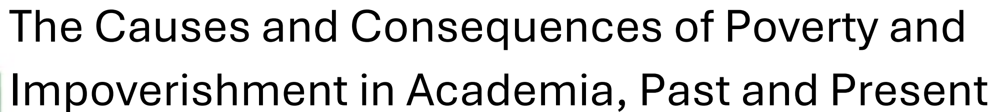
The Causes and Consequences of Poverty and Impoverishment in Academia, Past and Present



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In 2024, or 2000 or 2010, we have no collective or historical memories of student poverty as a constant in the recent and distant past. We have no memories that new PhDs regularly faced a job crisis at least as severe as that of the last decade. But there were almost no tenure-track positions in the late 1950s to early 1960s, in the first half of the 1970s, and at various times in the 1980s-1990s-2000s. Data are sketchy. Memories are real. Still, the radically uneven literature pits one golden age of neverland against another.[1]

Contemporary recognition of the plight of many graduate and undergraduate students, and adjunct faculty, redirects attention to poverty in academia. Renewed attention falls on *some* of the *causes* but not on the *consequences and contradictions.* Typically, we repeat myths and stereotypes. Our vision is too narrowly focused and short-sighted. We exaggerate the novelty of the multiple, interacting problems. We simplify understandings of causes and consequences, and the range of possible *mediations.* We should not think in terms of one or two overarching *solutions*.

Commentaries on student poverty do not make necessary connections to age, social class, race, gender, and ethnic patterns across the United States and in the birth nations of international and migrant students. For example, inquiries today should begin with sociologist Matthew Desmond's (2023a) critical account *Poverty, by America*. Desmond (2023a, 2023b) is especially good on the contradictions and the special case of the United States.

[1] See Graff (2024j, forthcoming b, and References below).

Although dated, the best works on the subject of the economic power of schooling remain the following: W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson's (2004) *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling*, their (2005) "Vocationalism in Higher Education: The Triumph of the Education Gospel," and Lazerson's (1998) "The Disappointments of Success: Higher Education After World War II." Contrast these publications with Jon Shelton's (2023) ahistorical and ideological *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. Taken together, these works remind us that higher education is also part of a political economy, as both cause and an effect.

Surprisingly *and* unsurprisingly, the topics of this special issue do not feature in such diverse books as Christopher Newfield's (2008) *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* or its close companion from 2016, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*; Steven Brint's (2018) *Two Cheers for Higher Education: Why American Universities Are Stronger Than Ever—and How to Meet the Challenge They Face*; or, Michael M. Crow and William B. Dabars's (2015) *Designing the New American University*. The most recent former elite university presidents' tomes also ignore pressing issues that permeate "student life," today's rhetoric of marketing and communications, *and* student lives at all levels: Nicolas Dirks's (2024) *City of Intellect: The Uses and Abuses of the University* and Derek Bok's (2024) *Attacking the Elites: What Critics Get Wrong—and Right—About America's Leading Universities.* How little direct attention students receive in the higher education literature is striking especially in contrast to newspapers and social media.

The only book-length collection of essays is a dated one edited by Cary Nelson (1997): *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis*, which has a near exclusive focus on graduate students' organizing. That is one important element that is seldom placed in its larger contexts.

Many scattered essays and an awkward genre that some call "Quit-Lit" do not meet the urgent need for in-depth, systematic—both quantitative and qualitative—studies. Frank Donoghue's (2008) *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* presumes the plight of the humanities to be unique and depends on undefined buzzwords. Leonard Cassuto's (2015) *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix* is out of touch with higher education, disciplinary, and political economic realities. The humanities are an aggravated but not unique case, in fair measure a consequence of our own actions and especially inactions. The social and natural sciences share most of the problems of the last half century, but each disciplinary cluster remains isolated from the others.

None of the overflowing but underwhelming book series on higher education—from Johns Hopkins University Press, Cornell University Press, West Virginia University Press, Bloomsbury, Lexington/Rowman, and Littlefield—include original studies of these issues.

In this essay, I first point to patterns of change *and* continuity in higher education past *and* present. That is absolutely necessary for any consideration of reactions and actions now. "Poverty in academia" is an age-old pattern and problem that shifts over time and types of institutions. We forget, for example, that both the Morrill Act of 1862 and the post-World War II GI Bill were anti-poverty *and* economic development efforts but almost exclusively for white men.

I then reframe the history of higher education by taking a critical eye to commonly repeated myths or at best partial truths about the conflicting and contradictory promises, practices, and

results of higher education, especially with respect to labor and poverty. I conclude with a consideration of the incalculable costs and consequences.

A Required First Course

Consider images and myths.[2] The foundations of Western universities in medieval times and their growth in early modern Europe are inextricably associated with poverty-stricken "scholars," from Paris to Rome, Florence, Madrid, Oxbridge, and elsewhere. The religious elements of university foundations are underscored, but many early students sought administrative careers. Over the *longue durée* of colleges, the poverty of many students and both ministerial and part-time faculty was foundational. *Conceptions of scholars and paupers were inseparable* (see, for example, Grendler, 2002; LaVolpa, 1988; McClelland, 1980).

