

University Mischief-Makers

by Mark G. Brennan

The New Global Universities: Reinventing Education in the 21st Century, Bryan Penprase, Noah Pickus, Princeton University Press, 2024, pp. 352, \$32.00 hardcover.

Money burns holes in pockets. Universities don't have pockets. But they do have billion-dollar endowments. They also have battalions of non-academic administrators who will squander a school's seed corn on absurd schemes to justify their suspect existence. As a long-time adjunct ethics professor at New York University, I can submit my personal bank statements to prove my school pays its instructors only what their union, the UAW, demands. Student instruction matters less than food courts and climbing walls when acquisitive hands commandeer the endowment. At both Yale and New York University, two cases studied in *The New Global Universities*, administrators armed with MBAs and PowerPoint decks decided campus extension would be a good use of the donors' funds entrusted to their care.

These busybodies knew from their business school marketing classes that merely expanding incoming classes

would cheapen their schools' exclusive brands. So to protect their imprint as they grew for growth's sake, NYU built a dystopian campus in Abu Dhabi while Yale birthed—and then buried—one in Singapore. One need read no further than this book's subtitle, *Reinventing Education in the 21st Century*, to recognize this economics textbook solution in search of a problem. Revolutionary reinvention, the spirit animating DEI mandarins, academic advisors, and mental health grifters parasitically destroying today's universities, has now warped the minds of their presidents and boards of trustees too.

Authors Bryan Penprase, founding faculty member at the aforementioned Yale-NUS College (RIP), and Noah Pickus, associate provost at Duke, aimed this book at their "colleagues in higher education" (read: not professors) as well as the "growing legion of entrepreneurs" who can turn their utopian subtitle into a plan of action.

I have watched the university's reinvention firsthand over the last two decades, albeit in microcosm. When I first started, syllabus templates for the required courses I taught included book chapters and academic articles. I recall how they required students to read entire books in the antediluvian pre-reinvention era of the 1990s. Now I cringe as I send out today's reinvented syllabi, which include YouTube videos, popular magazine articles, and blog posts. Reinvention isn't necessarily a good thing, unless you're an overambitious university administrator buffing up your annual self-review.

Yale and NYU both recognized the value of a liberal arts education before they imprudently exported it to climes otherwise hostile to free inquiry and open debate. The authors point out that 23 percent of American-educated Nobel prize winners between 1999 and 2008 attended liberal arts colleges, not research universities like, say, NYU or Yale. Small liberal arts colleges have also produced 27 percent of U.S. Presidents and 35 percent of Supreme Court Chief Justices. Those fixated on a college education's instrumental value should note that corporate CEOs also happen to be "disproportionately" liberal arts graduates.

AQ readers already understand the value of a liberal arts education. Now academic entrepreneurs and spendthrift university bureaucrats can use those marketing riffs as justification for the "growing imperative for universities to invest abroad." (60) Why hire a few more philosophers or physicists on your

home campus when you can spend even more money franchising the brand on the other side of the globe?

NYU's Abu Dhabi campus fits seamlessly into the "NYU Global Network" and its platitudinous aim to "deliver on the aspiration to educate global citizens." (42) Yale mustered its competitive spirit to one up NYU's empty koan with a mission statement in the form of a haiku:

A community of learning,
 Founded by two great universities
 In Asia, for the world. (65)

Let's ignore Yale's failure to obey the rigorous syllable structure that makes a haiku a haiku and heartily applaud its good intentions instead.

Sadly, and yet to no outside observer's surprise, both schools learned the revolutionary social values regnant on their main campuses don't necessarily travel well. NYU has encountered "unresolved issues" at its Abu Dhabi outpost. The authors teach those who know absolutely nothing about anything that "norms regarding homosexuality and gender relations ... are very different in New York and Abu Dhabi." Yale's student newspaper predicted the school would not be able to "ensure the quality of day-to-day education" at a campus "10,000 miles away," especially one located in a country "where public demonstrations and chewing gum are banned."

