

# DISTANCED EDUCATION: Fast Times at Ronald McDonald U.

By Jesse Drew

From the large land grant colleges of the Midwest to inner city colleges in urban centers, US educators, academics, philanthropists and activists have managed to lay the groundwork for a system of public higher education—democratic in its admissions and its aspirations. Though far from perfect, these universities stand as vital public spaces for the intermixing of ideas, classes, cultures, and lifestyles. As a faculty member in several public universities, I am saddened to see this valuable American resource in grave danger of being destroyed by a concerted campaign of absorption waged by multinational corporations and their cadre of complicit university professionals.

Nothing from the first 30 years of my life would have indicated that I would ever find myself standing at lecterns in the role of university professor. It is no exaggeration to say that, by now, thousands of students have passed a semester or two before me, perhaps raptly absorbing, hopefully mulling over, possibly even sleeping through my harangues on art and technology, computer techniques and applications, interface design and interactivity, art history, critical theory or documentary film—my words, video clips, computer demonstrations, overheads, and invocations hopefully penetrating their central nervous systems.

I am perhaps a most unlikely candidate for such an occupation, having left home at 15, a graduate of the ninth grade, spending the next decade on industrial assembly lines. In my mind, a professor was a comical and pathetic character. The Mad Professor. The Nutty Professor. Goodbye Mr. Chips. In my favorite childhood show, the stock character known as “The Professor” was senile, with long gray hair and walked around holding an enormous book, coke bottles soldered onto his glasses.

I detested most college students as well. I lived next door to students, who played loud obnoxious music late at night, when I would have to get up at 6AM for my shift at the factory or the construction site. Worse yet, on weekends, I would be confronted with them getting hefty student discounts at the movies, while me and my minimum wage friends paid full price.

But as an avid reader, I found myself at the University Library more and more, and wandering around the halls of an institution that allowed me to explore the realm of ideas, cloistered from the prevailing winds of outside reality. I became fascinated by Chinese History, and devoured dozens of books on the subject. Then I stumbled upon a large lecture class on contemporary Chinese history, and snuck in, soaking up the lectures, debates and discussions that raged around the

auditorium. I relished experiencing people from many walks of life engaged in the exchange of ideas, an experience not often found within the daily routine of work and home. In a university setting, one could have conversations about politics, society, history and science, about things that mattered to me, rather than the usual banalities dictated by mass media, entertainment, sports, and star trivia. Thus, still working, yet somehow finding time for classes, I took my GED and eventually earned an AS in electronics, and then a BA in Art.

Involvement in both the electronics industry and the art world led to my being asked to teach a class in art and technology, back when the worlds of art and electronics were not fused together as they are today. Energized by the ability to teach, I got my MA and eventually my Ph.D. and began teaching for a living, in the high demand areas of multimedia, web design, digital video and all things *ars electronica*.

I soon found myself in the stressful position of teaching on five different campuses. Some semesters I was burdened with 30 hours a week “contact” time in the classroom, the equivalent of two or three fulltime faculty jobs. All this to make the equivalent pay of one tenure-track position. Though my evaluations were excellent, and my classes overloaded, there were no fulltime job openings. Equally distressing, most of my students only wanted to learn the short-term money-making skills, with no real interest in the aspects of technology that fascinated me—social aspects, elements of control, social justice implications, utopian or dystopian ramifications. Though the mission of a four-year university is supposedly broad-based knowledge, I often found myself being little more than a technical trainer for the burgeoning dotcom industry. The university actively promoted this view of itself, to attract student “customers.” Ultimately, I found myself dealing with the grim reality that many of the subjects I taught were directly responsible for much of what I find reprehensible about the direction of higher education.

In my decade working in industrial manufacturing and assembly, I learned a fair amount about what a speedup is, and how a speedup impacts the working conditions and wages of industrial workers. Little did I know that as a university professor I would remain within the confines of the same industrial system. Today’s university models itself on the modern multinational corporation. Microsoft. Walmart. McDonalds. Starbucks. These are the working models, not some old-fashioned Socratic notion about mentors and peers. Today’s public university president sees himself as CEO, and gets paid like one. Deans of Colleges frequently act as corporate managers, more responsible for the bottom line

than the educational process. Today's chief university administrators rarely even come from educational backgrounds, but are hired for their financial acumen. They perceive the faculty as the workforce, the students as the customers. Following this corporate model, the McUniversity must fight for market share while slashing labor costs. And they do this the same way other multinationals operate—by relying heavily on temporary workers, imposing modern speedup technology, and weakening any unity and solidarity among its workers.