When Atlantic-coast British immigrants and their descendants imported English and Scottish higher education to the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, that pattern transferred, too, from Harvard, William and Mary, Princeton, Penn, and Columbia to early public universities like Virginia. Among our lore is the image of Mark Hopkins, president of Williams College, trained as a lawyer, philosophizing on "one end of a log" to a humble, poor undergraduate at the other end.

Parenthetically, when young women were allowed to enroll in Oberlin in the 1830s, they were required to wash the male students' clothing—*without pay*—one day each week. Women's uncompensated "work" was part of co-education.

Of course, there were very few racial, ethnic, or religious "minority" students in the "age of the democratic liberal arts colleges." Far more Black slaves labored in both private and public higher education before and after the Civil War than attended colleges until the twentieth century. They were poor and impoverished, their presence only recently and partly acknowledged (see, for example, Wilder, 2013; Cohen, 2012).

These were not yet the colleges of the wealthy, merchants, industrialists, professionals, rising middle class, or the "exceptionally talented few." Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century institutions of higher education were "the engines of mobility" or the "basis of democratic opportunity" only for a relatively small number, overwhelmingly white and male.

The self-deluding myths of a "golden age of the liberal arts college" and "great books" propagated by generations of university presidents and amplified in particular by English and humanities professors obscure the basic fact that undergraduate education has almost always been vocational. This ranged from training clergy, then lawyers and teachers, to the vocational Morrill Land Grant Act's over-riding emphasis on agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. Pre-professional and professional "training" have long histories.

Since at least the mid-nineteenth-century, universities have been tied *and* self-promotingly tied themselves to *ideals and myths* of both democracy and individual social mobility. The inherent contradictions are insufficiently noted. The dangers of overpromising and overselling

[2] On historical myth, see Graff (2008, 2015a, 2022q, 2022r, 2022u, 2022x, 2023d, 2023o, 2023p, 2023x, 2023z, in progress a).

rank high among colleges' and universities' contradictions. We periodically reap the consequences of "Slogan U" but perhaps never as dramatically as in the last decade.[3]

These foundations changed irregularly and inconsistently throughout the twentieth century. With the partial exception of some land-grant public universities, and some progressive and religious schools, mainline higher education became more exclusive and elitist especially until the post-World War II period.

These issues are not well represented in histories of education. I refer interested readers to David F. Allmendinger, Jr.'s (1975) *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* and the best single-volume history of American higher education, Paul Mattingly's (2017) *American Academic Cultures: A History of Higher Education*. Contrast Allmendinger, Jr.'s work with that of W. Bruce Leslie (1992), *Gentlemen and Scholars: College and Community in the "Age of the University," 1965-1917*, with its ideological, under-researched mythmaking.

To address some of these questions, I wrote *Reconstructing the New "Uni-versity" from the Ashes of the "Multi- and Mega-versity"* and editing a collection of original first-person essays, *Changing Paths of Academic Lives: Revising How We Understand Higher Education/Universities, 1960s to 2020s and Beyond*.

Ignored by most recent critics of higher education, Thorstein Veblen's (2015) classic *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen* remains very important and relevant. With far too little attention to political economy, costs of living, extent of poverty among other forms of student, staff, and instructor strains of insecurities, historians of higher education—and today's writers—continue to emphasize the "age of 'emergence' of 'the modern university.'" Compare, for example, Laurence R. Veysey's (1965) *The Emergence of the American University* and his own seldom noticed revisionist (1981) "Book Re-View"; Compare Julie A. Reuben's (1996) *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* and the ahistorical Jonathan R. Cole's (2009) *The Great American University: Its Rise to Prominence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected.* The many repetitive but frequently cited books by Clark Kerr, Ernest Boyer, and Derek Bok ignore these issues, as well.

Precedents to the Present and Persistent Problems

"The making of the modern university," among its major taglines, is a maze of many myths. Let me be clear. By "myth" I do not mean complete falsehood or lie but at best a partial truth. Myths do not propagate and attract support without a degree of apparent accord with some people's sense of reality.

The early "age(s) of opportunity" for higher education were also the great eras of segregation, exclusion, and selective elitism. Uninformed recent and current debates about affirmative action and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) do not understand how recently quotas and then their persisting less formal transformations—Black, Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, women, transgender, other racial and ethnic, and geographic—were largely if never

[3] See References for my essays on slogans and sloganeering in higher education. See also Graff (in progress a).

completely removed. They seldom confront the fundamentally ideological and often self-interested or even prejudicial they remain.[4]

In the lexicon of democratic liberalism, to understand universities, labor, and poverty, we also need to probe concepts, myths, and the actual operations of old and newer forms of market economies and job markets. The *job market*—an inappropriate term of both classical and neo-liberal economic "theories" applied to academic labor, which has never been an ideal or even functional "free-labor market"—has rarely been strong since the historically unrepresentative post-World War II spurts of uneven and unsustained expansion.

