institutional. That does a real disservice to the humanities' self-presentation.

Emre: Yet a different interpretation might be that the humanities are not in crisis, because the humanities were from the get-go a kind of con, a miracle of irrationality.

As you claim in the book, they are antithetical to the pace of capital and to the logic of productivity, so that to convince anybody to read poetry in the first place was an amazing sleight of hand.

That's one way of reframing the crisis talk. There is no crisis, because under modernity the humanities should never have existed in the first place.

Wellmon: The humanities in their modern, institutional forms function as release valves, or a safe institutional space, for talk about values, meaning-making, or ethical concerns generally within a capital-driven system — whether that's the mid-19th-century Prussian system, the managerial capitalism of the early 20th century, or the explosive, "golden era" capitalism of Cold War liberalism.

So "the humanities" aren't just a "miracle of irrationality"; they serve a distinct institutional and social function — to keep certain kinds of questions cordoned off from the *real* knowledge work of other domains, like the natural sciences and technology. In the early 1960s, Thomas J. Watson Jr., then CEO of IBM, served alongside several university presidents on the Commission on the Humanities, co-sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. The commission produced a report that laid the groundwork for the legislation that established the National Endowment for the Humanities at the end of the decade. And in that report, the commission claimed that in a future in which Americans would only work 10 hours per week — the Cold War version of the Keynesian dream was still alive — there was a clear and distinct function for the humanities: *leisure*. But it was a leisure almost entirely detached from any kind of knowledge project or any kind of social project whatsoever. In that sense, certain forms of capitalism need something like the humanities to sustain themselves.

Reitter: To say that there's a tension between the pace of capitalism and the pace of the humanities isn't to suggest that the humanities are this organic thing. Beginning

around the start of the 19th century, the humanities are different from their previous incarnations. There's a lot of grand and fascinating narrativizing in the history of the humanities now: people like Rens Bod and James Turner trying to show continuity going way back to the sixth century BCE. But we see the justifications for the humanities fundamentally changing around 1800, to some extent as a response to modern industrial society.

Gutkin: What are some of the new justifications that you see emerging then?

Reitter: The humanities adapt themselves in such a way as to put themselves at the center of an institutional project — the university. . That's crucial.

But also, the paradoxical idea of the higher practicality of impractical liberal learning is introduced, which is not really something that you find in traditional justifications of the humanities before this time. This is why you can quote from Schleiermacher or Fichte or Humboldt, and it sounds incredibly contemporary, ripped from the headlines: "learning how to learn; learning how to think critically and systematically, to see connections among disparate things."

Those thinkers are responding to the fragmentation they see as attending modernization: bureaucratic rationalization, industrialization, specialization. The word for specialization in German at the time was *Einseitlichkeit*, literally "one-sidedness."

So you could say that this is a con, an attempt to pretend that life under capitalism can be more humane than it really is by including this humanizing component. You can also say that it creates an area of relative freedom, and that this culture has also formed its critics, such as Marx himself. Or we can go back and forth, which is what a lot of people do, with their position at any given time depending on which mode they're operating in. Are they trying to look critically at the academic humanities? Or are they trying to make the case for the academic humanities? The tensions between

the humanities' democratizing and conservative tendencies play a significant role in the story our book tells.

Emre: There's a provocative tension between the archives that the central chapters draw on, from 19th-century Germany primarily, and the contemporary framing of the book, engaging with living writers who are thinking about the neoliberal university.

There were moments when I pulled up and wondered, "Wait, are the mid-19th-century docents of the University of Berlin really the models for contemporary adjuncts? Is 'careerist' the right word to use in translating Schlegel's *Brotgelehrter*?" I'm wondering if you see any risks to that kind of anachronism.

Wellmon: We spent a lot of time, and had lots of disagreements, about precisely things like how to translate *Brotgelehrter*. Tensions were ever-present!