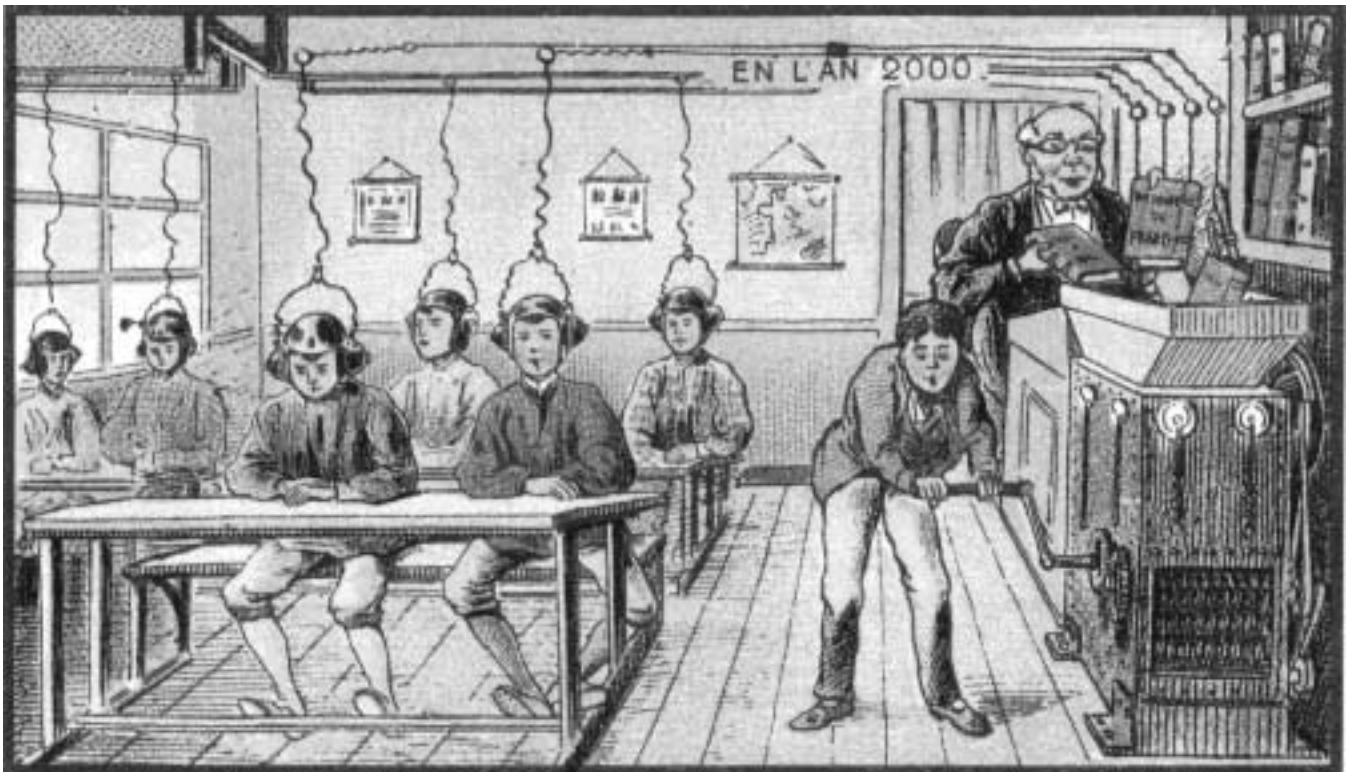
For decades, the industrial workforce has been decimated by the globalization of work processes, in particular the offshore factory. The nature of the educational “market” does not permit this directly, as students are local entities. However, moving the university “offshore” can be accomplished by moving the university into cyberspace. By digital duplication and dissemination, the educational “content” can be re-used, sent around the globe, and even sold for a profit. This has become the goal of today's McUniversity CEOs. The present discourse of university management is dominated by this idea—similar to the retail industry—of getting away from “brick and mortar,” by moving into so-called on-line or distance education. Unfortunately, by using the progressive claim of modernity, evoking false empathy for working families, and releasing a barrage of high tech hype, they have been successful in neutralizing the natural opponents to their plan.

