

“Mark Edmundson’s lively account of the way we educate now offers enjoyment and enlightenment.” —HAROLD BLOOM

WHY TEACH?



IN DEFENSE OF A REAL EDUCATION

MARK
EDMUNDSON

AUTHOR OF *WHY READ?*

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WHY TEACH?

In Defense of a Real Education

Mark Edmundson

B L O O M S B U R Y
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Introduction

Midway through the last decade of the twentieth century, American higher education changed. Colleges and universities entered a new phase in which they stopped being intellectually driven and culturally oriented and began to model themselves on businesses. They sought profit; they sought prestige: the more the better. To be sure, there had always been a commercial side to American higher education. But in the mid-nineties, universities began dropping pretenses and putting profit ahead of intellectual and (dare one say it?) spiritual values. This book reports on the change and attempts to combat it.

What does it mean for a university to stop seeing itself as having something like a spiritual mission and begin acting like a commercial venture? Many things: The shift the universities underwent was complex and had multiple dimensions. There were major technological changes, changes in the intellectual climate. As this book unfolds, it will offer a comprehensive picture. But we might begin by saying that at the center of it all was a shift in the role of students. Before 1995 or so, students had about as much say in the shaping of the university as members

of a fairly well established religious community have in determining its moral codes and forms of worship. Which is to say, they had almost none. The professors ran the show: What was important to them was what mattered.

But things changed. Starting in 1960, the American birthrate began to decline. In 1974, it hit its lowest point in sixty years. The baby boom was emphatically over. Twenty years later, the kids born in the seventies were ready for college, but there simply weren't enough of them to supply the schools that had so happily expanded to accommodate the baby boom population.

The university of the early nineteen nineties was still geared to the enormous swell of kids born after the Second World War. When that previous population finally made its way through—like a juicy meal passing the length of a boa constrictor—the schools began to see trouble. How were they going to complete the freshman class? How were they going to pay for all the tenured professors and the entrenched deans brought on to educate the prior generation? Colleges can expand readily enough—hire more professors, hire more administrators, build more buildings. But with tenure locking professors in for lifelong employment, how do you get rid of surplus faculty when the market declines? What do you do with the dorms that threaten to stand empty? How do you fill all those potentially vacant seats in Psych 101?

The answer was obvious. The universities were going to have to pursue students much as businesses pursue customers. They were going to have to treat their prospective students as potential buyers. And they were going to have to treat their existing students as customers too, for students can always switch brands: They can always up and transfer. So securing customers and

getting them to maintain brand loyalty became the order of the day. “Most colleges don’t have admissions offices anymore,” a college administrator told me in 1993. “They have marketing departments.” Even those schools that had more applicants than places in the first-year class had to market aggressively. They were competing for prestige and position with other schools of their caliber. They were also competing for full-tuition payers. Everyone wanted the kids who weren’t going to petition them for a full ride or nag for discounts come tuition time. Ultimately, too, the schools were competing for future money: The best students tend to become successful, and then (with luck) committed donors. “The primary purpose of Yale University,” a Yale faculty member said not long ago, “is the production of wealthy alumni to further enrich Yale University.”

How did the students respond to being treated like customers? They didn’t seem to mind at all. From what one could see, they loved it. They were long accustomed to the consumer role. From the time that they were toddlers they’d been the targets of ads and ads and more ads. They were used to being addressed in the teasing, whimsical, and ultimately sycophantic advertising mode that the universities now felt compelled to use. The kids apparently adored being fawned on: They’d grown up in front of the television, being treated like monarchs of the marketplace. When the universities followed suit and began to address them with similar deference, the kids ate it up. On came expensive student centers, lavish gyms, gourmet dining, and slews of student service workers, deans and deanlets to cater to the whims of the customers. Universities began to look like retirement spreads for the young.

No surprise that when the kids got to the classroom they

demanded a soft ride: They wanted easy grading, lots of pass-fail courses, light homework, more laughs. If the professors didn't oblige, the kids flayed them on the course evaluations. Those evaluations had an impact on tenure, promotion, salary, and prestige. By and large, the professors caved.

