AFTER THE UNIVERSITY

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After the University

Higher Education and the Future of Intellectual Work

CHAD WELLMON

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INTRODUCTION

An Autobiography of Higher Learning

From 2014 to 2021, I led a faculty effort to reform undergraduate education at the University of Virginia and helped create a liberal arts program for working adults. For most of this time, my family and I lived among three hundred undergraduate students at the center of campus, where I served as principal of Brown College, one of UVA's three residential colleges.

Over the course of those years, I watched an institution replace a president whom trustees had attempted to depose a few years earlier. I saw this university begin publicly reckoning with the fact that its campus—a portion of which is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site—had been built by enslaved Black people and defined itself long thereafter by the exclusion of their kin and fellow citizens. In those same years, I hid my three children behind a sofa as four hundred torch-bearing white supremacists paraded by the dormitories in our backyard while yelling "Jews will not replace us!" Soon thereafter, I marched with my family, neighbors, and students in protest of those same far-right extremists. I met with students as they organized campaigns to rename campus buildings and to educate their classmates about their institution. I welcomed dozens of first-year students who showed up for college in the middle of a global pandemic. Meanwhile,

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I followed the downward-sloping line graphs tracking the demise of disciplines such as English and history across the country, and I watched graduate students successfully unionize at Boston University, Columbia, Georgetown, Harvard, Illinois State, and Yale, among others.

More recently, in the spring of 2024, I watched the Virginia State Police break up a student protest on campus, and just after completing this book in the summer of 2025, I joined hundreds of others to protest the forced resignation of the president, Jim Ryan, who had called the police.

Before I began working on the undergraduate curriculum, moved onto campus, and witnessed the events of the past few years, I had a clear idea of what a university should be: a space and time set aside and made free for higher learning, but, as I would learn, that was a narrow understanding of what it actually was.

The University of Virginia is a bureaucratically complex, large-scale enterprise with an operating budget of more than $5 billion. It is also an investment company (The University of Virginia Management Company) that manages an endowment of over $14 billion; a medical center with more than 12,000 employees and almost $3.5 billion in annual operating revenue, including over $500 million in federal research contracts and grants[1]; an athletics enterprise with twenty-five sports programs and reported total revenues of $153.5 million[2]; a police force of sixty-seven officers; a library and museum with numerous art, historical, and scholarly collections, including more than 5 million printed volumes; a collection of capital assets in the form of academic buildings, dorms, stadiums, office parks, a resort with an eighteen-hole golf course and six-hole par-3 course; an entertainment venue for everything from rodeos to Rolling Stones concerts; a licensing and venture group; a transportation system comprising a fleet of hundreds of buses, trucks, and cars; and an institution of higher learning. Like Frankenstein's monster, UVA trudges on—a creature both beautiful and wretched, stitched together by historical accident and earnest ambition. What is the relationship between this monstrosity called a university and higher learning?

In the summer of 2020, when university presidents, including Jim

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Ryan, released their plans to reopen in the middle of the COVID pandemic for the upcoming fall semester, they based their arguments for reopening, whether online or in person, on maintaining the status quo. Later, when they explained why their institutions *had* to reopen for in-person instruction in the fall of 2021, their reasons were grounded not so much in the requirements of higher learning as in the imperative to resume operations. At UVA, dorm beds had to be filled so that the rental cash would flow so that the debt could be serviced. (Like many universities, UVA uses the steady cash flow from housing to pay its bond debts.) Courses had to be offered so students could continue collecting the credits they needed to graduate; tuition dollars had to be collected so faculty and staff could be paid; surgeries had to be performed, and hospital beds filled so Medicaid and Medicare dollars could be collected. To think of other ways of organizing the university risked too much: canceled housing contracts, smaller enrollments, empty football stadiums—and thus falling revenues, collapsing budgets, and, ultimately, lost jobs not just for faculty but (and more immediately) for the thousands of staff who relied on the university for a living.

University presidents and trustees found themselves in a similar situation in early 2025, when the Trump administration threatened to withhold billions in federal funding unless institutions complied with a sweeping list of demands. This assault on higher education exposed instabilities in the system of higher education—instabilities that have been masked but never resolved. While some leaders capitulated, others fought back, claiming to defend not just their own institutions but academic freedom and the university itself. Yet the defenses offered were largely technocratic. Harvard's president Alan Garber warned that federal "overreach" jeopardized Alzheimer's and cancer research.[3] A letter organized by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, signed by dozens of university presidents, described American colleges and universities as "engines of opportunity and mobility" that fostered "innovation" and provided "human resources" to meet the needs of a "dynamic workforce."[4]

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These appeals, however politically expedient—who opposes cancer research?—deflected attention from more basic questions: Was the arrangement that made universities federal contractors *good* for the university as an institution? Was the coupling of universities and labor markets? Was the transformation of universities into engines of economic productivity? These leaders assumed that the university's primary purpose was to produce outputs and to distribute goods: economic, medical, or technological. How universities educated people (or failed to) and shaped their lives as an institution went largely unmentioned. Little was said about how they function as social sorting systems.

And yet, more stirring rhetoric about public purposes and public goods will not save the university. It will simply obscure the reality that our educational institutions and broader society treat not just higher learning but all education, all intellectual desire, as means to money, power, and status. All the while, the specter of ChatGPT and artificial intelligence casts its own shadow, posing a similarly existential threat to the idea of the university as a place of disciplined study.

None of this constituted a sudden crisis. The idea of the university as a sacred space and time, a sanctuary for disciplined study, had already exhausted itself long before COVID, Trump, or ChatGPT. These events did not precipitate a collapse. They were manifestations of the longer development of our institutions of higher learning into something else entirely. Reopening during the pandemic, responding to government coercion, or reacting to AI—all reflected institutional imperatives to keep operations running, all had reasons that rhymed with the anxieties and needs of those particular institutions. Each had goods to distribute (medical care and cancer research) and functions to serve (labor markets to satisfy and economic growth to drive). The university had to be defended.

When the stakes were existential, the reasons offered to justify the university had little to do with disciplined study and intellectual desire. How is it that an institution purported to be about higher learning is defended as the means to something else entirely? How did such a yawning gap open up between what we claim universities are for and

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what they actually do? Has the university's pursuit of money, status, and utility eroded its capacity to sustain anything but its own acquisitiveness? *After the University* answers these questions and explains why doing so matters now.

After the University is not a memoir. It is an autobiography of higher learning. Told in part through my own experiences and focused through the institution where I have worked since 2007, *After the University* offers an account of the peculiar problems, current conditions, and prospects of higher learning. Written for the most part in the scholarly mode I know best—conceptual and historical analysis and interpretation bolstered by footnotes—it is a reflection on the ideals, practices, and values that colleges and universities claim as their own. I use "higher learning" and not "higher education" in order to differentiate the universal aspirations and potential of the former from the overdetermined and fixed horizon of the latter. My concern is not with colleges and universities in themselves, but in the ways these institutions have formed and *de*formed intellectual desire and practices of disciplined study. Higher learning and disciplined study continually adjust what W.E.B. Du Bois called our "growing knowledge of life" to a social reality that is likewise ever changing.[5] Whether we acknowledge it or not, our individual strivings for knowledge are also social strivings—sometimes coerced or compelled, sometimes collective and common.

I am interested in the institutional conditions of disciplined study and intellectual desire. For the past two hundred years in many parts of the world, these conditions have in large part been set by the university, which was itself transformed under the conditions of modernity: mass democracy, industrialization, technological and media change, increased labor productivity, and capital accumulation—the social conditions that have shaped the lives of so many of the world's people over the last two centuries. In the context of modernity, then, how is it that colleges and universities, institutions so obviously about knowledge and learning, are also so obviously not about those same things? When and why did they become parodies of themselves, forsaking the goods of disciplined study in favor of the competition for social stand-

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ing and the endless pursuit of money and power? Under the current conditions of higher education, can the goods of disciplined study be recognized on their own terms, not absolutely and exclusively, but simply as worth valuing in themselves?