The other thing I would say, to excuse ourselves, is that, ironically enough, presentism is a distinctive feature of the modern humanities. So perhaps we indulged that presentism. But I see us as also *owning* it. The modern humanities, however historicist they might insist that they are, are a fundamentally presentist project. What makes the humanities *modern*, for us, is that they are understood as countervailing against very present dangers. In this sense, the *modern* humanities address not disordered desires, unruly passions, or the presence of evil but historical changes: industrialization, new technologies, natural science, and capitalism. This permanent relationship to the present links the modern humanities to the temporality of crisis.

Gutkin: So in your presentist mood, what would you prescribe? What should humanists do?

Wellmon: This is an institutional question, and it depends on what we want to do. Is the goal increasing enrollments or increasing access to existing institutions, or is it something more utopian, like more fundamentally democratizing knowledge? How

utopian do we want it to be? In the past year, I've become much more utopian. Institutional reforms are not going to bring about the social changes to which I aspire; I'm not that interested in saving the humanities. That's my prescription: a more liberatory project, not settling for institutional gerrymandering.

Gutkin: What would that look like?

Wellmon: I'm trying to learn from places and people I haven't really bothered to ask until recently. This past semester, for example, I helped start a liberal-arts program for working adults at the UVA, and taught its first core course. After a failed first week or two of class, it was clear I had to reinvent what I was doing. So that's a local, particular instance.

The book I'm finishing up is called *After the University,* and tries to think through these kinds of issues. But despite what the title might suggest, it's not dire; it's not at all like Alasdair MacIntyre's introduction to *After Virtue,* with its images of moral apocalypse. It's hopeful.

"We're all damned and free to live in multiple communities, multiple identities, and alongside multiple, often conflicting values."

Emre: I don't think it's an accident that many of us who teach in universities feel more fulfilled when we go teach in prison-literacy initiatives or at community centers or in adult-education courses. There's a reason we feel better about what we do then — because we are participating in institutional projects that expand access to literacy and literary consumption beyond the university.

Reitter: This is an irony we try to underscore in the book: Precisely as the humanities have fought to fit themselves within the constrained space of the university, they have

made these enormous promises about what they can do, promises that are often better kept, it seems, outside the university.

Wellmon: The university was central to our story because its institutional history has long been tied to a social project, and a normative project, to assert a structural homology between the university and society — from Wilhelm von Humboldt's assertion that the university is the pinnacle of *Bildung*, of a nation's moral culture; to Charles Eliot's claim, as the president of Harvard in the late 19th century, that the university is the core of liberal culture; to Clark Kerr's argument, in the 1950s and '60s, that the university is the center of the knowledge economy. The project of the *modern* humanities parallels the project of the *modern* university. Both have to be more than just relevant or useful; they have to be fully integrated with and functional parts of a social whole.

Gutkin: When Kerr says that the university is the center of the knowledge economy, he's talking especially about scientific and technical knowledge, right? Whereas when somebody like William Deresiewicz, in what I take to be a Humboldtian spirit, certainly an Arnoldian spirit, asserts the importance of the university, they're talking about a sort of spiritual centrality: The humanities are a repository for a set of human needs, human aspirations, human values, that are no longer satisfied elsewhere in society, but should be. Maybe they used to be satisfied by religion, or whatever, but in the absence or the waning of these spiritual institutions, the humanities will step in, absorb those functions, and offer them to students passing through and also to a broader public. When you talk about overpromising, I took you to be talking about this salvific, spiritual function.

Wellmon: That's one historical form of the overpromising, and we certainly discuss how this more moralized or spiritualized function appears again and again. But I see the Cold War Kerr multiversity as overpromising, too — overpromising that the social sciences are the managerial key to organizing all of society's myriad functions and the university's proliferating purposes, and overpromising that the humanities are not just

a politically necessary source of leisure but also a geopolitical tool that can be used to distinguish an American national culture from a Soviet one, a tool that shaped a moral image of the Soviet Union and its people as entirely incapable of value, meaning-making, and creativity.