Yale's "Department of Extraneous Expansion" disagreed. It figured Yale-NUS's inaugural president, Pericles

Lewis, armed with his “three books out from Cambridge University Press,” his Ph.D. in literature from Stanford, and “his background as a Canadian” could intimidate a regime that appreciates a good caning. Unfortunately, the “profound mismatches in culture between Yale and NUS” that never showed up on any of Yale’s rosy financial projections or in Lewis’ three books on modernism doomed the partnership. (65) You won’t hear mention of that foreseeable misfire in Yale’s alumni donation requests. Yale’s student editorialists should take a victory lap around New Haven while chewing gum, just to rub it in.

Thankfully, *The New Global Universities* looks beyond the mere reinvention of its subtitle. And here we find more interesting, less predictable examples. Readers worried about the demise of liberal arts education thanks to blinding STEM hyperspecialization, stultifying business programs, and mortifying woke curricula will find reason for hope at India’s Ashoka University and Massachusetts’ Olin College of Engineering, two of the other six case studies.

Ashoka co-founder Ashish Dhawan learned the value of a well-rounded education during his career in private equity, where spreadsheet dexterity trumps classical pedagogy. According to Dhawan, societies need those “who are willing to question the status quo, who are independent thinkers and who know how to write well” in order to function. Dhawan launched Ashoka after he discovered “India doesn’t have enough of that.” (121) Those of us toiling

in America’s college classrooms, plagued by soporific groupthink seminars and AI-written homework assignments, see that exact need too.

Unfortunately, Ashoka ran into the same cultural brick wall that both NYU and Yale hit. The school has striven nobly “to move India from being just a consumer of knowledge to a major producer of knowledge” since its founding (131) even as a new headwind has approached. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party’s elevation of the Hindu religion as Indian society’s highest calling through *Hindutva* threatens to stifle, if not crush, secular advances like liberal arts education. (135)

You will find no piles of deadwood inhabiting faculty offices at Olin, which eschews tenure. (85) Nonetheless, the school still receives more than 150 resumes for each job opening. During their reappointment and promotion interviews, faculty must answer two questions that would drive the typical tenured professor, every university’s most reactionary element, into a padded cell: “Where are you going as an individual?” and “Where is the institution going?” (85)

The students Olin attracts likewise bring fresh, unfettered expectations of what a liberal arts education entails. While they focus on engineering, Olin students take liberal arts courses at nearby Wellesley College since Olin’s administration understands “it’s a different experience if you take poetry with a bunch of engineers in the room.”

(191) Olin's solicitation of student input for curricular design sounds like fun for the students, if not for those of us who understand 19-year-olds might not grasp the *telos* of a liberal education. In any event, it's refreshing to learn of the existence of Olin students who obsess about something other than their sacrosanct GPAs, career prospects, or Instagram feeds.

Penprase and Pickus deserve commendation for their thorough research and logical narrative presentation. But be warned. Their business jargon electrified the half of my brain where I keep my finance MBA just as it tortured the other half where I store my history Ph.D. Bizspeak like innovate, leverage, revolutionizing, flexibility, impact, differentiate, conceptualize, innovate (again!), and collaborative—all in one paragraph no less—doesn't belong in the English language. And certainly not in a book about liberal arts education. (226) Then again, the authors' target audience probably includes far more MBAs than humanities Ph.Ds. I chose the book after my Ph.D. brain compartment fell for its main title without noticing the red flag my excited MBA brain threw up after it read the book's subtitle. We all live by Grandpa's hoary advice, "Don't judge a book by its cover." We ignore Grandma's more insightful corollary at our peril: "Think long and hard about its title and subtitle before reading it."

Those with humanities Ph.D.'s can use *The New Global Universities* as a field guide to the entrepreneurial administrators reconfiguring the modern uni-

versity while "imagining a new world" with few constraints. (29) Those same philistine entrepreneurial administrators, who prioritize growth over education, can festoon their PowerPoints with the empty words they learn here, even as the book's important lessons shoot right over their laptops.

The United States has only recently begun to grasp the fruitlessness of nation building as a foreign policy goal. Iraq and Afghanistan reminded those who had forgotten the United States' earliest example of nation building futility, Reconstruction, of the economic, administrative, and, most importantly, cultural impediments to global expansion. Let us hope universities learn these historical lessons before their administrative mischief-makers blow their endowments.

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