Ideal Reader

I first encountered these goods while watching my dad prepare for his Bible studies at church or the lessons he would lead our family through in the living room. Surrounded by concordances, Greek and Hebrew lexica, and commentaries, he would scribble notes, terms, and verses on long sheets of yellow legal paper. He spent most of his time studying the Book of Revelation and the always approaching apocalypse that would signal the Rapture and the sudden ascent of the saved (i.e., us) out of this world. My dad's God was *deus absconditus*, and so, ever alert, he read, studying for signs of the coming of Christ, who would return, as Paul warned the Thessalonians, "as a thief in the night."

When he opened his Bibles and study aids, my dad did not seem to know what he would find. He just gave himself over to the words, working his way through, unsure how he would be different afterward, but somehow certain that he would be. He read alone, prayed alone, and thought that, in the fullness of time, he would be judged alone. His desire to know God was not just personal; it was monad-like in its self-sufficiency. Yet he was not alone. If I punched my brother or talked back to my mom, he would grab me by the shoulders, hold his eyes level with mine, and ask if I could hear the Holy Spirit. I would mutter nonsense and look past him, picturing in my mind a red rotary phone with no numbers, just a handset and a curly cord dangling down to the floor—my dad's direct line to the divine. Other people, books, churches, religions were just noise.

In addition to his dedicated study of Scripture, two other facts about my dad helped me make sense of him. He had been a boxer, and he had no college degree. Boxing honed his focus, as well as his sense that, just like in the ring, he was alone in the world. His lack of a BA was the backdrop to a life of layoffs, missed promotions, repeated failed attempts at community college, and—just weeks before his sixty-third

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birthday—being "let go" and deemed ineligible for a pension from the British conglomerate that had just bought the factory in rural North Carolina where he worked. A month later, he was working at Lowe's just above minimum wage. Then he did the arithmetic and realized that Social Security and Medicare made more financial sense.

My dad's working life made a mockery of the concept of merit. He knew that his professional place and social status were fixed; it made little difference to him whether God, a formal aristocracy, or a meritocratic system propped up by higher education was responsible. Despite the succor of his Christian faith, my dad considered himself a failure, a poor example for his kids. Like original sin, his lack of a college degree stained him—every bit as much as teenage parenthood, job after job but no profession, divorce, drug addiction—and he was convinced the stain was heritable. His commitment to all sorts of bootstrapping never made intellectual sense to me, but it always made social sense. He believed that his personal relationship with Jesus and the scriptural study that underlay it made up for the formal scholarly training he never had. He aspired to be the kind of person who could read biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek and study commentaries, not because he wanted a better job or more recognition, but because something happened when he read. He practiced his own peculiar, lonesome form of disciplined study. That the Creator spoke directly to my dad was, I came to believe, compensation for a life otherwise devoid of dignity and recognition outside our immediate family. Long before I entered a college classroom, my dad—sitting alone with his Bibles at the kitchen table—was my ideal reader.

Besides the Bibles, commentaries, and concordances, the only other books our family owned were the *World Book Encyclopedia* and Time-Life's home improvement series, which included titles like *Basic Wiring* and *Plumbing*. The plain facts and step-by-step explanations provided a relief from the interpretive demands of reading the Bible with my dad. What and how I read started to change during my freshman year of high school after a friend recommended *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*. I did not know anything about Socrates or Sartre, nor about the book's author, T. Z. Lavine. I read the book, a

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mass-market paperback, the way I played baseball and soccer: desperately and unencumbered. I do not remember much about my experience reading *From Socrates to Sartre*, though I used it as a guide for a series of subsequent paperback acquisitions: Plato's *Apology*, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. I mined those books for ideas, phrases, and images—nuggets I claimed as my own. I read like my dad read. The absence of context, history, or secondary literature did not slow me down; I did not know enough to appreciate them or be embarrassed by my ignorance.

Lavine, who had hosted a 1979 series on Maryland Public Television on which *From Socrates to Sartre* was based, was a philosophy professor at George Mason University who had studied under American pragmatists like Ralph Barton Perry and C. I. Lewis at Harvard. Lavine's stated goal in doing the series and writing the book was to reclaim literature and philosophy from the college professors. In her view, they were hoarding for themselves the fruits of these disciplines; she would return them to the intellectually inquisitive outside the ivory tower.

Lavine told the *Boston Globe* that ten years after the series first aired, people still wrote to her to express their thanks or to describe how reading Plato had changed their lives. "There seems to be a hunger for this kind of programming," she said. The *Globe* article continued:

> [Lavine] says if Socrates were around today he'd probably be on television. No cloistered ivory-tower type, he. The man was out there, talking, ticking people off, and . . . raising the blood pressure of traditionalists who feel a philosopher's place is in the university, period.[6]

Although oblivious to Lavine's aim when I first read her book, I later learned that its lineage included works such as Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers* (1926), a huge mass-market success that has sold over 3 million copies. While earning his doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University, Durant directed the Labor Temple School, an adult education center in New York City, where he taught philosophy to workers. He based his lectures on canonical figures such as Aristotle, Plato, and

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Locke, using extensive outlines that he then published as five-cent "Little Blue Books." After seeing some of Durant's outlines, Lincoln Schuster, of the publishing giant Simon and Schuster, decided to collect and publish them as *The Story of Philosophy*.

In a preface written seven years after the initial publication of *The Story of Philosophy*, Durant explained why American readers needed books like his:

> Human knowledge had become unmanageably vast. . . . Philosophy itself, which had once summoned all sciences to its aid in making a coherent image of the world and an alluring picture of the good, found its task of coordination too stupendous for its courage, ran away from all these battlefronts of truth, and hid itself in recondite and narrow lanes, timidly secure from the issues and responsibilities of life.[7]

What Durant called "an esoteric class monastically isolated from the world" jealously lorded over knowledge, dismissing the claims of the uninitiated as the quaint efforts of dilettantes. Against all this, Durant promised, as Lavine would decades later, to "humanize" knowledge by reclaiming literature and philosophy from the professors.

With their dodgy binding and cheap paper that tore as I turned and that yellowed in less than a year, books like *From Socrates to Sartre* and *The Story of Philosophy* invited use. I treated them not like precious objects but as paperback tools. Like an eager (if inexperienced) explorer seeking guidance from maps on which the names Socrates and Sartre delineated distinct territories encompassing different ways of life, I read naively, unreflectively, existentially, reconstructing arguments and testing claims only for the purpose, I thought, of figuring out how to live and why.

At college, an English professor taught me to read repeatedly and slowly; a German professor taught me to read with a pencil; a political theory professor taught me to read suspiciously and between the lines. Collectively, they showed me that how and why you read depended on where and with whom you read. Literature happened with English and German studies professors around a table with open books. Philosophy happened with philosophy professors and mostly without books.

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I liked talking about books with other people. Classroom discussions and dining hall conversations were opportunities to try out different personae, moral possibilities, and ideas. Sitting with other people, I found that the possibilities of reading became more real to me than they had when I read with just my dad.

It was not until the fall semester of my senior year, after some of my professors suggested that I apply to graduate school, that I learned that reading could also be a paying job. Doing something for its own sake, just for the goods gained in the doing, had struck me as somehow self-indulgent. But teaching books for a living seemed an attractive possibility. My dad doubted that the two—a profession and his form of piety—could coincide. I spent the next two decades forcing them to fit.