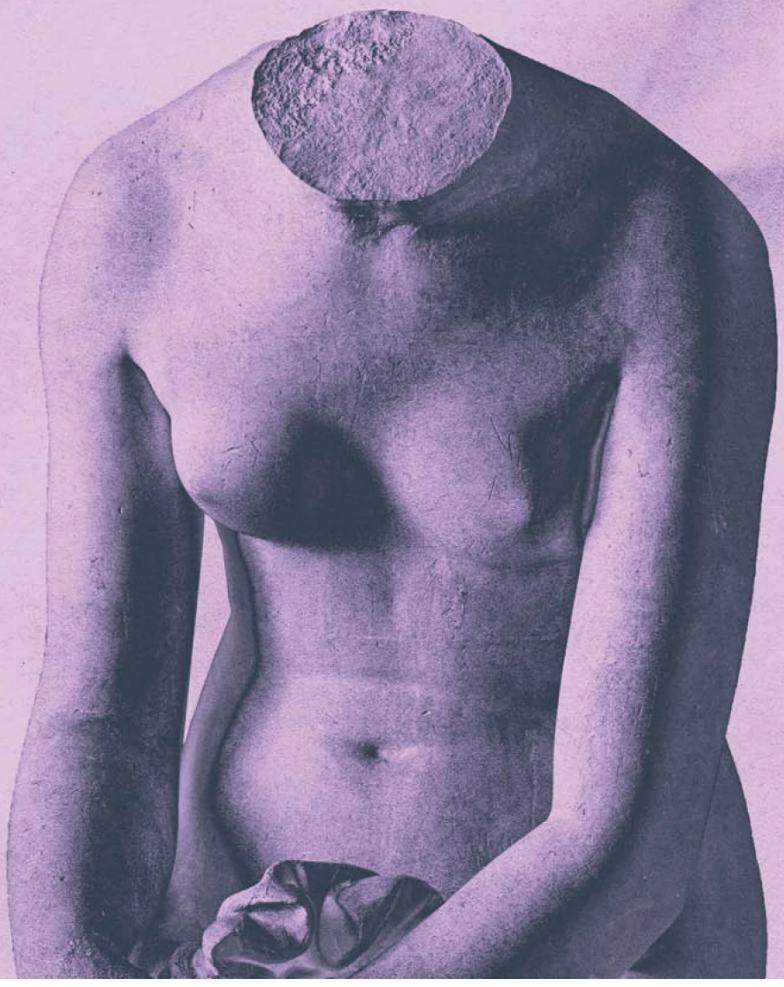
Emre: What's the difference between "the humanities" and "the liberal arts," in the context of this book?

Wellmon: Both historically and conceptually, "liberal" in "liberal arts" names a disposition, a stance toward education and knowledge that was not only instrumental, whereas the humanities name a certain institutional taxonomy. So around 1900 in the U.S., those few scholars who were interested in using the term "the humanities" not just to refer to the study of classical literature but as a concept through which to collect previously disparate disciplines — from philology and music to religion and philosophy — had to fight to claim liberal knowledge as their own.

Paul Reitter *and* Chad Wellmon

Permanent Crisis

The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age



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Gutkin: One prominent version of that disposition is associated with Max Weber, who is in a way the hero of *Permanent Crisis*. Your understanding of some of the key claims around what Weber calls "value-neutrality" in "Scholarship as Vocation" differs somewhat from many other interpretations.

Reitter: The Weberian notion of value-neutrality is sometimes presented as a naïve notion of objectivity, and then beaten up as such. We don't see it that way. We think that Weber acknowledges pretty clearly that your academic work is going to be guided by values that you can't ground through your academic work, but that at the same time it's important to try — again, in your academic work — to be as critically reflexive as you can about these values. And not to make it your order of business to *inculcate* values in students other than ones needed for academic study.

It turns out that those values are values that are important for civic life in general: listening to other people, being able to think independently. So that's the third way that we see in the debate between someone like William Deresiewicz on the one hand and Steven Pinker on the other. Deresiewicz says something like: We should dump this soulless research orientation and go back to the 19th-century model of moral education, but minus religion. Pinker says we should distance ourselves from soul-building because what the hell is that, really?

Wellmon: It's really weird and overdetermined to translate *Wertfreiheit* or *Werturteilsfreiheit* as "value-neutrality." A more literal understanding might be "value-freedom" or a "freedom of value judgment." Weber's is not a negative understanding

of freedom. We are destined, fated even, to encounter conflicting values, to assert them, and to collectivize them.