Among an overwhelming literature on higher education, I suggest beginning with the relevant works of geographer and political economist David Harvey and economist and historian Thomas Piketty. How little the topics appear in the contemporary scholarly promotion of public-funded public and private university expansion. Is it surprising or contradictory how little the full shelf of books on "universities in the marketplace" addresses either labor or poverty?[5]

Universities never functioned for all as a free, open, or equitable "market." What I, as a historian, call the "myth of decline" is omnipresent among writers from both right and left about post-World War II universities.

Insufficiently appreciated and studied are the roles of federal, state, and local direct and indirect funding and support, first in the expansion of colleges and universities and second in employment opportunities, the reduction of student indebtedness and poverty, and the lessening the "opportunity costs"—to appropriate another curious (and contradictory) term—of graduate studies and entry-level, full-time tenure-track positions. In the US context, this is more the exception than the norm over the long term.

The "ages of expansion" for higher education were all defined by relatively massive government expenditures beginning with the founding of state universities with the 1862 segregationist and vocational Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 and new public universities founded on land illegally appropriated from Indigenous Peoples. Expansion continued with non-central elements of the segregationist public welfare and economic development Work Projects Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression and rose to new heights with the segregationist and, in-practice, sexist GI Bill following the end of World War II. Many very likely unemployable veterans chose to enroll in post-secondary schooling. The emergency, "temporary" housing that many universities built for them is an instructive example as are work-study programs.

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[4] The major historical exceptions to these generalizations included Progressive Era University of Wisconsin, the parts and the whole of City University of New York (CUNY), and The New School, especially for refugees from eastern Europe and then old and new leftists. To begin, see Hoeveler (2016), Edel (1990), Traub (1994), and Rutkoff and Scott (1986). We need more encompassing critical histories of CUNY, its parts and the whole, and the contradictions of The New School, past and present.

[5] Harvey's and Piketty's works are too many to list. In contrast, see Clark Kerr's many books, including *The Uses of the University* (1963) and *The Great Transformation in Higher Education, 1960-1980* (1991). Compare with Christopher Jencks and David Riesman's (1969) work. See also Bok (2003), Washburn (2005), Smith (2004), Richard S. Ruch, (2001), and Stein, ed., (2004). Little different are the self-styled left or progressive critics like Fabricant and Brier (2016), Newfield (2008), and Bunch (2022).

“Expansion” and both the explicit and implicit promise of individual mobility are most commonly associated with the sporadic, uneven flow and ebb of public higher education—and the private responses and the overlaps—since the 1950s. As commonly perceived, this was not a single wave. Public and private wealth periodically flowed into both public and private institutions. Along with notions of “markets,” we cannot simply oppose or dichotomize abstract notions of “public” and “private,” nor can we directly correlate an individualistic ideology of upward movement through education with the actual lives of those not attending college, “dropouts,” “flunk-outs” (note the rhetoric again), or “successful graduates” at Bachelors, Masters, PhD, or professional-degree levels.

Academic labor and poverty cannot be separated from public—as well as private—funding opportunities. This is often a matter of timing, chance, and individual variation.

Internationally, the United States is an outlier, an “exception” as in so much else. Especially but not only in the West, the modern expansion of higher education was also first associated with the emergence of public institutions in the nineteenth century. Most dramatically and significantly, beginning in the 1930s but increasing substantially from the 1960s, higher education was central to the flows and ebbs of the welfare state in its varying, inconsistent forms. Private and public, individual and collective are less often opposed. Although never a perfect set of relationships, there is typically less opposition between the individual and the collective. Consequently, student poverty and opportunities have been less apparent until recently. They need to be understood through the opaque lens of “social safety nets.”

An Illustrative/Not Unrepresentative Account from the 1960s-1970s

When I entered Northwestern University in 1967, it had only recently dropped a range of racial, religious, and ethnic quotas. In so doing, it increased its scholarships and loans and recruited nationally for the first time. My professors almost unanimously spoke about great changes, largely if not yet completely for the better.[6]

At the same time, there were many poor—however defined or measured—students. My own middle-class family had little to spend on my higher education. I paid primarily with university and state scholarships and state loans and summer pay as a union laborer in my native Pittsburgh’s declining steel mills and public parks. I learned life-long lessons in those non-classrooms from sometimes amazingly wise instructors who had not graduated from high school.

From a lower middle-class family, my future wife received scholarships, took out loans, and held work-study positions year-round. That was the only way she could afford to attend a selective—in fact, any—university. I paid for her first eye examination out of my tiny monthly allowance. When tuition rose from $600 to $800/quarter or $2,400/year in 1969, the student body screamed bloody murder.