College changed how I read. Graduate school changed *why* I read. I realized that reading was at once an individual and collective practice. It included a whole series of repeated actions and acquired dispositions: preparing for seminars at Café Milano by writing in a book's margins; copying long passages and short phrases into a notebook; attending to a particular book with people who likewise valued it enough to attend to it and, even better, to listen to each other talk about it; imagining other people who had read and attended to it and recognizing their excellence as readers who had honestly sought not just to acquire power and status but to interact with this book; regarding all of these things not as mere acquisitions but as common and limitless goods. And most important, knowing that the stage had been set, and I, we, could *read*.

In junior year, I had asked one of my professors if he would be willing to lead an independent study on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. I had thought Nietzsche might help me get beyond my dad's moral absolutism. A few years later, as a graduate student, I was writing about Nietzsche's interest in late nineteenth-century natural science, comparing footnotes in his collected works with a curated list of books he had either borrowed or bought. In place of my personal problem about my dad's either-or moral confidence, I had posed a philosophical and literary-historical question about Nietzsche's use of the natu-

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ral scientific concepts of his time. And I was relieved. This transformation made my original problem more manageable, allowing me to participate in an ongoing conversation among the very people whose technical skills, erudition, and scholarly acumen I aspired to. On the one hand, I had begun with what I remember as a rich, urgent sense of what I wanted to know and why I wanted to read. The values woven from the stuff of my life were captured by values that seemed clearer and more communicable yet also somehow diminished. On the other hand, my reasons for reading and the values I associated with it weren't diminished—just different. The change was a development away from *curiositas*, a vice akin to acquisitiveness or cupidity, into *studiositas*, an intrinsically normative intellectual virtue. I was becoming a different, more disciplined reader.

Becoming a disciplined reader initiated me into a community of readers, a tradition, a set of practices, and the goods and virtues internal to these practices. It also introduced me to a new set of ideals and virtues: a commitment to argument, a demand for evidence, an openness to debate, and a commitment to the fellowship of scholars for whom knowledge is not a personal possession but a collective good that is created, cultivated, and shared. I became comfortable with routine and the harness of habit. I learned that detachment was a fruit of exercise and repetition, of practicing how to talk and think about things you love, disdain, or are indifferent to—and to do so not just impersonally but from a desire to learn more about the object, yourself and others, and the world. Over time, this disciplined reading made me want not just to talk about Kant or Goethe but to write about them; not just to scribble notes in the margins of their works but to mine them for material for the next talk, the dissertation, the next article, the next book. I read not just to be formed but to be informed and productive. My intellectual desires began to overlap with career goals and professional protocols.

Nevertheless, my scholarly questions never fully displaced those posed by the problems of my youth, and my careerist goals never fully consumed my intellectual desire. To make sense of these changes and the conflicts that followed, I told myself that while others plied a pro-

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fession, I practiced a *vocation*. Through graduate school and my years on the tenure track, I approached teaching and writing the way a newly ordained priest might approach the liturgical calendar: dutifully following the schedule set by the academic year, giving daily service to the ritual of writing as I sipped my morning coffee, reading during the day and before retiring at night with pencil and notebook always close at hand. UVA provided material conditions that made such a vocation possible, including a research library, a salary, an office, and health insurance. Using the vocational ideal, I turned the vices of careerism and the limitations of professionalism into scholarly virtues.

Somewhere between graduate school and my first few years as a faculty member, as I developed from a desperately desirous reader who treated texts as arenas for grappling with his private problems into a technically skilled and productive reader who treated texts as raw material to be processed into professional commodities, a kind of rich lode there for the mining, I began to relate to the reader I had been differently. I came to believe that in order to become the kind of reader and thinker I aspired to be, I had to condescend to the "bad" reader and salvation-seeking thinker I had been—the same reader and thinker my dad remained.

Apologies for the university often rely on first-person narratives like my own. Were this book to follow such a model, I would use my own experiences to justify the social value of disciplined study and the university, implying that these things should matter because they matter to me. But I want to understand not only what goods the university distributes and what social functions it serves, but also how it shapes people's lives and, in particular, intellectual desires and practices of disciplined study. After writing what became this introduction, I began drafting other sections and chapters, in which my first-person narrative was subsumed by description, analysis, and narration of a conflict that was not just my own but that of an institution. The patently personal, as manifested by my own feelings of alienation and disillusionment in the face of institutional contradictions, proved insufficient. Although personal narrative can elicit identification, it does not easily explain the world. Yet personal reasons and first-person ex-

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periences can be fruitfully combined with the attitude and armature of more academic accounts—a more scholarly third-person narrative, empirical data and facts, conceptual analysis, historical and philosophical argument. Although *After the University* begins in the first-person mode, what follows will be more immediately recognizable as a third-person account. Nonetheless, the conflict as I first recognized it—between the kind of reader my dad was and the kind of reader I became; between the twenty-year-old college junior enrolling in a Nietzsche course in order to think beyond good and evil and the professional scholar a decade older arguing about Nietzsche's quarrels with fellow nineteenth-century philologists—appears throughout the following pages, but in different forms. Circling upward from my own feelings of alienation and disillusionment and outward across centuries and institutions, *After the University* spirals around the core conflict—can we see the goods of disciplined study as worth valuing in themselves?—moving beyond the personal and particular and toward the social and universal.

Internal and External Goods: Disciplined Study and the University

College, university, and higher education name both aspirations—knowledge, a credential, a job, status—and the social hierarchies that fuel associated anxieties and hopes. They also name real and necessary goods, the things that satisfy our bellies and our imaginations. The university's relationship to these goods has changed, but the way we talk about higher learning obscures this history and hampers our judgment about how we might lead meaningful lives in light of these changes. *After the University* develops an alternative idiom for thinking about higher learning and our educational institutions, centered on three conceptual pairs: internal/external goods, disciplined study/the university, and deflection/value capture.

The rise of the modern research university was accompanied by academic professionalization and specialization, infusions of private and state capital, the expansion of infrastructures (laboratories, libraries, and so forth), the seminar, and more. *After the University* con-

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siders many of these but focuses on another feature of the modern university: the gradual separation and eventual estrangement of disciplined study from the university and each one's respective goods—that is, the internal goods of the former and the external goods of the latter.

Internal goods are those "realized" through active participation in a practice in accordance with its standards of excellence.[8] External goods—such as money or prestige—are those that may arise from participation in a practice but can be pursued by other means. The feeling of connection and joy of barreling a baseball or turning a double play is internal to baseball; making money or gaining fame through it is external to baseball. Goods of the latter sort can be gotten through other activities, like driving an Uber or becoming a YouTube star. Internal goods demand abilities, competence, commitment, and experience specific to the practice. In order to recognize and enjoy the goods internal to baseball, one has to be an engaged and excellent participant.

By disciplined study, I mean coherent, complex, and cooperative knowledge practices governed by internal standards of excellence. As social practices, they embody shared goods, values, and rules. Disciplined study forms particular kinds of knowers—those who have acquired the habits, dispositions, and virtues necessary to know and relate to themselves, others, and the world through the lens of their practice. Such practices catechize and form our intellectual desires and "specify" the kind of person capable, in the words of essayist and scholar Emily Ogden, of knowing well.[9] In the chapters that follow, when I discuss the extent to which disciplined study can be pursued and valued for its own sake, I refer to how the realization of its internal goods is enabled and constrained by institutional and social conditions.