Gutkin: So for you, Weber offers a kind of minimal ethical project, and he is prescriptive to this limited extent: The ethical commitment of the humanistic researcher is simply to inculcate a level of self-consciousness and reflexivity about one's ultimate commitments, whatever they may end up being.

Reitter: You're framing it as "minimalist," but I think it's no small thing. It can come across as minimalist in Weber's own telling because he's positioning it in critical relation to a project of value building, of indoctrination, of soul construction, that is off-the-charts maximalist. But what he's offering is very robust in its own right.

And it's ultimately not that different from what Deresiewicz wants, but the framing is quite different because Weber is trying to counter what he sees as a dangerous development in early-20th-century German letters, the professor who sermonized in the classroom and played to the students' desire for nonrational, transformative, "authentic experience" rather than academic training.

Wellmon: There's resonance with Freud here. As Freud did with modern civilization, Weber called for permanent tension, permanent struggle, in a phrase, permanent crisis — the refusal to assume that a university-based discourse can provide a unifying, totalizing way of life. That is what it meant to live as an intellectual adult in the modern world. For Weber, it's a permanent conflict of values.

Gutkin: What ethos will that minimal Weberian commitment result in? One in which you're always taking an ironic distance from your own ultimate commitments?

Wellmon: I don't think it's all that minimal. But in any case, when Weber talks about these types of things, he's talking about a particular situation from which an utterance might be made, from within a university lecture hall or from a podium before a class of

students. It's a particular kind of speech-act. That pedagogical frame, that institutional frame, is where he makes those kinds of arguments. And at the same time he's doing that, he's also running for political office, and there's no whiff of value neutrality in his political speeches. I see him as saying: If the university is going to survive under our current conditions, we must comport ourselves thus. But it's not a statement about the totality of life. We're all damned and free to live in multiple communities, multiple identities, and alongside multiple, often conflicting values.

Emre: It feels very hard to deny that we are in a crisis right now, and as sympathetic as I am to the argument of your book, there's something — and maybe this is just a feeling, maybe I'm being governed by my feelings in saying this — about the crisis that we're currently in that seems different. Are there aspects of this moment that exceed your account of the continuity of crisis discourse from 19th-century Germany to the present?

Wellmon: As a theoretical and moral matter, I have to affirm that now it's different. I have to affirm that it's different because we have to believe that in order to provoke ourselves to action. And, as an empirical matter, we could, just to start, identify the dramatically different levels of access to and participation in institutions of higher education. Even after massive enrollment increases between 1880 and 1910, there were still just over 50,000 students enrolled in Germany's universities, and the vast majority continued to come from an elite secondary school known as a *Gymnasium*. Compare that to the vast system of higher education in the U.S. today, with over 4,000 different institutions and total enrollments in degree-granting institutions well over 15 million. Among other things, the conditions of labor and learning are, however similar some of the anxieties and concerns may have been, different.

Reitter: I hope we don't leave people with the impression that our story is one of the eternal return of the same, and that institutional circumstances haven't changed in very important ways. Discursive formations that took shape in 1810 have stayed in

place for a long time, but, of course, many other things are happening — massive institutional transformations on all fronts**.**

Wellmon: Say what you want about the Prussian state, but they thought — as ludicrous as it sounds, as ludicrous as it was — that philologically trained men made for good bureaucrats. Hah!

Gutkin: I wonder if, like the church, the humanities can't really do without overpromising. Otherwise people might stop believing in us.