Many of the graduate teaching and research assistants of the 1960s held more than one university job. My dormitory counselors were all full-time graduate students across the

[6] For my experiences, see Graff (2024j, 2022i, 2022m, 2022r, 2022u, 2022v, 2202z,
2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023h. 2023q, 2023u, 2023x, 2023z. 2024f, 2024g, 2024h, 2024i).

disciplines. They supplemented fellowships and either or both teaching and research assistantships with that work.

At Ohio State University, where I ended my full-time teaching career, and at other institutions, now college juniors and seniors (and occasionally sophomores) mainly with room-and-board compensation (but no additional stipend) replace graduate students as inadequate supervisors of fellow undergraduates only a year or two younger. Universities save money while students suffer socially and materially. Poverty and impoverishment are inextricably interrelated.

In the late 1960s, teaching assistants—all graduate students—were not paid well, but the degree of abuse pales in comparison to the 1980s and especially the 2000s. Although there are no systematic data, those with whom I speak agree that assistants had lower numbers of teaching sections and closer supervision. Their efforts were better coordinated. Support of students and quality of instruction are inextricably interrelated.

In a rare but transformative example, at least one exceptional case was not paid in cash but in course credits. In the third quarter of my junior year, all of my undergraduate advisor's doctoral students were in the United Kingdom doing dissertation research. He turned to me, inviting me to teach two discussion sections of his British history course. Unable to use university funds, he instead gave me credit for two full courses: one to teach, the second to do extra reading and meet with him weekly to discuss each class session. This was a major step on my uncertain but successful path to becoming a professor.

My future wife and I each graduated with student loan debts. Deferred until I completed my PhD degree in 1975, I repaid the bank that allocated State of Pennsylvania higher education loans $15/month over several years. Of course, our $3000 debts do not compare to the 1990s and 2000s levels of tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars. But in the 1960s and 1970s, we were "poor" undergraduate and graduate students, living on fellowships, assistantships, and part-time jobs around the year.

For context and comparison, in the first half of the 1970s, we paid between $120 and $150 for rent each month and $10 each week for food at the grocery store. A celebratory meal at a French restaurant with wine cost $25 for two. My $2500 plus tuition Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and my wife's University of Toronto $500 bursary and part-time hourly work supported us for our first year.

We benefitted enormously by moving in 1970 to Canada and the University of Toronto where tuition was $500/year and even as landed immigrants (not resident aliens, as in the United States) we had free health care for five years. No US universities or states provided such foundational social supports, especially for young unemployed or under-employed students.[7]

After a first year on fellowship, I spent the next four on varying combinations of university and national Canadian graduate fellowships, academic year and summer research assistantships, and an extramural teaching fellowship. My graduate department had no undergraduates and therefore no traditional teaching assistants. In my final year, I was hired to

[7] See Desmond (2023) on "American exceptionalism." US higher education can only be understood in a comparative perspective. The place of international students demands much more careful study. It is revealingly rare.

teach one graduate seminar in my area of expertise, a superb learning experience. I have not heard of another such opportunity.

With a nod to "American exceptionalism," in the summer of 1973, after participating in the Newberry Library Institute in Social, Demographic, and Family History, supported by grants from the Spencer and Mellon Foundation, I taught a graduate summer school course at Northwestern University. That opportunity stemmed from a collegial relationship between my graduate advisor and his colleague at Northwestern. These exceptions cannot be institutionalized. They do suggest opportunities and alternative possibilities.

There Were No "Good Old Days"

My first full-time position was tenure-track, along with more than 120 other new or recent PhDs in 1975. This exceptional group's early careers began at the brand-new, expansionist, and falsely promoted "interdisciplinary" branch of the University of Texas at (actually near) Dallas (UT-Dallas). There were also adjuncts, all year to year, including, in the offensive phrase, "trailing spouses," some male, more female. My starting salary was $13,000 for the nine-month academic year. Most faculty couples were two earners with many beginning or waiting to begin families. There was no university daycare or paid family leave.

These were not poverty wages but they were not comfortable wages either, especially with the combined weights of student-loan payments and job insecurity until tenure.

Few of us were aware that a tenure-track assistant professor in a Texas public university could be terminated without full review before the end of the third year. Third and fifth year "full reviews" constituted what we came to call "the great massacre" of the untenured. Exceptional assistant professors were terminated. Some left for other careers. Both common patterns demand study (see Graff, in progress b).

Yet, confronting the worse tenure-track job market in history up to that point, UT-Dallas was a plum position. One Princeton PhD, political economist occasionally quipped, "Aren't we all someone famous's best student?" He was at least partly correct. That was no guarantee of job security, then as now (see Graff, 2023e).

More than 40 years later, I completed my career as Professor of English and History, and inaugural Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies at the almost 150-year-old, land-grant Ohio State University, 2004-2017. I achieved security while students—graduate and undergraduate—the ever-present non-tenured—of a confusing and confused variety of appointments—and many tenure-track assistant professors did not.