I use the term *disciplined study* to both narrow and broaden what counts as a knowledge practice. It narrows the scope to practices that are sufficiently complex and governed by developed standards of excellence—practices that reveal greater depth and nuance over time. To return to the example of baseball, as one becomes a baseball player, the game discloses new challenges and internal goods (e.g., advancing

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from catching a groundball squared up and with two hands to attacking the ball and catching it with one hand off the front left foot), its standards of excellence become exacting (lofting flyballs to the outfield gives way to hitting line drives with high exit velocities), and its goods become more nuanced (fouling off multiple pitches and having a good at-bat might be more meaningful than simply reaching base). At the same time, disciplined study expands the scope beyond university-based, academic forms of knowledge to include any sufficiently complex and developed socially organized practice that gives form to the desire to know and to learn. Like all practices, disciplined study and its goods require communal care and cultivation. Communities and traditions sustain them by inculcating future practitioners into shared standards, values, and virtues.

After the University is less concerned with cataloging knowledge practices—sorting them into what counts as a disciplined study and what does not—than with understanding how internal goods relate to institutional and social conditions. What matters is this: The goods of a practice can only be attained by excelling in it, by embracing its virtues and standards. They cannot be acquired by other means. Yet the boundaries of disciplined study as a category remain blurry, because whether a practice counts or not also depends on evolving judgments about knowledge. Which kinds of knowledge are esteemed in a given epistemic culture and its hierarchies? Which forms of knowledge are deemed socially valuable and worthy of support? To identify a practice as disciplined study is to make normative judgments about knowledge, virtue, and social worth. Such recognition inevitably involves, as Lorraine Daston notes, ranking forms of knowledge and the "knowers and the epistemic virtues they are expected to display."[10] A central premise of *After the University* is that epistemic cultures, hierarchies, and systems "crystalize in institutions and livelihoods," in shared social structures that make certain forms of life possible. As institutions evolve, they compel their members to clarify these hierarchies, to make these values "explicit," and to articulate shared purposes.[11] For the past two centuries, no institution has so thoroughly monopolized what counts as authoritative knowledge and organized

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knowledge practices more than the modern research university. "Since its inception in Germany in the early nineteenth century and its reinvention in America later that same century, the research university has been the central institution of knowledge in the West."[12]

To understand the development of disciplined study and its internal goods, we need to understand its primary institutional home since 1800: the university. By the university, I mean institutions of higher education—colleges, universities, and other postsecondary educational institutions—and their accumulated norms, rituals, rules, and structures, from the annual donning of caps and gowns and the distribution of degrees at graduation ceremonies to human resource departments and offices of institutional research.

I distinguish disciplined study from the university to emphasize the difference between knowledge practices and institutions. We might think of their relationship as part to whole, in which institutions (colleges and universities) consist of distinct practices. Without institutions to sustain and protect them, practices like disciplined study can erode or disappear. For two centuries, the university has been that institution for disciplined study.

Institutions are constituted by people and their shared practices, whose goods and values institutions seek to support. Yet, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, institutions are also "characteristically and necessarily" concerned with external goods. To provide the material conditions that practices require, institutions pursue money, prestige, and social utility.[13] They organize and structure themselves around the provision of these external goods, thereby shaping the institutional and ethical conditions in which practices can thrive or dissipate. Institutions without practices are empty; practices without institutions are fragile and unsustainable.

The distinction between practices and institutions and their respective goods is not fixed. It marks a shifting, often porous boundary, because institutions and practices are so closely intertwined. They form, argues MacIntyre, a "single causal order." The internal goods of a practice depend on an institution's capacity and willingness to secure external goods. Yet this characteristic and necessary pursuit of

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money, power, and prestige creates tensions. Institutions may find themselves serving goals and interests that conflict with the values of the very practices they support. In striving for external goods, they may distribute rewards—money, power, status—in ways that reshape both internal institutional conditions and external expectations. The same institution that sustains a practice can also deform it by exposing that practice to the "dispositions, habits, and values" characteristic of competitive institutional life.[14]

The university has never been exempt from these institutional tensions. From twelfth-century Bologna to twenty-first-century Charlottesville, it has served as a greenhouse for practices of disciplined study while, simultaneously, securing external goods and serving a panoply of interests. It has accumulated endowments and sought regular financial support from individuals, religious groups, local governments and civil authorities, and states. It has also cultivated material (and political) support by producing—or promising—a range of goods: from professional training, expertise, and new technologies to economic productivity, social mobility, personal fulfillment, and a better life. It has nurtured the goods of disciplined study even as it has pursued the external goods (e.g., money, political support, and prestige) required to sustain itself.

The relationship between disciplined study and the university has long been fraught but also fruitful. As universities cultivated and reshaped practices of disciplined study, they also adapted them to new ends. These shifts provoked internal and external conflicts over the university's legitimacy: Who should fund it? What was its purpose? Should it exist at all?

Tensions between disciplined study and the university have waxed and waned. In the thirteenth century, the University of Paris became a battleground between members of the faculty and the Roman Curia over curriculum control—specifically, which of Aristotle's texts could be taught. The conflict crystallized competing conceptions of the new institution's purpose: Was it an arm of the Church, training clergy and bureaucrats, or a community of scholars in pursuit of theological truth? In eighteenth-century Göttingen, faculty benefited from inno-

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vations like the first research library, salaried positions, and protection from censorship by the theology faculty. These institutional conditions, funded by the Hanoverian state, came with stipulations: The state claimed ultimate authority over faculty appointments and university governance. The university, in short, was a knowledge factory in service of state aims.

The distinction I draw between disciplined study and the university, between practices and institutions, is a heuristic intended to clarify several key points. First, identifying disciplined study with the university obscures the many institutions that have sustained knowledge practices. Long before, students in Bologna hired teachers, reputedly establishing in 1088 the first university, disciplined study flourished in libraries, monasteries, and other settings. From the Library of Alexandria to today's public libraries, practices like copying, translating, annotating, and cataloging have shaped intellectual life. For centuries, practices like letter writing, rhetoric, and bibliographic work thrived both within and beyond university walls. Second, assuming that the university is the natural or necessary home of disciplined study blinds us to how radically the university has changed. Today, the university does many things—disciplined study perhaps least among them. Anyone committed to the flourishing of intellectual practices and the cultivation of intellectual desire must grapple with this reality.

Most importantly, this distinction allows us to see how the university's accumulation of functions and its acquisitiveness have transformed the institution itself as well as the practices it houses. Some may argue that the university is, essentially, the rightful home of disciplined study. I once believed this myself. And it may be true that without such study, the university loses its legitimacy. Yet the university persists—with or without it. Distinguishing practice from institution can help us resist the centripetal pull of an institution that only relatively recently absorbed disciplined study into its orbit.

Ultimately, this distinction clarifies what I believe is worth preserving: the practices and goods of disciplined study. Some might argue that material needs must come before intellectual ones. That may be

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so. But for my purposes, it is sufficient to acknowledge that valuing disciplined study does not require us to deny the value of bread, shelter, and other external goods. The needs of the mind are as real as those of the body. The rigid division between material and intellectual needs, around which many modern systems of higher education are structured, has regularly been used to deny the goods of disciplined study to entire groups of people. The poor, we are told, hunger only for bread.

The central historical claim of the following chapters is that the relationship of disciplined study and the university and their respective goods underwent a fundamental shift between 1800 and 2000. During this period, the university became more than an institution; it became a social process, central to managing the contradictions of changing democratic, industrial societies. The modern university, as Eric Lybeck argues, was not simply shaped by these transformations. It constituted a social revolution, whose effects, still felt today, remain as consequential as democratization and industrialization but also *inseparable* from them.[15] Over the past two centuries, especially in the United States, the university came to monopolize the resources—financial, cultural, social, intellectual, political—necessary for intellectual work. Most significantly, it controlled credentialing, enabling people to move across social domains. If democratization reshaped politics and industrialization reshaped labor, the university reshaped knowledge and education. Like those other processes, it materially, intellectually, and spiritually enriched lives, producing and distributing a wide array of goods.