Reitter: Maybe it's a matter of improving the overpromising.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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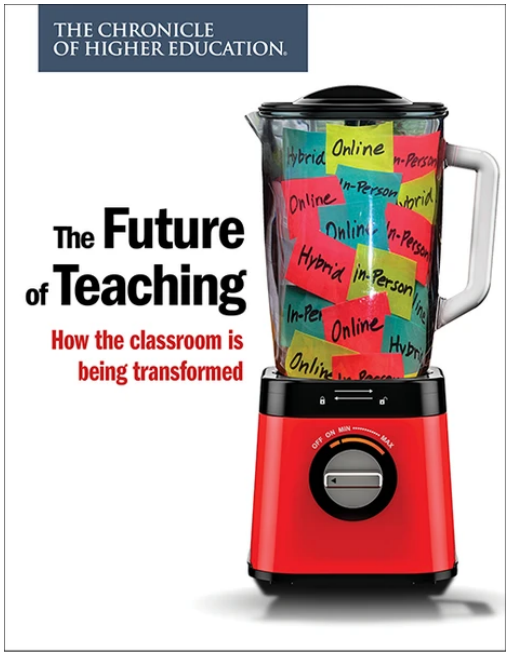

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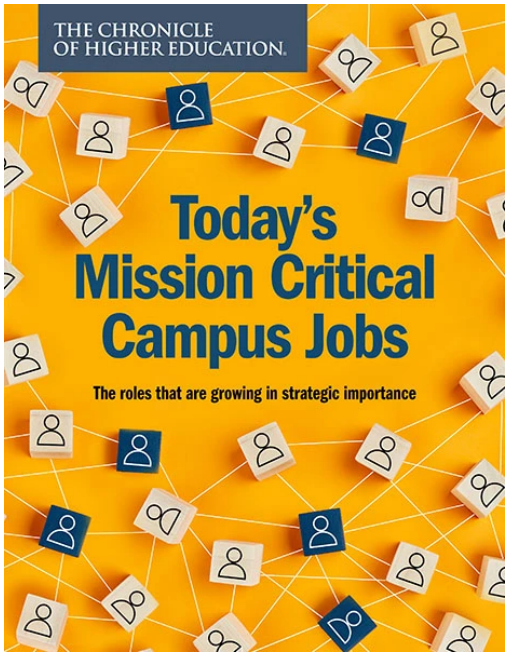

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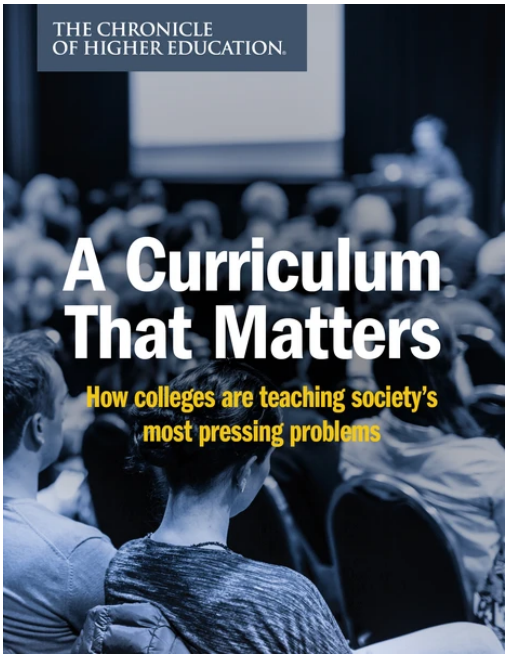

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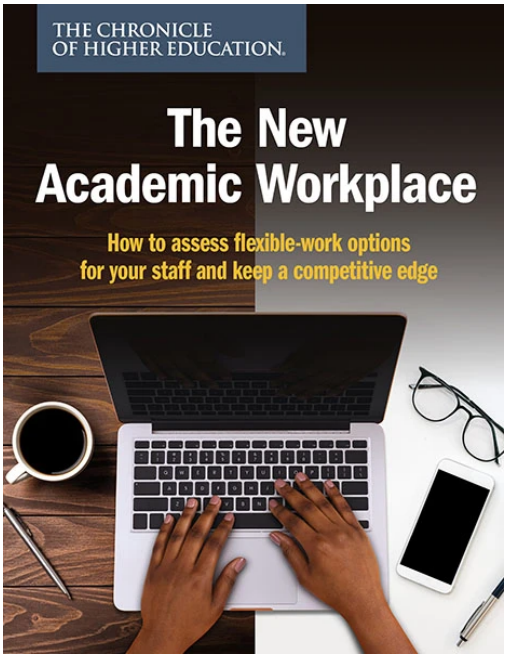

The New Academic Workplace

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