Almost all of my own doctoral students in several disciplines across the arts, humanities, and education who desired tenure-track positions achieved them, and then tenure, but not always at first. Some moved from one university position to another, more appropriate one. One student chose to remain in a primary and secondary school associated with a major university. Another chose wisely to leave a tenured position to return to teaching literature at an elite private secondary school. One extremely talented student left her academic profession because of a near complete absence of jobs in her field.

A significant handful chose, wisely for themselves, not to seek full-time academic positions. In some cases, this decision involved considerations for factors such as family location, partner or spouse's job, and a growing family. All my students nurtured worthwhile, satisfying, and successful careers. In each case, they successfully translated their studies into successful work. In this, they parallel some of my 1970s graduate-school peers who chose not

to complete doctoral degrees, and some of my founding UT-Dallas colleagues who were either denied tenure or opted out of academia after close examination of its strengths, limitations, and opportunities.

There are many lessons in their life paths. On the one hand, the crises of the present are not without precedent. On the other hand, as my own successful career confirms, professional and material forms of security and scholarly achievement are not always consistently synonymous or accompanied by fair or equitable professional or personal treatment, psychological comfort, and associated elements of "academic success."[8]

Approaching the Present

The present can only be understood in historical context. If not unprecedented, the problems including poverty *and* impoverishment among graduate and undergraduate students, non-tenure-track contractual and adjunct faculty, staff, and even some tenured faculty with special needs and large loan debts has grown significantly. Both poverty and impoverishment cross economic, political, social, and cultural boundaries.

This must also be comprehended in the context of the accelerating decline of higher education especially since the 1990s. By decline, I refer both to the inaction and failure to meet challenges of the historical moment by colleges and universities. And the related but very confused diminishing image and loss of faith in the economic value and personal and social worth of higher education.

Handwringing and whining, loudest among the humanities, help no one except, perhaps, the authors of unknowledgeable, self-serving essays that fill *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. If I may generalize boldly, with each succeeding week or month, most universities—large and small, public and private—seem more paralyzed and more distant from reality, and especially from their students, faculty, and staff whose needs are real and increasing (see Graff studies included in References).

Not the first such convergence of trends—as in recessions, depressions, and wartimes—the situation is made dramatically worse by the failure of universities in general and especially the refusal of the non-professional divisions (that is, fields outside engineering, computer science, business, and the applied sciences) to respond meaningfully and responsibly to changing social, economic, and indeed their own campuses' currents.[9]

Poverty and low wages are persistent conditions in higher education for staff as well as students and some faculty. Full-time, continuing, and commensurate work *was never promised* to students and graduates at any level. The "privilege" of association with the proverbial Ivory Tower presumed to be a reward in itself, substituting or preplacing fair material compensation.

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[8] See Graff (2015a, 2015c, 2022c, 2022h, 2022i, 2022j, 2022n, 2022p, 2022q, 2022r, 2022v, 2022w, 2022x, 2022y, 2022z, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023h, 2023i, 2023k, 2023l, 2023q, 2023v, 2024b, 2024c, in progress b). Compare with the distancing and out-of-touch qualities of Cassuto (2015), Mary Burgan (2006), Furstenberg (2013), and Semenza (2006). The latter is by an assistant professor; he includes "fake" documents. Consider the book titles. Publishers see a market here; is that surprising?

[9]. That, in large part, is the subject of my book in progress, *Reconstructing the New "Uni-versity" from the Ashes of the "Multi- and Mega-versity."* See also Graff (2023i), Knezevic and Graff (2023), and Levy and Graff (2023a, 2023b, 2024).

Over time as well as across campuses, opportunities, support systems, and costs of living—and expectations for the future—vary more than common perceptions allow. We lump when we need to split. Contrary to the usual discourse in the 2020s, their course is variable not linear. We must seek out the commonalities *and* the distinctions not only for time and place, but for undergraduate and graduate students; non-tenure-track part- and full-time, PhD-holding faculty; and early-career professors.

In these contradictions lay some of the *multiple meanings of poverty and impoverishment*. By *impoverishment*, I refer to the inseparable material, social, and physical consequences of poverty broadly defined. My conception embraces the complexly interconnected psychological, intellectual, and cultural consequences for the individuals and their close associates directly involved, but also for their broader array of fellow students and diverse publics.

To reiterate: *there was no golden age with which to compare the present*, as tempting–and as easy—as that is to most commentators. All too often, we have no systematic, longitudinal, or comparative data across public and private universities or student degree levels or different kinds of non-tenure-track teaching faculty. That is among the many reasons why the "problems" and the facts of student and adjunct poverty seem so recent and dramatic. Individual stories are often moving, sometimes powerful, but rarely representative.

Despite that, almost all matters have worsened. That is inescapable. But it must be understood more carefully and in context.

Toward A New Beginning

First, the oversold promise of higher education has run its conflict- and contradiction-ridden course after more than a century and a half of flows and ebbs. Institutions take credit for individuals' success while the unsuccessful are held responsible for their own failure. That is the American Way: one's bootstraps are for sale by the campus.