But *After the University* is not primarily concerned with these sweeping social transformations. Instead, the focus is on how these transformations altered the institutional conditions of disciplined study, redefining its relationship with the university and with their respective goods. The goods of disciplined study did not disappear, but they gradually separated from the university, its functions, and its pursuit of external goods. Disciplined study ceased to constitute the most important function and, in a more Aristotelian sense, the most essential part of the university. As the university institutionalized the pursuit

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of money, power, and prestige, these aims began to "compete with and even engulf" the goods and values of disciplined study, corroding the practices the university had claimed as its own.[16]

Deflection, Value Capture, and Alienation

The growing dominance of external goods—both in what the university pursued and in what it produced and distributed—reshaped the institution. This shift manifested itself objectively in new structures and norms and subjectively in how people experienced and valued the university. With the ascendance of external goods, the university came to be assessed by its outputs and effects: the number of graduates, its contributions to economic productivity, and its technological advances. *After the University* traces this output-oriented valuation back to nineteenth-century Prussian bureaucrats who argued that universities should align their activities with state-defined social needs and maintain an equilibrium between educational output and societal demand. It follows the development of this institutional orientation to the 1960s, when debates in the United States over financing higher education increasingly focused on its role in workforce preparation and economic growth. Social scientists began tracking outcomes like wage premiums, upward mobility, and disparities in life chances tied to educational attainment. The emergence of new data sets and a growing trust in quantified knowledge accelerated this shift toward evaluating the university in terms of what it produced.

Yet questions about outputs and distributive effects, however important for addressing inequality, are not the only way to think about higher learning.[17] However worthy these external goods may be—social mobility, economic growth, technological progress—our collective fixation on them has diverted attention away from what purportedly distinguishes the university in the first place: the practices and goods of disciplined study. The university does more than distribute social goods and produce outputs. It shapes lives. This formative power raises a different set of questions: How has the university's transformation altered the institutional conditions of disciplined study? How

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has the growing estrangement between the university and disciplined study manifested itself not only in different institutional structures but also in subjective experiences of meaning and value?

There are historical reasons, explored in the following chapters, for our tendency to focus on what the university produces and to prioritize external over internal goods. There are ethical reasons as well, and they are rooted in the distinction between practices and institutions, and between internal and external goods. Without the "requisite experience and competence," the goods of a practice can be difficult to recognize, let alone value.[18] How does one explain the satisfaction of barreling a ball or turning a double play to someone who has never played or studiously observed baseball? How does one convey the possibilities for interpretive play afforded by German prefixes or Attic Greek syntax to someone not formed by philological practice to see them? How does one share in the satisfaction of welding a bead so clean and tight that it looks like a stack of dimes and passes an X-ray inspection?

The gradual estrangement of the university and disciplined study, the reign of external goods, and our collective focus on the university's outputs has to do with this ethical fact. As is the case for all practices, the goods of disciplined study can seem inscrutable to those not competent or experienced in the practice. They can also be difficult to communicate. External goods, in contrast, are more readily recognizable and more easily communicated, regardless of one's familiarity with the practice. It is no surprise, then, that the public discourse around higher education tends to emphasize the most visible economic and social effects of having—or not having—a BA.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as the university evolved into something more akin to a social process, it came under increasing pressure to articulate not only the value of its practices but its institutional legitimacy. When expressed in terms of narrowly economic effects like employment rates or higher lifetime earnings, the value of a university education is more easily communicated across institutional and social boundaries than the intrinsic value of disciplined study. Mone-

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tary metrics—denominated in US dollars or Prussian marks—are more immediately recognizable and broadly meaningful than the internal goods of such an education.

These external effects are real. In the United States today, having a BA or not having a BA marks a clear divide in how people live, work, and die. But the internal goods of disciplined study are no less real. An output-oriented conception of higher learning is both diminished and pernicious. It can obscure the very goods that have historically been tied to the university as an institution: not just future earnings or social status, but rather the goods of disciplined study and higher learning.

The gradual separation of disciplined study, the university, and their respective goods manifested itself objectively but also psychologically and subjectively in how people experienced the university. It changed how individuals related to the institution. *After the University* traces this transformation not only as a shift in institutional norms and structures but also as an ethical condition—one that demands distinct forms of life. How has this historical shift altered the way people experience the goods of disciplined study? How has it reshaped their relationship to the university? How has it shaped disciplined study and what it means for people? These are ethical questions concerned with the psychological and subjective effects of institutional change, especially with experiences of the meaningfulness of an activity. They ask how socially constituted practices are felt and understood: Are they "experienced and narrated as meaningful in themselves" or merely as means to other goods?[19] Do people find meaning and value in the activity itself, or has the pursuit of external goods, like credentials, money, or status, so overwhelmed them that they cannot even recognize the internal goods of disciplined study?

To address these questions, I use two related concepts: *deflection* and *value capture*. Philosopher Cora Diamond describes deflection as the propensity of philosophers to be drawn to some difficult reality, only to find their attention diverted to some adjacent philosophical discussion or problem—one that offers more clarity and absorbs the attention associated with the original difficulty but does not actually

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address it. Diamond imagines a philosopher struck by the reality that we might suffer alone. The philosopher begins with this reality, with the "ineluctable facts of our capacity to miss the suffering of others and of the possibility of our own suffering being unknown and uncared about." But as the philosopher reflects on these facts and continues to think about them, her attention and appreciation of this reality are deflected into philosophical debates about skepticism versus anti-skepticism, fallibilism, criteria of knowledge, and so forth. The reality of suffering and the difficulty of apprehending it have been displaced by the problem and difficulty of philosophical argumentation: how best to formulate arguments and anticipate counterarguments. The philosopher's attention is now absorbed by a philosophical problem that is adjacent to, but ultimately deflecting from, the reality of suffering.[20]

For Diamond, deflection is a propensity of philosophers, but I adapt it in two ways to describe the university. First, I extend deflection to explain an institutional tendency to divert our attention and intellectual desires away from the goods of disciplined study and toward substitute objects that absorb our attention. The university facilitates this redirection by providing the language, norms, and structures that enable—and even encourage—it. Second, I use deflection to describe the subjective experience of this redirection. The university's deflective tendencies can erode our ability to recognize and value the goods of disciplined study. So powerful is this dynamic that it not only displaces our intellectual desires but transforms them entirely.

Deflection is related to a second concept, which I adopt from the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen. Our attention can be deflected and absorbed by substitutes because those substitutes, especially in institutional contexts, are often tied to "simplified values." We may begin an activity grounded in values that are rich and interwoven with our lives, only to later discover that these values have been captured by ready-made ones with little connection to our lives. These simplified versions gradually dominate our practical reasoning—a phenomenon Nguyen calls "value capture."[21]

Nguyen uses social media to illustrate this phenomenon. We might

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join platforms like Instagram or (RIP) Twitter seeking connection, conversation, or community, but soon find ourselves fixated on likes, retweets, and follower counts.[22] The nuanced reasons that first drew us in—seeking out intellectual community, learning from other people, discovering new things—are replaced by the platform's more immediate and addictive metrics. The simplicity of such values lies not only in what they measure—not so much human connection as aggregated expressions of approval or disapproval—but also how they measure. Social media platforms create, Nguyen points out, an environment in which the simplest of value forms predominates: numeric and quantified values. They convert complex and idiosyncratic judgments into simple scores—likes, shares, clicks. Because these metrics are clear, ever-present, and presented as immediate feedback, they absorb our attention and induce us to act in certain ways. They shape our behavior. We want the like, the retweet, the ratio. Embedded in platforms owned by tech giants like Meta and Google, these values come packaged with rules and structures that compel us to internalize them. We come to treat these simplified values like practical maxims, endowing them with the power to orient our practical reasoning. The phone in our pocket offers instant access to a world of ready-made values—engineered to feel like our own.