In the old days, when the university was a quasi-churchly institution, the professors largely called the shots. (The ecclesiastical style of architecture at Yale and Duke and numberless other schools makes the old religious affiliations clear.) The professors disseminated scientific knowledge that could improve daily life and help us to understand nature. They promulgated literary and philosophic wisdom that initiated young people into the complexities of the adult world.

But in the new university all this changed. Now the professors were the people who gave the grades, period. They needed to be humored at all times and hearkened to occasionally. But anyone who revered them for their wisdom or wanted to emulate them was tacitly understood to be half-cracked. The word *professor* intoned in a certain way began to mean "learned fool."

As the professors' influence receded, the world of consumerism and entertainment enhanced its powers. In the mid-nineties, the kids were socialized into the consumer mentality by their new, two-hundred-station TV sets (and of course by their parents). The first chapter of this book, "On the Uses of the Liberal Arts," describes the confrontation between the TV-driven consumer ethos that the kids brought with them from home and the intellectual ethos of the university. At the time, many commentators ascribed the decline in American higher education to the advent of programmatically debunking cultural theory. Freud, Marx, and Derrida were at the root of all evil. If debunking theory did have an effect, it was largely because of how well

it rhymed with the attitude of dismissive superiority that TV and commercial culture overall tended to stimulate.

Ten years later, in the middle of the new millennium's first decade, things changed again. Now kids weren't only being shaped by the belch-and-buy spirit of TV, but by the hurry-up consumer ethos of the Internet, which they patrolled with un-sleeping vigilance. (We create our tools, Marshall McLuhan famously said, and then our tools create us.) To put it crudely: The students had been sped up. Now they were consuming, watching, enjoying, buying at a hyper-accelerated pace—living in overdrive. What they couldn't do was slow down: slow down to observe and examine, slow down to think. The second chapter, "Dwelling in Possibilities," tells how the new computer technology administered an adrenaline shot to the already robust rebellion against real education. Now the consumer worldview was more confident, further insinuated, tougher to budge. What was actually a product of culture—the buy-buy, do-do ethos—was beginning to feel more like a precipitate of human nature. And fighting what people believe to be natural is never an easy thing.

This book tries. It's addressed not to presidents and deans and boards of directors and trustees; it's not addressed to the chair of the faculty senate or to the consortium of student leaders. Most of these people are by now part of the problem. The book is addressed to individual teachers and most of all to students and their parents. It puts a diagnosis on the table and then offers strategies for dealing with it. In these pages I talk about how to get yourself a good education at an American college or university, even when the forces of the school itself are arrayed against you. (The major enemy of education in America now is American education, university education in particular.) There are

astounding opportunities to be had at almost all American colleges, and this book aims to inspire students to seek them out. I also want to offer teachers some resources to fight against the current modes of dull conformity that afflict us.

For education now is not for the individual. It is not geared to help him grow to his potential and let him find out what he truly loves and how he might pursue it. No. Education now is a function of society. This is the theme of the first section of the book, “The Shift.” Current schooling, from the primary grades through college, is about tooling people to do what society (as its least imaginative members conceive it) needs done. We are educated to fill roles, not to expand our minds and deepen our hearts. We are tooled to slide into a social machine and function smoothly with a little application from time to time of the right pleasing grease. Education now prepares us for a life of conformity and workplace tedium, in exchange for which we can have our iPhones, our flat screens, our favorite tunes, Facebook, and Twitter. But what we want is real learning—learning that will help us see the world anew and show us that there could be more to our lives than we had thought.

Conservative jeremiads against the university tend to declare that universities are not doing their socializing job comprehensively enough. They want higher education to feed the demands of the American economy overall and of private enterprise in particular. The authors of such tracts are inclined to feel that one idea subversive of the status quo is one too many. In my view, universities are still functioning far too much in the service of conformity. Whether the academic idiom in play is conservative or purportedly radical—traditional or post-post-structuralist—schools now educate the mind and not the heart. The curriculum has become arid and abstract: Preprofessionalism

is the order of the day. What Keats memorably called “Soul-making” is absent from current higher education. It needs to be restored.