### Why Johnny and Janey can surf the web but can't read or write

The argument for distanced education sounds very rea-

sonable at first. Why make thousands of students converge onto one location, disrupting their lives, fighting traffic, getting dressed in the morning, when they can stay at home, log on, and work towards their degree? Stuffy lecture halls, crummy food, the tussling, shoving, sweaty crush of students, slurping their morning coffees. Who needs it? Stay at home, say the high tech proponents, and get a real education. By clicking icons on a screen students can watch canned or perhaps even live lectures delivered from afar. By e-mailing an anonymous teacher the results, they can interact with their cyber-mentors. They can even take tests on the Web and get their answers instantly e-mailed back to them.

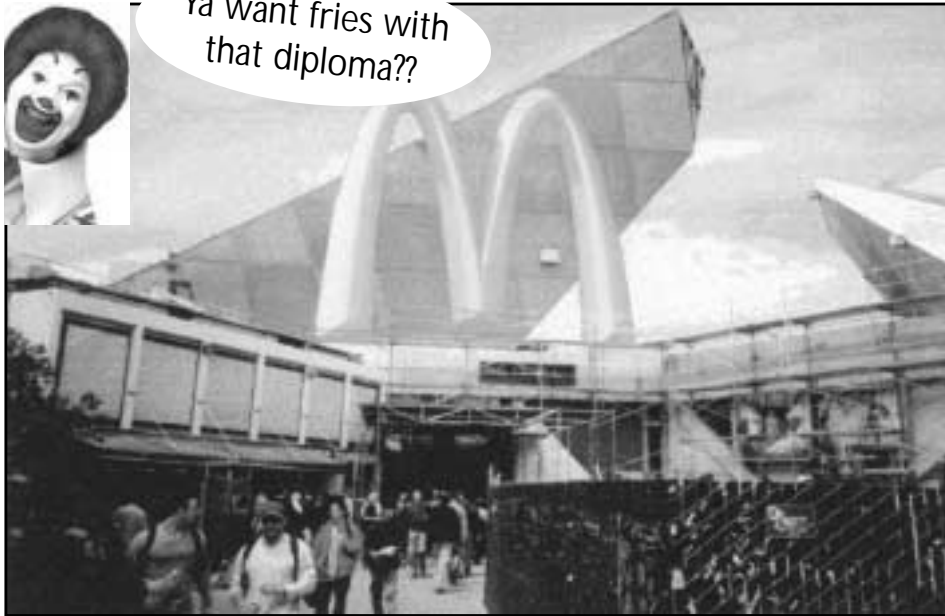
A large part of the “new economy university” rests upon the technological savior which goes by the name of “virtual classroom,” “distance education,” “the on-line university” and other euphemisms forged in the chambers of university marketing departments. But for all the excitement raised from this so-called “revolution,” a significant factor is glaringly absent—the students. None of these on-line experiments have any proven success in improving the educational process. But, like the once-skyrocketing stock of dotcom companies before they even turned a profit, the on-line bandwagon is now full of cheering, horn-tooting university professionals en route to the future, education be damned. Despite the absence of proven benefits, the transformation of the university, the dissolution of “brick and mortar,” is considered “inevitable.” What is inevitable, however, is that without a concerted opposition by faculty, students, and the public, higher education will cease to be an important public



*School in the Year 2000*, originally an 1899 cigarette card by Jean Marc Côté



Ya want fries with that diploma??



## Pardon Our Construction

### We're Building the New Corporate University!

#### Learning to Swim where there's No Water!

To prepare you for the working world, here at Biz U. we're creating a uniquely temporary environment. Temp teachers, temp administrators and staffers, even temp students! After our environment of pervasive insecurity, you'll really learn how to thrive in the New Economy.

#### Distanced Education:

In today's busy world, who's got time for active learning, exposure to a diverse student body, or discussing ideas with others? Today's Biz U. is spending millions so you can receive canned educational products via TV or computer in the isolation of your home or cubicle! Critical thinking doesn't pay. Business needs programmers, not artists or philosophers!