Nguyen extends value capture from social media to institutions. Technologies and institutions embed simplified values within broader environments that stabilize and reinforce our internalization of them through feedback mechanisms. Large-scale, bureaucratically organized institutions need values that are "clear, coherent," and transferable, values that can move efficiently through complex organizational structures and up and down differentiated hierarchies. This requires standardized, stable processes and structures that reliably produce metrics that can be "easily measured at scale, propagated across institutional units, and recorded in institutional memory." Institutional metrics enable the smooth control of information, coordinating an organization divided by units, departments, and functions, each tasked with both performing its role and communicating its values to the larger system.[23]

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Consider this example of institutional value capture: how a College of Arts and Sciences at a large public university might evaluate a cellist for promotion. A dean convenes a committee of 10 faculty from across departments. The music department submits a dossier including the candidate's CV, list of performances, courses taught, student evaluations, and a departmental report. Much of the departmental report emphasizes the candidate's virtuosity. Everything the candidate is expected to do—perform, teach, and evaluate fellow musicians—flows from her excellence as a cellist. The report notes that her spiccato is perfectly playful and percussive; she shifts with ease; her sound blends flawlessly with both the cello section and with the symphony as a whole; her intonation is immaculate; and, as principal cellist, she leads with expressive precision. The members of the college-level committee—among them perhaps a biologist, a classicist, a mathematician, a historian, a literature scholar, a filmmaker, and a physicist—may not be cellists or musicians, but they recognize these observations as discipline-specific virtues. They trust their music colleagues' judgment.

The departmental report also includes a summary of the candidate's teaching evaluation scores, which are based on university-wide student questionnaires and include ten questions rated on a five-point scale (e.g., "How effective was your instructor in helping you master course content?"). The candidate's average score across all ten questions was 4.80. These numbers do not directly reflect the nuanced standards described in the report, but they offer more immediate, portable values—ones familiar across departments and legible to the dean's office. These metrics will figure prominently in the college committee's report to the provost's office and the university-wide committee, which reviews faculty from across the college, law school, business school, and medical school. Institutional metrics like these can travel efficiently across bureaucracies, making them powerful instruments of value capture.

Value capture does not describe an inevitable shortcoming of metrics or quantified knowledge. (Indeed, the rise of what I call university statistics plays a significant and meaningful role in the rise of the research university.) Like all large, bureaucratically organized institu-

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tions, the university must communicate both internally and externally the standards and values of diverse activities. It needs to fit them to other parts of the institution and to make them legible across the whole of the institution. Value capture does not describe this feature of modern bureaucracies. It describes a more particular, ethical phenomenon in which people with "rich, subtle, or inchoate" values encounter preexisting, institutionalized ones—often through metrics and quantified knowledge—and gradually orient their reasoning around these substitutes.[24] These streamlined values can become practical maxims, replacing more complex reasons and values.

Sometimes, however, our aims shift not because an institution redirects them but because we change. Our evolving relationship with a practice can lead to different, not necessarily diminished, goods. When I refer to deflection and value capture, I am not describing a developmental process in which the goods, values, and meaning simply change. As we deepen our engagement with a practice, we often begin with only a vague sense of its goods or what drew us to it in the first place. We gradually learn to recognize its goods and acquire a fuller appreciation of them. And because a practice's standards of excellence are continually debated and extended, its internal goods can evolve. This is precisely why they resist capture by fixed, prefabricated values.

While metrics and quantified knowledge can strengthen an institution and help to align it with shared purposes, deflection and value capture are not tools in this sense. As I use them, they describe ethically, institutionally, and socially enervating phenomena that have become structural features of the modern university. They name shifts in attention, diversions of concern, and displacements of value onto different but also clearly inferior substitutes, all within an institution ostensibly dedicated to higher learning. These substitutions matter because they reorient our attention away from the internal goods of disciplined study toward less meaningful, more easily measured external goods.

The problem with these types of displacements and substitutions is not the loss of some fixed or original set of values but, as Nguyen puts it, is the nature of the replacements the university now offers:

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prestige, money, and status in place of the goods intrinsic to disciplined study. This substitution has two consequences. For individuals and communities, it weakens their relationship to disciplined study and their capacity to find it meaningful. For the university, it erodes one of the primary justifications for being. If it can offer only external goods, what sets it apart from anything else that promises the same?

Both Diamond and Nguyen situate deflection and value capture within the contemporary university. When philosophers shift from confronting a "difficult reality" to debating philosophical problems, argues Diamond, they are doing what they have been trained to do. They are emulating university-based philosophers, transforming urgent, lived questions into professional puzzles fit for seminar tables and lecture halls. Turning life problems—the difficult facts and realities we all can appreciate—into professional problems, they assume the persona of the professional university philosopher. This, Diamond wryly notes, "is what university departments are for."[25]

Nguyen similarly draws some of his most vivid examples of institutional value capture from university life. He points to the power that grade point averages possess to orient the lives of students and entire institutions, not because GPAs are intrinsically meaningful, but because they serve as convenient heuristics, "easily communicated" within and beyond educational institutions. He also cites the influence of *US News and World Report*'s law school rankings, as studied by sociologists Wendy Espeland and Michael Saunder in *Engines of Anxiety*. These rankings—based primarily on just three metrics: incoming students' GPA and LSAT scores, and graduate employment rates—prompted law schools to align themselves with the rankings and pushed students to prioritize admission to the "best" schools, where "best" is defined entirely by the list.[26]

That Diamond and Nguyen find examples of deflection and value capture in the university is not surprising. They, too, are professional academics. But there are historical and institutional reasons why the university fosters these ethical phenomena. Between 1830 and 1970, the university and the institutional conditions of disciplined study changed in fundamental and unprecedented ways. As the university's

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pursuit of external goods cleaved the institution from the internal goods of disciplined study, deflection and value capture became not just common experiences but defining institutional features.

I began writing *After the University* intent on resolving the discontent at its core. That did not happen. Yet along the way, I found a measure of freedom from the university, encouraged by Freud's admonition that the things we humans create to protect us from ourselves provide us with meaning and make us miserable. For centuries, universities have provided refuge, material support, and institutional legitimacy for intellectual work, while simultaneously constraining and distorting it. By titling this book *After the University*, I am neither lamenting a decline nor celebrating a collapse. I am pointing to the possibilities presented by our present upheaval. The modern university turned higher learning into a credentialing device and allowed acquisitiveness to overwhelm the goods and values of disciplined study—all under the banner of the unassailable good known today as "higher education." As that illusion unravels, new openings arise: We can claim disciplined study and higher learning as the necessary goods that they, in fact, are—and that they are worth doing well, not simply as the means to satisfy basic material needs, reproduce social orders and labor forces, occupy leisure time, or serve human capital.[27] After the university is now.