How do you educate yourself, or, if you’re a teacher, how do you try to educate others? The next section of the book is called “Fellow Students,” for I think of myself as being a student of my discipline, as all teachers must be. In “Fellow Students,” I talk to people who are still in school and trying to get themselves an education despite the odds. I offer plenty of advice: about how to read, about how to deal with professors, about how to struggle against a decadent university culture. I talk about the kind of education you can find in a classroom at its best, which is epitomized for me by what my great teacher Doug Meyers offered. I ask young people to ponder the virtues of failure and to think about what they can gain educationally from sports—and what they can lose. I reflect on what’s called global education and I let students know why I think they should all—and I mean all—at least consider becoming English majors.

The final section of the book is called “Fellow Teachers,” and it’s addressed to my comrades in what can often seem like one of the impossible professions. I encourage people who teach in universities—and especially in humanities departments—to stop thinking of themselves as creators of so-called new knowledge (or “fresh paradigms,” as the current jargon has it) and start thinking of themselves as teachers. I’d like them to imagine themselves as potential liberators, not only of the students in their classes but of the people outside of school who might attend their lectures or read what they write. I urge them to stop the professional posturing and prestige chasing and liberate themselves and others into the fields of joy and salutary change that

the liberal arts at their best provide. I'd like them to step up and oppose the commercialization of their universities. I'd like them to think less about their careers and more about the hopes that brought them to the study of great books to begin with. I'd like some of them to cut the shit. I'd like all of us to have a little more fun.

I'd like us to blow a hole through the university's ethos of entertainment and training for success and to bury its wearisome work-hard, play-hard frat-boy ideology. We should blast away the customer-coddling deans and student service hacks; blast past academic pretension and the hunger for "standing in the field." Blast university presidents so afraid of offending a potential donor that they won't raise a word in behalf of social justice or political sanity. Blow away the trustees who think that they're a corporate board of directors and will not rest until their schools resemble Walmarts. Blast them all. And while you're doing it, have a good time. Because knowledge is joy. Creativity is ultimate freedom. Real thought is bliss. *Sapere aude*, as the old thinkers liked to say: Dare to Know; Dare to Be Wise!

THE SHIFT

LIBERAL ARTS & LITE
ENTERTAINMENT (1997)

TODAY IS EVALUATION day in my Freud class, and everything has changed. The class meets twice a week, late in the afternoon, and the clientele, about fifty undergraduates, tends to drag in and slump, looking disconsolate and a little lost, waiting for a jump-start. To get the discussion moving, they usually require a joke, an anecdote, an off-the-wall question—When you were a kid, were your Halloween getups ego costumes, id costumes, or superego costumes? That sort of thing. But today, as soon as I flourish the evaluation forms, a buzz rises in the room. Today they write their assessments of the course, their assessments of *me*, and they are without a doubt wide awake. “What is your evaluation of the instructor?” asks question number eight, entreating them to circle a number between 5 (excellent) and 1 (poor, poor). Whatever interpretive subtlety they’ve acquired during the term is now out the window. Edmondson: 1 to 5, stand and shoot.

And they do. As I retreat through the door—I never stay around for this phase of the ritual—I look over my shoulder and see them toiling away like the devil’s auditors. They’re pitched

into high writing gear, even the ones who struggle to squeeze out their journal entries word by word, stoked on a procedure they have by now supremely mastered. They're playing the informed consumer, letting the provider know where he's come through and where he's not quite up to snuff.

But why am I so distressed, bolting like a refugee out of my own classroom, where I usually hold easy sway? Chances are the evaluations will be much like what they've been in the past—they'll be just fine. It's likely that I'll be commended for being "interesting" (and I am commended, many times over), that I'll be cited for my relaxed and tolerant ways (that happens, too), that my sense of humor and capacity to connect the arcana of the subject matter with current culture will come in for some praise (yup). I've been hassled this term, finishing a manuscript, and so haven't given their journals the attention I should have, and for that I'm called—quite civilly, though—to account. Overall, I get off pretty well.

