

Academic Freedom

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There have been many books written recently about the transformation of universities into corporations, reflecting many different perspectives. Cary Nelson, a professor and president of the American Association of University Professors, adds to the list with his *No University Is An Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). In this volume Nelson discusses the threat of the corporate model, the growing dependence on contingent faculty, weakening shared governance, Right-wing polemics, and various financial crises. Nelson takes on all comers (for example, he critiques in an even-handed fashion both Stanley Fish and David Horowitz, one an observer from inside and the other a non-academic looking from outside the university) who have criticized the university, its governance, its societal roles, and the place of the faculty. The book is full of examples of the weakening of academic freedom and how such situations have been challenged or not.

Nelson clusters much of his concern around the corporate university. For example, he concludes, “Many of the values higher education has traditionally promoted – from free inquiry to a commitment to the public good – cannot remain credible if a university adopts the employment policies of a ruthless corporation” (pp. 58-59). Nelson laments the likely failure or loss of interest of the corporate university in “educating students to be critical participants in a democracy” (p. 73). While some may applaud the end of such an educational agenda, the implications are dire: “The flawed public image of our ethical status undermines academic freedom

and diminishes every element of our mission. A university that acts like a corporation cannot expect to be viewed as anything else” (p. 78). In this sense, *No University Is Like An Island* joins a growing chorus of case studies, memoirs, and research about the implications of the corporate university model.

The difference with Nelson’s book, one that is certainly part memoir of his work with the AAUP, is its focus on faculty (individually and collectively) responsibility for what has happened in the academy. There has been a loss of collective memory amongst the faculty: “The loss of institutional memory among the faculty makes for a wonderful opportunity for higher education’s corporate managers: they can remake higher education without objection from a faculty that does not know the difference” (p. 74). Nelson attributes this to tenured faculty who have become self-absorbed and the growth of and reliance on contingent faculty: “Two generations of tenure-track faculty – obsessed exclusively with their academic disciplines – have been distracted and inattentive as the character of campus decision making has been gradually transformed. This trend has been accelerated by the growing number of contingent faculty lacking the job security that undergirds academic freedom and shared governance” (p. 105). One result of such inattention is the potential loss of tenure altogether, creating grand challenges down the road. First, there is the problem of how academic administration will evolve: “The world without tenure is a world of administrative fiat – first over all elements of shared governance, then over academic freedom as it applies to faculty speech in public and in the classroom” (p. 92). Second, there is the matter of just what a future faculty might look like. Nelson states, “We have seen the future, and the faculty is not there” (p. 194).

Despite a lot of pessimism or cynicism, Nelson constantly reminds the reader that there is always the possibility of taking corrective action. He pounds home this point by charting the changes that have occurred with

the AAUP in the past few decades, as it has become a more proactive watchdog about academic affairs. Nelson argues that we need to learn from our mistakes: “Bad decisions indeed tend to haunt us, remaining teachable moments that last for decades” (p. 125).

The sense of academic memory and action is what one takes from the book. Indeed, from my own perspective of serving as a program chair and SIS Council Chair I have become concerned about the rapid growth in self-assessment, planning, and other related activities that engage more and more of our time. My concern is not a need to resist such demands, but more about how we can transform the process into useful individual and collective evaluation that strengthens our work rather than distracting us from our research and teaching. This is something I will be wrestling with over the summer as I prepare for a new academic year. I believe we have a long way to go before we learn how to do such work sensibly and in a fashion that protects our own roles as university faculty.

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