But today the myth of "promise for all" through higher education but achievement *for some* has run its course. Therein lies the often repeated notion of a popular loss of faith or confidence in the value of college—from the price of tuition (and often hidden fees) to applicants, enrollees, attendance, and degrees conferred. And, of course, implicitly promised but never guaranteed employment is part of the poor bargain. A concern for future employability is what is new to the moment with higher education as a significant source of both poverty and impoverishment individually and collectively, accompanied by declining levels of support for students.

Ideologues on the right misleadingly relate this concern to the suppression of free speech, wokeness, and unchecked liberal and left [sic] professors. In fact, state and private suppression of genuine free speech—including in classrooms—is led by the radical right-wing especially in Florida, Texas, Georgia, Arkansas, and Indiana, and imitated in states like my current home state of Ohio. This suppression, indeed, is a far greater threat to the never firmly established promises of academic free speech for students, staff, and teachers.

On the left, professors who do not know their history or theory point to, without defining, "neo-liberalism," "the corporate university," and the "market-place university." These concepts tell us almost nothing.

Despite the illusions of the impact of the common application, multiple forms of early admissions, "guaranteed" loans, and counterfeit high school college credit courses on increasing access, applications and enrollments decline. Student aid in the form of scholarships, loans, and work study never correlate closely with shifting student numbers or needs. Student aid also declines as a consequence of changing internal and external currents, especially in the so-called but incomplete "public sphere."

We regularly read about the hidden and exceedingly fine print that misleads students and their families about conditions of admissions, fees in addition to tuition, minimum enrollment requirements for the acceptance of financial aid, and much more. Therein appear more causes for student poverty. Federal and state authorities respond tardily to all of these well-known problems of both omission and commission.

As a result, students' course loads decrease while many work at least part-time, and the once four to five years for a BA/BS becomes six to eight or more years, if ever. Tuition does not decline proportionately. Significant flunk-out and dropout rates, especially in the STEM fields, are not reported. Students pressed from at least middle school by school counselors, parents, cultural forces, and widespread university policies that over-admit especially in engineering and business and under-admit not only in the humanities but also in the social and natural sciences flunk or drop out in unacknowledged, substantial numbers. Indeed, the numbers of humanities majors, in particular, by themselves are misleading (see Graff articles from 2021–2024).

As the uneven recovery from the pandemic and many universities' poor responses and guidance continue, students short of expenses often accept the easily available but almost always underpaid and often unsafe part-time opportunities that surround them. Their universities do not step up to meet the needs of their ever-rising tuition paying "customers/consumers." Housing and food prices, on and off campus, rise more quickly than scholarships and loans. Many students have no choice in order to meet their basic needs.

The former president of Ohio State in 2022 promoted her Scarlet and Gray Advantage Plan. Neither a free mileage or credit card program, this plan purported to establish debt-free graduation for all students *without reducing tuition and fees*, a logical and an arithmetic impossibility. With no development plan, funding, budget, or timetable, it covered 125 students of 7500 members of the class of 2026 in its inaugural year. Few students knew about it. With that president's ordered resignation, it is all but forgotten.[10]

We also forget that unlike today, a BS in engineering was typically a 5-year program with one year of *paid* internships or co-ops. Lengthening times for completing degrees across fields, high rates of flunking and dropping out, and increasing student poverty—and intellectual/cultural impoverishment—interact inseparably, weighing heavily on all parties.

Second, the mid-to later twentieth century rise of enrollments and graduates was built on the partial truth or myth "that everyone needed a degree for a good job." For several decades, that conception appeared to hold across most departments and majors. It served as "an independent variable," substantially propelling unprecedented family "investment" in children's education, and levels of both family and individual students' loans. It also built upon

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[10] See Graff (2022b, 2022s, 2022t, 2022y, 2023a, 2023b, 2023r, 2023s, 2023t, 2023v, 2024d, 2024i).

"baby booms." This led directly to what is widely considered a crisis for millions of young and not so young people, who were lured into tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars of indebtedness. Poverty was all but a direct consequence of unregulated university pricing and loan granting, often illegally misleadingly. The Biden bailout plan is inadequate, falsely and illogically condemned as favoring those in most need of assistance and blocked by right-wing courts.

If we adopt the rhetoric and blinders of most economists, the market economies of universities, tuition, and student aid, on the one hand, and the loan economy and job markets on the other, the rise in student poverty and decline in valuation of higher education are all but the direct results of the American equation. Without either or both knowledgeable and responsible university and government response, how could it be otherwise?

Facing the specter—and the realities—of poverty in this context leads millions of undergraduate and graduate students to access the rising numbers of available jobs that do not require a degree or only a two-year degree or certification in computers or aspects of high-tech construction, for example. There are job opportunities that will diminish poverty, but they do not counteract intellectual impoverishment or declining support for educational institutions.