#### Money for Prisons, not for Education:

Besides paying for the bloated salaries of our CEO administrators, we're putting your tax dollars where they're really needed—building jails! In today's market-driven social climate, prisons are simply a better economic investment. Why else do you think prison guards make so much more money than teachers?

venue for the exchange and incubation of ideas, but will be permanently subject to the forces of "the market."

Unlike most university administrators, as a student I've had two such experiences with on-line/distance technologies of instruction, both of which were considered abject failures by the students. Each class involved two dual classrooms, coexisting side by side, yet separated by hundreds of miles. Our classrooms existed as alternate universes, where the professors took turns delivering lectures to the classroom in which he was physically present, as well as casting his words off into the other on-line classroom. After the lectures, both classes could interact in front of a camera lens, controlled remotely by an appointed student in the class. The

classes were accompanied by e-mail listserves as well as a web page component.

The novelty at first was pleasant. For the first half hour, people craned around the monitor to see what the other class looked like. Lots of laughter and merriment ensued over a few minor technical blunders, and the awkwardness of the situation. But when we tried to get down to a real discussion, it foundered. It was as if the two classrooms were tumblers in an hour glass, a lot of sand struggling to flow, but only one grain at a time could pass. Without physical presence, our convictions were filtered out. We could see and hear someone, but without context. Nuance and tone were blanched out. Side discussions in the rooms, often important to developing a context, could not be communicated. Conversation became burdensome and heavy. As a result, people's intentions were often interpreted wrongly. Friendly smiles were perceived as smirks, irony and sarcasm taken at face value.

E-mail discussion lists coincided with the audio/visual experience. Usually the e-mail discussion at the end of the class was "Is that what you meant to say?" or "I don't think you really understood me." Towards the end of the class, myself and a fellow student traveled 500 miles to meet with classmates from the other class. We

were amazed how often we had totally misread our fellow students.

One glaring example was when we queried our fellow students at a distance, most of whom were of Mexican origin, about their views on the recent Zapatista uprising in Mexico. We had a half-hour disjointed discussion, and we came away perplexed about their negative opinion as to the uprising, which contradicted our understanding that Mexican young people broadly supported it. Later on, in e-mail discussion, we learned that in fact they all supported the Zapatistas. In fact, several of them had participated in mass demonstrations of support.

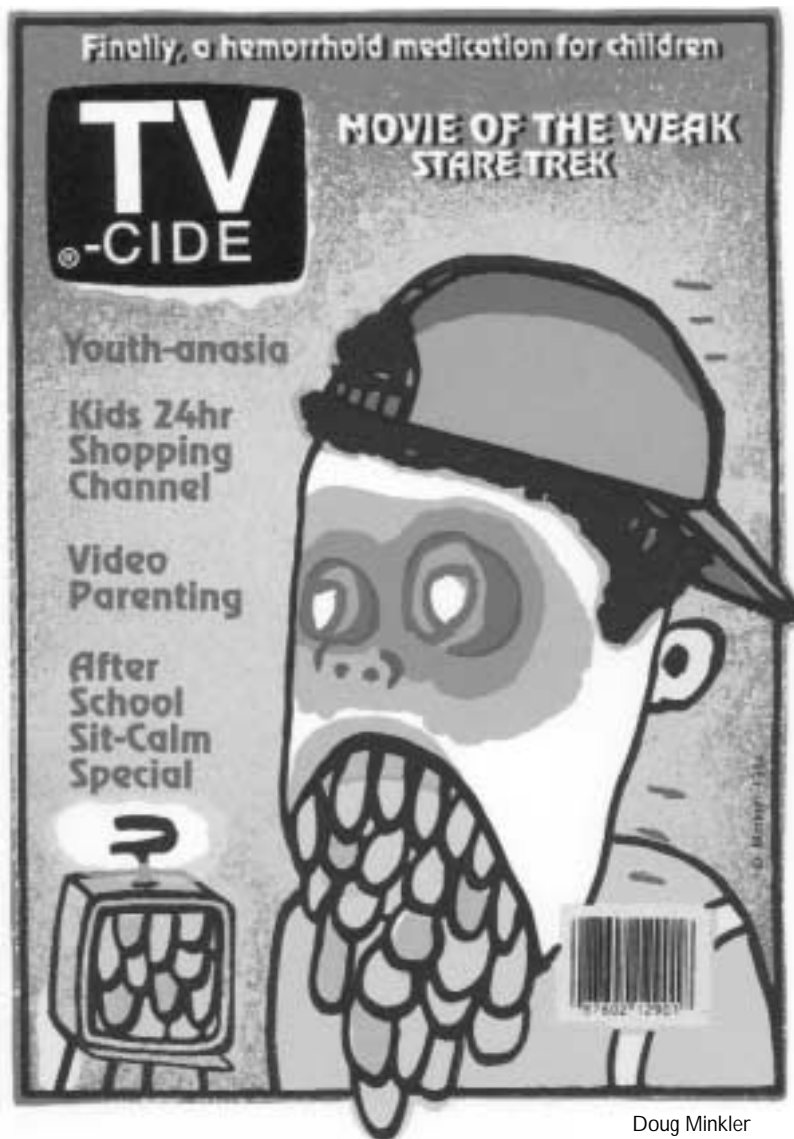
In the end the on-line element of the class proved