Yet I have to admit that I do not much like the image of myself that emerges from these forms, the image of knowledgeable, humorous detachment and bland tolerance. I do not like the forms themselves, with their number ratings, reminiscent of the sheets circulated after the TV pilot has just played to its sample audience in Burbank. Most of all I dislike the attitude of calm consumer expertise that pervades the responses. I'm disturbed by the serene belief that my function—and, more important, Freud's, or Shakespeare's, or Blake's—is to divert, entertain, and interest. Observes one respondent, not at all unrepresentative: "Edmundson has done a fantastic job of presenting this difficult, important & controversial material in an enjoyable and approachable way."

Thanks but no thanks. I don't teach to amuse, to divert, or

even, for that matter, to be merely interesting. When someone says she “enjoyed” the course—and that word crops up again and again in my evaluations—somewhere at the edge of my immediate complacency I feel encroaching self-dislike. That is not at all what I had in mind. The off-the-wall questions and the sidebar jokes are meant as lead-ins to stronger stuff—in the case of the Freud course, to a complexly tragic view of life. But the affability and the one-liners often seem to be all that land with the students; their journals and evaluations leave me little doubt.

I want some of them to say that they’ve been changed by the course. I want them to measure themselves against what they’ve read. It’s said that some time ago a Columbia University instructor used to issue a harsh two-part question. One: What book did you most dislike in the course? Two: What intellectual or characterological flaws in you does that dislike point to? The hand that framed those questions was surely heavy. But at least they compel one to see intellectual work as a confrontation between two people, student and author, where the stakes matter. Those Columbia students were being asked to relate the quality of an *encounter*, not rate the action as though it had unfolded on the big screen.

Why are my students describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? And why am I coming across as an urbane, mildly ironic, endlessly affable guide to this intellectual territory, operating without intensity, generous, funny, and loose?

Because that’s what works. On evaluation day, I reap the rewards of my partial compliance with the culture of my students and, too, with the culture of the university as it now operates. It’s a culture that’s gotten little exploration. Current critics tend

to think that liberal arts education is in crisis because universities have been invaded by professors with peculiar ideas: deconstruction, Lacanianism, feminism, queer theory. They believe that genius and tradition are out and that PC, multiculturalism, and identity politics are in because of an invasion by tribes of tenured radicals, the late-millennial equivalents of the Visigoth hordes that cracked Rome's walls.

But mulling over my evaluations and then trying to take a hard, extended look at campus life both here at the University of Virginia and around the country eventually led me to some different conclusions. To me, liberal arts education is as ineffective as it is now not chiefly because there are a lot of strange theories in the air. (Used well, those theories *can* be illuminating.) Rather, it's that university culture, like American culture writ large, is, to put it crudely, ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images. For someone growing up in America now, there are few available alternatives to the cool consumer worldview. My students didn't ask for that view, much less create it, but they bring a consumer *weltanschauung* to school, where it exerts a powerful, and largely unacknowledged, influence. If we want to understand current universities, with their multiple woes, we might try leaving the realms of expert debate and fine ideas and turning to the classrooms and campuses, where a new kind of weather is gathering.

From time to time I bump into a colleague in the corridor and we have what I've come to think of as a Joon Lee fest. Joon Lee is one of the best students I've taught. He's endlessly curious, has read a small library's worth and seen every movie, and knows all about showbiz and entertainment. For a class of mine he wrote

an essay using Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus to analyze the pop group the Supremes. A trite, cultural-studies bonbon? Not at all. He said striking things about conceptions of race in America and about how they shape our ideas of beauty. When I talk with one of his other teachers, we run on about the general splendors of his work and presence. But what inevitably follows a JL fest is a mournful reprise about the divide that separates him and a few other remarkable students from their contemporaries. It's not that some aren't nearly as bright—in terms of intellectual ability, my students are all that I could ask for. Instead, it's that Joon Lee has decided to follow his interests and let them make him into a singular and rather eccentric man; in his charming way, he doesn't mind being at odds with most anyone.