Despite its rhetorical endorsement of markets, higher education in general, and most disciplines and disciplinary clusters in particular, for decades failed to respond to changing conditions and changing students. To assert that the humanities and social sciences neglected to turn their/our so-often recited abilities toward understanding their/own circumstances is a powerful but inescapable indictment. It is one of the recent period's greatest intellectual contradictions.[11]

Third, we see these intersections and contradictions playing out at all levels, not only the most commonly recognized "plight" of PhD students and recent graduate students. The humanities capture the most attention, column inches, and bandwidth across the media. Yet the social sciences and much of the natural sciences share in the vicious cycles of changing perceptions of job markets, admissions policies, social and cultural distortions and misperceptions, unquestioned advantages of STEM, and programs and penalties to other programs in an unnecessary zero-sum game.

Unfortunately, "student interests" and "career aspirations" are not givens but manipulated socio-cultural products. Current widely repeated journalism, such as Nathan Heller's (2023) "The End of the English Major" and its tag-alongs in the *New York Times*, *Inside Higher Education,* and overflowing social media, is based on incomplete information, no historical perspective, and no questioning of assumptions. The English major has not ended nor do "Students Hate English." My undergraduate acquaintances in STEM and business readily attest "I miss reading." STEM students long for cross- or interdisciplinary courses on the history, philosophy, and literature of science and technology. Business students want economic history. Both want more basic communications education. They would prefer a broader, more integrated curriculum.[12]

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[11] On public scholarship and interdisciplinary, see Graff (2015a, 2021c, 2022a, 2022c, 2022d, 2022i, 2022l, 2022p, 2022q, 2022v, 2023f, 2023h, 2023x, 2024g).

[12] Heller (2023) with follow-up work from Paul (2023), Douthat (2023), and Newman (2023). See, for example, Hayot (2021). He cannot distinguish between marketing and actual content.

Non-STEM faculty would like to teach such courses. Engineering and other professional schools will not relinquish or share the budget-driving enrollment credit hours.

University admission policies and budgeting procedures are powerful negative forces. They shape enrollments and the number of majors. Lack of cooperation—with no central leadership—across campuses leads to colleges of engineering and business obstructing their students' abilities to pursue useful and meaningful electives and minors.

So, too, are practices that set departments and colleges or schools directly against each other without moderation or mediation, let alone leadership. Why have not the humanities in particular looked around themselves/ourselves and adjusted to accommodate the breadth of student interests and perceptions of job markets? There are far too few joint or blended majors that cross significant campus lines, many of them intellectually unnecessary.

On the one hand, the non-STEM fields adapt too little. Voices in that wilderness are few but powerful when aired. On the other hand, colleges of engineering use inflexible university budget models to amass all the enrollments, credit hours, and resources that they can. Their universities take no responsibility for maintaining or sustaining the health of the *uni*-verity as a whole in the face of the multi-versity.

As a result, everyone is intellectually and culturally impoverished while the highest levels of material poverty come to undergraduates, graduate students outside STEM, and non-tenure-track instructors, many of them part-time employees without benefits or job security.

Fourth, at the graduate level, the problems are especially acute although rarely understood in historical or meaningful contexts. On one hand, there is the too familiar but continuing (rather than unprecedented) dearth of tenure-track jobs across the arts and sciences. As I argue, history shows that this is recurrent, not novel, and to an extent at least in part predictable.

The limits of serious discussion, proposals, and debates, for example, in the two disciplines I know best, history and English, speak for themselves. Lamentation—whining, crying along the lines of "nobody loves us anymore" but unable to state specifically when they did—mark recent published commentaries. One young scholar who writes that she never planned to pursue doctoral studies, publishes (in poor prose), "I Love Higher Education. It Isn't Loving Me Back" (Leffingwell, 2022). With all due respect, I must ask: who specifically do you expect "to love you back?" How? Why?

Of course, she may be misled by tenured professors at Stanford and Princeton, who either ignore employment issues or propose graduate program reforms unaware that their own institution attempted but ended the same changes more than forty years ago. Should anyone be surprised that a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins expects but not surprisingly does not find serious discussion of the employment crisis at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association?[13]

Far too many intending and continuing graduate students are not advised adequately and responsibly. As a college senior in 1969-1970, I was forewarned, as I was throughout my graduate studies from 1970-1975, about both problems and possibilities of completing the

[13] See Bruggeman (2023). See also Labaree (2023) and Bell (2023). Compare with Leffingwell (2022, 2023)3.

doctorate. I changed major fields of concentration partly as a result of learning the shifting landscape of opportunity.

I was advised to and assisted in preparing myself broadly for the most likely set of possibilities. My major advisors at that time had themselves experienced the job crises of the early to mid-1960s, including the persisting barriers faced by women scholars. They shared their experiences. They led me through conference participation, proposal writing, and publishing articles—and professional modeling and socialization—as part of my training, to use at best an only partially appropriate word, as part of the unwritten or shadow curriculum. For better or worse, they taught me to be and to expect professionalism and collegiality. None of that is part of twenty-first-century currency (see Graff, 2023q, 2024j).