amusing, perhaps useful in very limited applications, but mostly a waste of time. These classes were not mere experiments, however, but pilot programs destined to replace the traditional classroom experience, and to eliminate a professor at either end of the delivery system.

These tele-distance classes were funded to the tune of millions of dollars by communications consortiums, in order to prove to the university that it was in their best interest to go online. The faculty member in charge of one of these classes was highly compensated by the telecom consortium. He went out of his way to slap a happy veneer on the results of his research, and to scorn his “dinosaur” colleagues who didn’t come aboard the techno train. He pointedly advised students to give a good evaluation of our distance learning experience, so as not to appear ungracious or unthankful for the technology bestowed upon us. (The same consortium was vying to convince the state medical establishment that it could eliminate doctors in outlying areas also. Patients out in the boondocks would stand in front of a machine and get checked by doctors who wouldn’t have to leave the comfort of their offices.)

The rich get educated,  
the poor get trained

The battle over who controls the university has its origins in the 1960s. The McUniversity serves what modern corporate America wants for its workforce, and educated students with a critical understanding of their role in the world is not on the menu. The money lost to the successful right-wing battle for the defunding of public higher education has now been replaced by widespread slavish begging for corporate money. Departments make deals with corporations that put them in good graces with their “sponsors.” At one university I was informed that a tenure track faculty member was hired not because he was a good teacher, but because he came attached with a million dollar corporate grant. At a faculty meeting, the Dean said to a room of part-time temporary faculty that we must “learn to do fundraising” to keep our jobs. This from a guy making \$148,000 a year. I regularly see broadcasting and technology-related departments making long-term procurement commitments to technology corporations, in a field where winners and losers often come and go in matter of months. Such deals hobble these departments with a single brand of technology for many years, eliminating their ability to objectively compare and contrast. And yet, they are commended by the administration and envied by the faculty. This emphasis on corporatization has resulted in a demoralizing of the



Doug Minkler

faculty, and a death-blow to the concept of a real education. Pedagogy has been replaced by patronage.

Whatever pedagogical preconceptions professors may believe in are shunted aside in the implementation of the on-line university. The foundation of learning is no longer based upon an interactive learning experience, but is predicated upon what Freire refers to as the “banking” system of education—the students as empty receptacles to be filled through the spigot of digital channels of dissemination. To their discredit, many faculty members have surrendered their pedagogical concerns and moved to accept the McUniversity presuppositions. But, digital conversion comes with its own arrogant assumptions. Prime among them is that the teaching process is one-way, flowing from teacher to student. I beg to differ. Students often learn more from other students than from the teacher. And faculty also learn from students! Learning is a collective, interactive experience, which is precisely what an on-line environment does not permit.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge becomes a gift bestowed upon those who know nothing.

Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents him or herself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. Students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.\*

The political ramifications of the distance university are enormous. Universities have always been a raucous, seething pool of political discontent, one of the last places with a truly public character, neither mall nor city hall. A gathering place of people from all walks of life; a fertile swamp of ideas, cultures, races. Asian Student Unions. Black Student Unions. Mecha. Gay Student Unions. Socialists. Communists. Religious Preachers. Bible Thumpers. Palestinians. Israelis. Hip-Hoppers. Jocks. Hippies. Punks. The whole gamut of the modern American scene. How tempting, then, to eliminate it all, funnel individuals through the glowing Netscape palette of the university portal. A sanitized, whitewashed, safe and clean mall of the mind. Sit back. Relax. Learn.

### The Digital Divide, Same as the Old Divide

When Newt Gingrich came to power in the early 1990s, he suggested that giving poor people laptops would be the key to empowerment. Liberals scoffed. When Bill Clinton and his entourage took over, Gingrich's disparaged "let them eat laptops" campaign morphed into the "digital divide." In other words, give 'em laptops, or at least wire their schools so the computers will work. As someone who has trained hundreds on computers, I can attest that what students need is reading, writing, critical thinking and logic skills development. Without the skills to read manuals, troubleshoot technical problems, and use the computer in a productive manner, the wired classroom is doomed to failure.

Even more importantly, students need safe and secure home lives, a healthy environment and the peace of mind to nourish an active imagination. Without these prerequisites, computers are an absurdly expensive waste of time and resources. The rhetoric of the digital divide focuses on the purchase of hardware and software products, conveniently prof-



Jesse Drew

# Digital Landfill

Last year's model = this year's scrap

itable for many multinational corporations while the real skills and resources that students need go begging. The digital divide is the same divide that has plagued industrial society from the beginning—the division of class. Without substantial structural change, no amount of computer products will tilt the balance in favor of the under-represented and under-served. The digital divide is a marketing scheme by an industry that sells products by taking advantage of America's sympathy for the disadvantaged, and laughs all the way to the bank.

And where is the opposition from the faculty? Unfortunately, many faculty members are blinded by a sense of "professionalism," a false consciousness that deceives them into thinking they are not "workers" in the true sense. Ironically this sense of professionalism does not come equipped with pay—prison guards, garbage collectors and other positions not requiring an advanced degree often have starting wages much higher than faculty members. But no matter, many professors believe they have more in common with their administrator/bosses than with their co-workers or the students they teach. As a temporary faculty member for many years, I have seen little sense of solidarity or action among them to connect with part-time, temporary adjunct professors.

The sense of superiority that tenured professors feel is enhanced by the fact that relatively few are given tenure. Unfortunately, the occasional tenure track job that comes up is rarely awarded to someone with a different point of view or to someone who might shine a little brighter than the other incumbent faculty. Tenure-track hiring has become a process ruled by the law of the least common denominator. It often functions as a well-designed mechanism for mediocrity.

\* Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 58-59

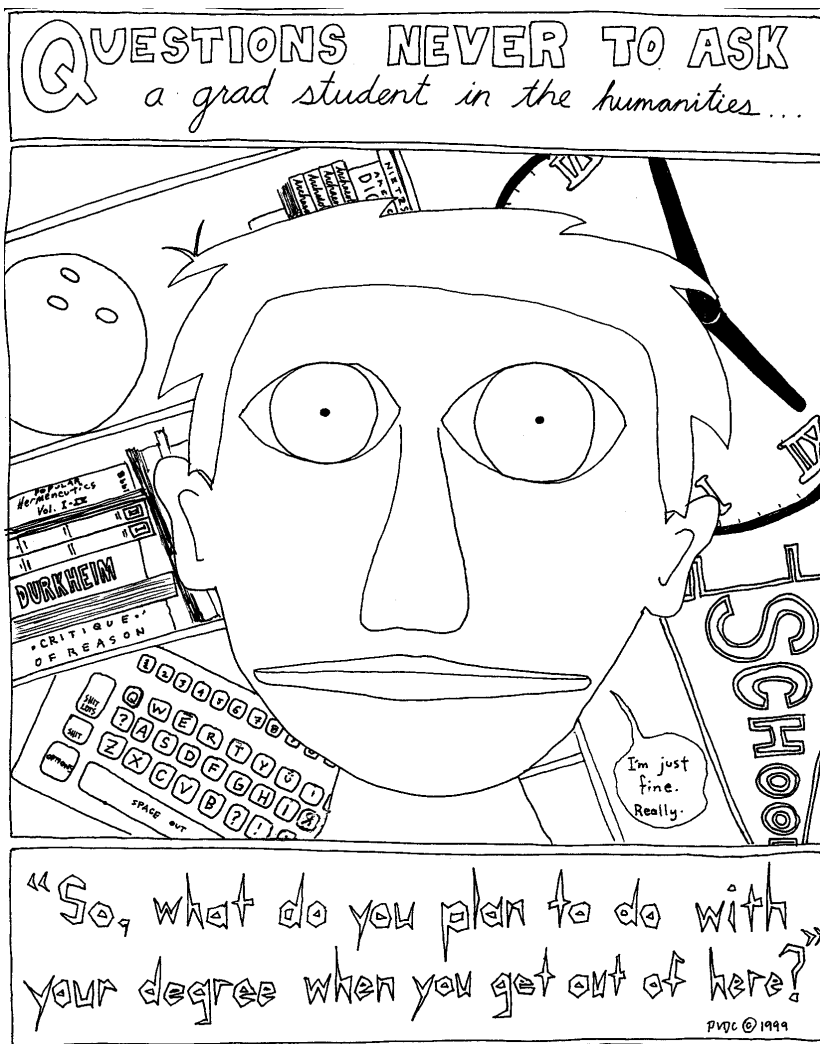
This does not bode well for coming battles with insurgent right wingers who would love to destroy the tenure system and burden the university professorial workforce even more. As a graduate student at a large university I helped lobby state congressmen for fee relief and got to sit in on a number of sessions at the state capital. It was the Republican congressmen who were the most friendly, relishing statistics that adjunct and temporary faculty not only taught the majority of the students, but had student ratings higher than most tenure track professors. For all of this, we earned much less than tenure track professors, usually with no benefits. We were seen as a potential pool of displacement labor, who could be used against the entrenched tenured. Many adjuncts *are* bitter at the lack of support shown by tenure track profs and *would* feel justified in replacing them. And with the university adopting the corporate model, tenure comes off looking more like an employment perk than the original basis of academic freedom. Detractors of tenure like to think of it as a way to hold onto deadwood. However, most good professors I know feel it wouldn't be the uninspired or tired professors getting the boot, but the "troublemaking" iconoclasts, the ones who snuck in under the radar. If the university is merely a training ground for corporate workers, who needs academic freedom anyway?

There are certainly many problems with the current state of higher education, many of which stem from lack of funding, a problem exacerbated by assaults on public school education. But any examination of the crisis needs to go beyond the surface, to a radical restructuring of higher education. The public university should be an *autonomous* public space for developing the ideas we require to move humanity forward. It should not be a mere training grounds to support the short-term marketing considerations of corporate America. One of the saddest things I witness is brilliant students getting siphoned off to build websites for some worthless commercial venture.

Real education encourages independent and critical thinking, and provides the intellectual skills necessary to negotiate through a lifetime of difficult choices. We should cultivate an education as we would cultivate a garden. An intellectual garden is diverse and well-tended, with crops that can nurture us through different seasons, early frosts, and dry spells. Today's education is a monoculture, planting a single crop at the behest of corporate America, leaving us at the mercy of its success or failure.

Behind the façade of the new distance technologies lies a parched desert devoid of new ideas or creativity. Social progress requires a diverse, vibrant multiculturalism of ideas that only a truly public university can provide.

The public university is worth fighting for. But efforts are needed on many different fronts. Faculty need to get flushed out of their ivory towers and recognize they can play an important role in public life. It is common knowledge there is a strong undercurrent of anti-intellectualism in America, but too often faculty help to promote this by engaging in insular, arcane and just plain silly research and writing only relevant to a handful of other bored academics. University administrators reward faculty who publish in academic journals read by no one, and are not encouraged to develop as public intellectuals and educators. Professors should reject this arcane role and work to situate intellectual debate within public life. The public university is naturally situated to be in the forefront of this endeavor. Students and faculty must work together to wrest control of this public resource from career bureaucrats and corporate CEOs. Despite the efforts of those who would hurl the university into cyberspace, there is still an important role for our public university, bricks and mortar all.



Paul VanDeCarr