It's his capacity for enthusiasm that sets Joon apart from what I've come to think of as the reigning generational style. Whether the students are sorority/fraternity types, grunge aficionados, piercer/tattooers, black or white, rich or middle class (alas, I teach almost no students from truly poor backgrounds), they are, nearly across the board, very, very self-contained. On good days they display a light, appealing glow; on bad days, shuffling disgruntlement. But there's little fire, little passion to be found.

This point came home to me a few weeks ago when I was wandering across the university grounds. There, beneath a classically cast portico, were two students, male and female, having a rip-roaring argument. They were incensed, bellowing at each other, headstrong, confident, and wild. It struck me how rarely I see this kind of full-out feeling in students anymore. Strong emotional display is forbidden. When conflicts arise, it's generally understood that one of the parties will say something sarcastically propitiating ("Whatever" often does it) and slouch away.

How did my students reach this peculiar state in which all passion seems to be spent? I think that many of them have imbibed their sense of self from consumer culture in general and from the tube in particular. They're the progeny of a hundred cable channels and videos on demand. TV, Marshall McLuhan famously said, is a cool medium. Those who play best on it are low-key and nonassertive; they blend in. Enthusiasm, a la Joon Lee, quickly looks absurd. The form of character that's most appealing on TV is calmly self-interested though never greedy, attuned to the conventions, and ironic. Judicious timing is preferred to sudden self-assertion. The TV medium is inhospitable to inspiration, improvisation, failures, slipups. All must run perfectly.

Naturally, a cool youth culture is a marketing bonanza for producers of the right products, who do all they can to enlarge that culture and keep it grinding. The Internet, TV, and magazines now teem with what I call persona ads, ads for Nikes and Reeboks and Jeeps and Blazers that don't so much endorse the capacities of the product per se as show you what sort of person you will be once you've acquired it. The Jeep ad that features hip, outdoorsy kids whipping a Frisbee from mountaintop to mountaintop isn't so much about what Jeeps can do as it is about the kind of people who own them. Buy a Jeep and be one with them. The ad is of little consequence in itself, but expand its message exponentially and you have the central thrust of current consumer culture—buy in order to be.

Most of my students seem desperate to blend in, to look right, not to make a spectacle of themselves. (Do I have to tell you that those two students having the argument under the portico turned out to be acting in a role-playing game?) The specter of the uncool creates a subtle tyranny. It's apparently an easy

standard to subscribe to, this Letterman-like, Tarantino-inflected cool, but once committed to it, you discover that matters are rather different. You're inhibited from showing emotion, stifled from trying to achieve anything original. You're made to feel that even the slightest departure from the reigning code will get you genially ostracized. This is a culture tensely committed to a laid-back norm.

Am I coming off like something of a crank here? Maybe. Oscar Wilde, who is almost never wrong, suggested that it is perilous to promiscuously contradict people who are much younger than yourself. Point taken. But one of the lessons that consumer hype tries to insinuate is that we must never rebel against the new, never even question it. If it's new—a new need, a new product, a new show, a new style, a new generation—it must be good. So maybe, even at the risk of winning the withered, brown laurels of crankdom, it pays to resist newness worship and cast a colder eye.

Praise for my students? I have some of that too. What my students are, at their best, is decent. They are potent believers in equality. They help out at the soup kitchen and volunteer to tutor poor kids to get a stripe on their résumés, sure. But they also want other people to have a fair shot. And in their commitment to fairness they are discerning; there you see them at their intellectual best. If I were on trial and innocent, I'd want them on the jury.

What they will not generally do, though, is indict the current system. They won't talk, say, about how the exigencies of capitalism lead to a reserve army of the unemployed and nearly inevitable misery. That would be getting too loud, too brash. For the pervading view is the cool consumer perspective, where passion and strong admiration are forbidden. "To stand in awe

of nothing, Numicus, is perhaps the one and only thing that can make a man happy and keep him so,” says Horace in the *Epistles*, and I fear that his lines ought to hang as a motto over the university gates in this era of high consumer capitalism.