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INTERLUDE I

The University, Technology, and the Magic of Credentials

On Sunday, June 10, 2012, Helen Dragas, a Virginia Beach real estate mogul who was rector of the University of Virginia Board of Visitors, announced that President Teresa Sullivan and the board had "mutually agreed" that Sullivan would resign. Speaking to vice presidents and deans shortly after announcing the decision, Dragas explained that the coming revolution in higher education required not just "incremental, marginal change" but radical transformation. Sullivan, she suggested, had been slow to respond to "challenges" that, though Dragas left largely unspecified, posed an "existential threat" to UVA.[1]

After several weeks of protests by faculty, students, and staff, the Board of Visitors relented: Sullivan could stay. But as we gathered on UVA's quadrangle, the Lawn, and met in town hall meetings, we learned that this existential threat concerned the purportedly disruptive effects of digital technologies on the university, including their potential to make higher education cheaper and more efficient by substituting technology for teachers. In a series of emails (brought to light as the result of a Freedom of Information Act request by the student newspaper, the *Daily Cavalier*), Dragas, fellow board members, and a small group of wealthy alumni had been sharing articles from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* prophesying a digital revolution. Whether too slow or too skeptical, Sullivan had yet to embrace the future—in 2012, it was MOOCs, or massive open online courses,

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that would upend higher education—and that put UVA at a competitive disadvantage.[2]

I opposed the coup because I considered it an abuse of the Board of Visitors' power and found its faith in MOOCs delusional. Yet standing on the Lawn, holding signs with my two kids, listening to earnest, sometimes rousing speeches, I felt a strange detachment. What did we, individually and collectively, have to believe about UVA and the university to compel us to stand here in the sticky Virginia heat?

The Dependency of Intellectual Practices

After the failed coup, I set aside the book I had been writing, a history of search technologies titled *Google Before Google*. I wanted to understand what had driven so many people to fight for UVA that summer. The book I did write, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (2015), was about the rise of the research university in another age of media glut and technological change. Around 1800, amid anxieties about information overload and the proliferation of print, a group of Prussian bureaucrats and philosophers wanted to translate a humanist educational ethos into institutional form, replete with state funding, committees, and clearly articulated norms. They wanted to reinvent the *universitas* as a living community devoted to truth, trust, and disciplined study for a modern media environment that seemed fragmented and overwhelming. "True learning and scholarship," wrote the philosopher J.G. Fichte in his 1809 proposal for a new university in Berlin, emerged from a collective devotion to the "art of putting disciplined reason to use."[3]

The early Prussian reformers' fervor for the unity of knowledge was matched by their desire to build healthy institutions that could make that unity real. Their idea of a university combined a living community of scholars, a sanctuary of disciplined study, with a bureaucratic machine. Even as they argued about the ends of higher learning, they didn't fall back on a nostalgia for a past when purposes were clearer and values richer. At their best, these debates moored norma-

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tive arguments about shared ends, practices, and values to a particular world and the challenges of building actual institutions. As part of the very institutions they hoped to reform, reformers were also well positioned to recognize both functional and ethical failures—how their institutions did not work and how they deformed lives. They diagnosed deflection and value-capture as features of the institutions they were building. The very administrative structures and bureaucratic hierarchies that sustained the communities and goods of disciplined study also imperiled them.

Writing at the tail end of the Web's heady era of democratic promise and at another moment of edtech hype, I wrote an apology for an institution—an apology in the classical Greek sense of a formal justification. Critics who dismissed the modern university as a bureaucratic behemoth, I thought, judged it deficient according to criteria that were impossible without the rise of the state-based research university and its bureaucratic organization. Rightly understood, the university remained a bulwark of trustworthy knowledge for our own bureaucratic age. Its distinctly modern cultivation of intellectual practices, epistemic virtues, and intellectual community offered a remedy for our own epistemic crises. This, I told myself, was why I had stood on the Lawn. This was why the university was worth fighting for.

Then I read Tressie McMillan Cottom's *Lower Ed*: *The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges*. A sociologist who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Cottom linked the explosive growth of for-profit colleges—fueled in part by federally backed student loans, a wildly disproportionate share of which are owed by black men and women—to policies that incentivize the pursuit of higher education at all costs. Although predatory institutions directly profit from these policies, established wealthy institutions make the entire system possible. Elite higher education, in Cottom's words, "legitimizes the education gospel," while "lower ed . . . absorbs all manner of vulnerable groups who believe in it."[4] Whether private or public, big or small, or PhD- or BA-granting, institutions of higher learning in the United States exist in a system in which their rank and value are relative.

What must one believe in to be willing to borrow tens of thousands

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of dollars in order to pursue a certificate of completion—a BA? What would a university have to promise to compel someone to do that? What would a bank have to believe to extend this person credit? Or the US government, to guarantee such loans en masse, amounting to $1.62 trillion?[5] And what would a society have to believe to sustain the system that keeps it all going?

Credit, Credentials, and the Belief in Higher Education

The words *credit* and *credential* derive from French and Italian words meaning "belief" or "trust" and are related to Latin nouns for "loan" or "a thing entrusted to another" (*creditum*) and "that which entitles to credit" (*credentialis*), as well as the verb "to trust" or "to believe" (*credere*).[6] Credit is a form of trust that one person or group has in another, serving as the basis for the former to provide the latter with something (typically goods or money), with the expectation that the person entrusted will return it within a certain period. In a credit-based relationship, belief and trust become habit. In the United States, this type of relationship underpins the financing as well as the ethos and legitimacy of higher education.

For centuries, universities have benefited from the belief that they could provide prospective students, as well as institutions (like the Roman Catholic Church, the state, the military, and the aristocratic classes), with particular goods (such as social status, discrete skills, knowledge, and money). But it was not until the nineteenth century in Germany and, then over the course of the twentieth century in the United States, that a belief emerged in the capacity of universities to shape not just the lives of social elites but the lives of a nation and its people as a whole—and to organize society by apportioning social advantage and rank.

Leading a life according to a gospel is one thing, but remaining ignorant of or refusing to recognize one's own dependence on nonbelievers is another. After reading Cottom, I understood in a way I previously had not. The scholarly life into which I had settled depended on the circulation of credit and credentials. My daily habits, as well as my family's health insurance, relied on what other people believed

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about universities. My initial answer to the question as to why I had stood on the Lawn was insufficient. I had not explained the extent to which the nineteenth-century Prussian Professor's life was intertwined with the sprawling administrative apparatus and social system of the Prussian system of public education: the professional path, the university, the credential, and the regulations, rules, and institutions that made them all real. The German university constituted a new social order, and this new social order and the shared belief in it afforded the Professor the institutional and material conditions that sustained his scholarly life.

By teaching and writing about the university, defending its continued relevance, I did not just depend on the university. I fostered belief in it. I had, as Cottom writes, a priestly role, shepherding "people's collective faith in themselves and their trust in social institutions."[7] The relationship, first forged by nineteenth-century Prussians between institutions of higher learning and the allotment of jobs, status, and stability, was mutually reinforcing. Universities, in particular, became not just a legitimate but the primary means of social sorting and the "partitioning of resources and prestige."[8]

The Currency of Belief

If I recognized myself in those nineteenth-century Prussian professors, I saw my dad in the Prussian university statistics, where the fathers "without a university education," who, despite having never enrolled in a university, nonetheless felt the force of the institution. Although he never shared in the gospel of higher education, my father bore burdens of a life without a BA: the economic precariousness, the vocational alienation, the psychological and physical exhaustion, the indignity. He would come home from the plant where he made car parts, complaining about "some kid with a piece of paper who didn't know a damn thing." These credentialed "kids" moved in to manage people like my dad. They would move on, but he stayed put.

The Prussian faith in the university provides a mirror image of my dad's relationship to the gospel of higher education. His faith came not from his confidence in higher education's moral edification and per-

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sonal benefit, its collective good and worthwhileness. It came from his experience of the cost and humiliation of not living in its grace. Born in Kansas in 1941, just before the dawn of the "golden age" of American higher education, he lived just outside the university's promise—a football scholarship foregone with the birth of his first child, a working life of job after job but never a profession, five children who followed his same path—and perhaps that is why he never mistook the spectacle for the thing itself. He never confused higher education with real know-how or reliable signs of intellectual desires. His lack of a BA was both a privation and a possibility. He never experienced the university's power to deflect and capture values, to alienate, and to disappoint, because he never expected anything from it other than the credential he never got.