That is a set of patterns about which I seldom hear in the twenty-first century and especially the last decade. Moreover, these patterns exacerbate material poverty and the impoverishment of graduate studies and are transferred to undergraduates especially by graduate-student instructors who replace (to a substantial extent) new ranks of assistant professors at far lower salaries and far lower costs to departments and universities. Overworked, underpaid, and easily expendable, graduate-student instructors take longer to complete their degrees if they in fact do, adding to depressed conditions.

Fifth, in this world of higher education, student instructors—with the awkward title of TA or teaching assistant despite often conducting their own classes—join the expanded and expanding ranks of the non-tenure track, which also include sessional or visiting faculty, contractual or non-contractual faculty, full- or part-time lecturers, adjunct assistant professors, and others. Consider these bewildering and misleading titles, all suggesting their insecurity, impermanence, and precarity. Uncertain wages and variable benefits are clear routes to poverty.

This is the major transformation of the teaching "corps" since the creation of the once novel untenured assistant, (usually but not always) tenured associate, and tenured full professor in the first half of the twentieth century.[14]

Truth and Consequences: The World We Have Wrought, Not the World We Have Lost

It is too soon to access fully the larger intellectual or educational, cultural, and political consequences. They are too many to enumerate but they constitute a powerful set of paths to both forms of poverty and broader forms of impoverishment. The lack of basic historical and civic knowledge, critical reading and writing abilities, and logic permeates our political culture. Multiple declines in higher education stand among the many reasons.

Consider a roster from which to advance discussion and prompt investigation. We know far too little about the direct and indirect causes—long and short term—and consequences. With less than two decades as our usual baseline, we cannot grapple seriously with either short- or long-term trends, effects, and possible responses.

[14] I recall my anti-intellectual father-in-law's bewilderment in 1975 when his son-in-law received his doctorate and became an assistant professor. He asked, why did I study for so many years only to become an assistant to a professor. As in so many ways, academia is often its own worst enemy. See, for example, Graff (forthcoming).

Failure to begin that process all but guarantees continuation and likely exacerbation of the popular and political turns against higher education and education more generally. The dangers of poverty and impoverishment rise and ripple down through public and private educational systems.

As both direct and indirect consequences, twenty-first-century anti-intellectualism and right-wing authoritarianism in general undermine popular understanding of free speech and other Constitutional rights, voting rights, privacy rights, inclusive accurate history, public education, book banning, among much else. This list also includes international and global issues, such as fundamental rights for all (including women and children), poverty, peace, climate change and environmental concerns, and disease and pandemics.[15]

The recent rise in poverty in higher education is inseparably and complexly associated with cultural and political impoverishment. Others may focus on the present and possible futures. In conclusion, however, I underscore the combined contradictions and silences of the principal groups in higher education when it comes to poverty and impoverishment, separately and together. In order, I identify elected officials at the national and state levels; university presidents, provosts, and heads of student life and student affairs; faculty groups on campuses; and national organizations—from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to more specialized scholarly organizations.[16]

On the national and state level, support for expanding student loans and a degree of oversight is contradicted by many officials' (including Democrats) opposition to government paybacks and cancellations of loans. The fallacious arguments about unfair favoritism are illogical, undemocratic, and anti-social. Similarly, oversight of loans, tuition and fees, and scholarships/fellowships is insufficient. The current FAFSA failure is only one case in point.

Few campus leaders address these issues or make developed proposals. They do not understand how silence and inaction undermine their mission-related sloganeering. The powerful realm of marketing and communication ("marcomm," as it identifies itself) has not yet seen sufficient "return on investment" in the sectors of poverty and impoverishment.

What I see as an unwillingness for faculty to cooperate and coordinate on curricular and other issues appears here, too. Despite too rare discussions about falling numbers of graduate students and the lack of jobs for many students (not only doctoral graduates), the lack of regular attention and proposals to address poverty by campus faculty groups, professional scholarly organizations, and the AAUP is damning.

In retirement, I note how few faculty and both graduate students and undergraduates are organized, let alone unionized in 2024. I note how little cooperation—educational as well as political—takes place among organized groups on campuses. We see this especially in California now.

Any call to action, in my view, must begin with communication, cooperation, and collaboration on campuses, across different universities, and with both officials and diverse publics. Can academia turn to genuinely broad education? Dare we not attempt to do that?

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[15] To follow these lines, see, for example, Graff (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022a, 2022d, 2022g, 2022i, 2022l, 2022q, 2022v, 2023f, 2023g, 2023j, 2023m, 2023n, 2023u, 2023x,2023z, 2024f, 2024g, 2024i).

[16] I note that I resigned from both the AAUP and the American Historical Association in 2023 as a result of unprofessional conduct on their staffs' part. Both refunded my membership fees.

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