It’s easy to mount one’s high horse and blame the students for this state of affairs. But they didn’t create the present culture of consumption. (It was largely my own generation, that of the sixties, that let the counterculture’s search for pleasure devolve into a quest for commodities.) And they weren’t the ones responsible, when they were six and seven and eight years old, for unplugging the TV set from time to time or for hauling off and kicking a hole through it. It’s my generation of parents who sheltered these students, kept them away from the hard knocks of everyday life, making them cautious and overfragile. It was their parents who demanded that teachers, from grade school on, flatter them endlessly so that kids are shocked if their college profs don’t reflexively suck up to them.

Of course, the current generational style isn’t simply derived from culture and environment. It’s also about dollars. Students worry that taking too many chances with their education will sabotage their future prospects. They’re aware of the fact that a drop that looks more and more like one wall of the Grand Canyon separates the top economic tenth from the rest of the population. There’s a sentiment currently afoot that if you step aside for a moment to write, to travel, to fall too hard in love, you might lose position permanently. We may be on a conveyor belt, but it’s worse down there on the filth-strewn factory floor. So don’t sound off, don’t blow your chance.

But wait. I teach at the famously conservative University of Virginia. Can I extend my view from Charlottesville to encompass the whole country, a whole generation of college students?

I can only say that I hear comparable stories about classroom life from colleagues everywhere in America. When I visit other schools to lecture, I see a similar scene unfolding. There are, of course, terrific students everywhere. And they're all the better for the way they've had to strive against the existing conformity. At some of the small liberal arts colleges, the tradition of strong engagement persists. But overall, the students strike me as being sweet and sad, hovering in a nearly suspended animation.

Too often now the pedagogical challenge is to make a lot from a little. Teaching Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," you ask for comments. No one responds. So you call on Stephen. Stephen: "The sound, this poem really flows." You: "Stephen seems interested in the music of the poem. We might extend his comment to ask if the poem's music coheres with its argument. Are they consistent? Or is there an emotional pain submerged here that's contrary to the poem's appealing melody?" All right, it's not usually that bad. But close. One friend describes it as rebound teaching: They proffer a weightless comment, you hit it back for all you're worth, then it comes wafting out again. Occasionally a professor will try to explain away this intellectual timidity by describing the students as perpetrators of postmodern irony, a highly sophisticated mode. Everything's a slick counterfeit, a simulacrum, so by no means should any phenomenon be taken seriously. But the students don't have the urbane, Oscar Wilde-type demeanor that goes with this view. Oscar was cheerful, funny, confident, strange. (Wilde, mortally ill, living in a Paris flophouse: "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of the other of us has to go.") This generation's style is considerate, easy to please, and a touch depressed.

Granted, you might say, the kids come to school immersed in a consumer mentality—they're good Americans, after all—but

then the university and the professors do everything in their power to fight that dreary mind-set in the interest of higher ideals, right? So it should be. But let us look at what is actually coming to pass.

Over the past few years, the physical layout of my university has been changing. Our funds go to construction, into new dorms, into renovating the student union. We have a new aquatics center and ever-improving gyms stocked with StairMasters and Nautilus machines. Engraved on the wall in the gleaming aquatics building is a line by our founder, Thomas Jefferson, declaring that everyone ought to get about two hours' exercise a day. Clearly even the author of the Declaration of Independence endorses the turning of his university into a sports-and-fitness emporium.

But such improvements shouldn't be surprising. Universities need to attract the best (that is, the smartest *and* the richest) students in order to survive in an ever more competitive market. Schools want kids whose parents can pay the full freight, not the ones who need scholarships or want to bargain down the tuition costs. If the marketing surveys say that the kids require sports centers, then, trustees willing, they shall have them. In fact, as I began looking around, I came to see that more and more of what's going on in the university is customer driven. The consumer pressures that beset me on evaluation day are only a part of an overall trend.

From the start, the contemporary university's relationship with students has a solicitous, nearly servile tone. As soon as someone enters his junior year in high school, and especially if he's living in a prosperous zip code, the informational material—the advertising—comes flooding in. Pictures, testimonials, vid-