Although he had neither the money nor the time to engage in study as he imagined it ought to be practiced, my dad never stopped learning and considered himself a scholar. The young Karl Marx's description of the contradiction of higher learning in mid-nineteenth-century Prussia fit my dad's situation: "If I have a calling to study but no money for it, I do not have a calling to study—in other words, not an effective or actual calling. On the other hand, if I really have no calling to study but have the will and the money, then I have an actual calling for it."[9]

The relationship between money and higher learning extends beyond the ability to pay for an education. The revolutionary power of modern higher education derives, in large part, from its credentialing authority. Backed by the state, universities give individuals credit that guarantees them as both intellectually and socially competent, reliable, and trustworthy. Credentials, Nietzsche has the young companion in his Basel lectures remark, are a form of currency. Being educated means being "current" or "up to date." "The true task of education, in this view, is to form people who are, as the French say, *au courant*—the same way a coin is *courant*, or "valid currency."[10] Like money, the magic of credential currency is its capacity to circulate unencumbered across social domains while maintaining its value. And outside our home, my dad was never credible. Because he did not have a BA, he was not recognizable as intellectually and socially competent, reliable, or

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trustworthy. He felt forever stuck—in debt and in a job that did not match his abilities—and unable to move freely in the world.

Like money, credentials stand in for particular qualities and values. This leveling function checks patrimony and patronage, but it also transmutes the specific goods of disciplined study, such as the joy of mastering German two-way prepositions, into a competition for social rank. It produces degrees of superiority and fits people within a social position. Fixing the value of all values, it makes excellence in disciplined study an individual possession that is relative and rival. Like the magical power of money, credentials turn one thing into another. Educational institutions convert intellectual desire and abilities into a credential currency that then circulates and can be exchanged for a job, income, and a secure, good life. They are a final form of deflection and value capture.

Although the rise of the credential society made historical sense and afforded real salutary social changes, it was ethically flawed from the start and over time became practically dysfunctional. In the case of Prussia, dysfunction resulted because the system of higher learning failed to educate the kinds of civil servants that liberal reformers insisted the nation needed. Universities, if they were to realize the reformers' aspirations, had to educate. Furthermore, the system suffered periodic crises. By the 1830s—and again in the late 1870s and 1890s—the expectation that the university's primary purpose was to produce professionals for the state (and, later, society more broadly) led, as detailed in chapter 4, to periodic "surpluses" of students—a conclusion only possible if the value of higher learning is reduced to its outputs. Ethically, the credential currency system required people to constantly appraise their own worth in the rigid, simplified terms of the system—that is, examinations and credential attainment. It pushed people along a path that was best trodden narrowly and speedily, with focused determination and without wandering. It encouraged an education dominated by fixed goals, skills, deflection, and value capture. By linking the development of intellectual abilities and desires so tightly to the idea of property, a currency one possessed and could exchange endlessly, the system of education pushed out other

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possible relationships and purposes. The purportedly necessary link between higher learning, professional position, and, quite simply, jobs was both empirically tenuous and ethically deformative. It encouraged a desire for access to a system that could never satisfy the very desires it cultivated—because of insufficient financial and political support, bureaucratic incompetence, or simply because it was never meant to satisfy—while supporting the accumulation of educational capital.

The Deformative Effects of Credential Currency

Credential currency fails not only outside the university but inside it as well. It deforms the very practices and goods it ostensibly elevates into universal values. Universities turned disciplined study, for example, into an instrument by which to rank and allot status. The fruits of disciplined study—published books and essays, for example—became a circulating currency in the competition for prestige and a place in the institutional and professional hierarchy.

The failures of credential currency can be observed most generally, however, in the two ethical phenomena I have traced in previous chapters. Deflection and value capture emerged with the modern research university. Both objective institutional features and subjective phenomena, they express the contradictory roles—to educate and to apportion social status— that the university assumed when it became the "basis" of social currency.[11] My own professional pathos does not proceed from overspecialization, the pressure to produce (i.e., to publish), or the rank and rivalry of institutional hierarchies. It emanates, rather, from the professional compulsion to profess faith in the university as a social system, a system that makes my scholarly life and work possible. The magic of credentialism not only transforms internal goods into endlessly exchangeable currency; it also creates places of abundance for an accidental elite.

The contradictions of the modern university lie in these gaps, between what we collectively believe about higher education and the realities of our institutions, between our knowledge of universities as social institutions and, for me at least, the quotidian experience of

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teaching and writing in an institution that, despite it all, still supports disciplined study. But what would happen if this faith in higher education were to collapse?

We might currently be witnessing this loss of faith. Before the Trump administration's assault on higher education, Gallup reported in 2024 that confidence in higher education among Republicans today was "nearly a mirror image" of what it was in 2015, when 56 percent of Republicans reported that they had "a great deal or quite a lot of confidence," and 11 percent reporting having little or none. In the latest poll, only 20 percent expressed confidence, while 50 percent reported having little or no confidence. Since 2015, the percentage of independents (down from 48 percent in 2015 to 35 percent) and Democrats (down from 68 percent to 56 percent) reporting that their confidence in higher education has fallen as well.[12]

What would universities do if they were forced to "support themselves by their own intrinsic products rather than by the currency value of their degrees"?[13] That is, what would universities do if a college degree were no longer the basis of our social order, the means by which social position is allotted?

In a recent course, "Is It Cheating to Use ChatGPT?," my students and I discussed a *Harvard Crimson* survey of Harvard College's 2024 graduating class that showed almost half of the respondents reported having cheated while at Harvard, almost twice the number of the previous year, with 31 percent reported having used ChatGPT in ways they understood as cheating.[14] What, I asked students, might be the relationship between the reported increase in incidents of "cheating" and using ChatGPT and students' beliefs about the purpose of college? One conclusion we collectively drew was that using ChatGPT can sometimes be more efficient than not using it, and sometimes a particular grade (on an assignment, an exam, a course) can be more valuable than anything a student might learn. Given the costs students were incurring, in terms of both money and time, and their actual goals—getting into business school, applying to medical or law school, landing a good job—individual assignments or entire classes could be more of a burden than an opportunity to learn. My students related to their

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time at UVA, like Erik Baker writes of Harvard students, in "transactional terms: an exchange of time and tuition dollars for credentials and social connections more than a site of valuable learning."[15] If educational institutions are valued in terms of how efficiently they distribute information and credentials, then universities are not profitable investments. The process of higher learning is too unpredictable, its outputs too opaque and unreliable, its results not manageable. In this relationship in which college is merely a means to an end, and courses, exams, and quizzes are primarily obstacles, cheating makes a certain ethical sense.

As though it were a universally recognized practical law, credentialism guides not only what we strive for but also our dreams of escaping it. Recently, I attended a dinner to discuss generative AI and UVA's plans for engaging it. An hour in and loosened up by good food, wine, and a shared table, several of us, including the provost and vice provost, offered a proposal: a program in which one hundred students, led by a core group of faculty, would study whatever they wanted and without grades. At the end of four years, UVA would issue these students degrees and translate their work into legible grades, credits, and a degree understandable to the rest of the world. It would, opined the provost, be a "real education." In such an education, using ChatGPT to cheat or to avoid doing the work of learning would not make sense. The goal of higher education—a credential—would already be guaranteed. In the time between arriving on campus and graduating, there would only be students' desire to learn or not to learn. Instead of being another obstacle on their way to a degree, those four years would be a time of disciplined study to be enjoyed for its own sake. Even in our inebriated dream, we could only muster a brief reprieve for a select few. Who, if anyone, would join us?

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