

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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I first came across the term “paradigm shift” thirty-five or so years ago in reading Thomas Kuhn’s milestone study *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962. The arts and the sciences are fundamentally dissimilar in their evolution, Kuhn asserted. In any given epoch, artists do not subscribe to anything resembling a central worldview. Instead, they dwell on simultaneous planes of possibility, intrigued by competing ideas. By contrast, scientists always work out of something more like a collective mindset, which Kuhn termed a paradigm. For example, for over two-hundred years, physicists operated on the assumption that the laws of motion Newton articulated in *Principia Mathematica* defined the truth of mechanics. When exceptions began to accumulate and cast doubt on these laws, physics became ripe for a revolution or paradigm shift—and Einstein’s challenges to Newton, informed by his theory of relativity, eventually emerged as the new normal.

A paradigm shift (and here I’m using the term in more of a lay sense) doesn’t happen overnight. Perhaps our recent campus change in software platforms from Blackboard to Canvas is illustrative. Some professors will inevitably go to their graves ruing the day we left Blackboard. Others will groan and say why bother—one course management system is essentially the same as another. The more things change, the more they stay the same, etc. Others (perhaps those who volunteered for the pilot program) will march boldly into the future extolling the wonders of Canvas and cheerily admonishing the rest of us to jettison our reservations. Still others (albeit only a very few) wouldn’t be caught dead using a course-management system in the first place. An old-fashioned grade book is good enough for them.

It is no accident that one of the most lauded books in schools of education in the early 1970s was Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. The pedagogy articulated therein clicked with the 1960s project of dismantling oppressive authority. Everybody, it was asserted in those days, at least by those under thirty, had something to say and contribute. People power became the operative paradigm. I can’t testify as to the exact day or week or month or year people power gave its last gasp in public higher education, but I *can* say definitively that it has done so.

The power to the people came *from* the people, because the people paid the taxes that supported our colleges and universities. It is the understatement of the century to say that government support of higher education has diminished. Here at Murray State, we have spent the 2012-2013 school year agonizing over exactly where to position our scalpels so that 6.4-percent state cuts would do the least damage. Nor is Kentucky alone in inflicting cuts upon cuts. In most states, the prospects of increased public support for higher education are nil.

According to our new paradigm, education is not a subversive activity. It's a business, and its mantra is not "power to the people" but "the customer is always right." In keeping with this business model, university presidents are increasingly viewed as CEOs who can be hired and fired at will and who take the kind of risks that necessitate being rewarded with exorbitant salaries. As documented in the May 12, 2013 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the median pay package for public university presidents in fiscal year 2011-2012 was \$441,392. Graham Spanier, the former president of Penn State University topped the annual pay list at \$2.9 million, with Jay Gogue, the president of Auburn University and E. Gorgon Gee, the president of Ohio State University coming in second and third at \$2.5 million and \$1.8 million. In the old days, new programs needed to break even. Now they must produce substantial additional revenue for the university as if they were divisions of major corporations. Campuses are given student sales targets like MSU's "12,000 by 2012." Education is seen as a product, and universities must struggle to establish brand recognition via advertising tag lines like MSU's "your world to explore." Universities have become increasingly like franchises, with satellite campuses, virtual campuses, campuses abroad, etc. Comparisons, which used to be deemed invidious, are now the name of the game. Currently, *U.S News and World Report* ranks Murray State #7 in the category of "Regional Universities in the South," and *Forbes* ranks Murray State #547 overall.

Perhaps the most depressing side of the business model is the mushrooming of "for-profit" universities. Thanks to the PBS documentary *The Ghost Army*, I recently learned about the U.S. Army's 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, whose job it was to impersonate

other Army units between D-Day and the end of World War II. Soldiers constructed fake tanks, recorded phony troop movements and blared them over loudspeakers, transmitted false radio messages, etc., in an effort to hoodwink the Germans about the deployment of U.S. Army units on the battlefield. There's a certain similarity between staging such an elaborate ruse and running a for-profit university, where as little as 25 percent of tuition revenue is actually spent on educating students. It's no surprise that students who attend such universities are responsible for an undue share of student-loan defaults.

There's also a reality-show dimension to the business paradigm. It's as if, at the beginning of each semester, each university department is put on an island with all its professors. Survival will require endless ingenuity. Never underestimate the importance of "likes" on Facebook or chile peppers on *ratemyprofessors.com*! Survival will also demand the husbanding of limited resources, which will surely involve the replacing of tenure-track professors with adjuncts. The risk that a few adjuncts will starve to death on their meager salaries by the end of the academic year might even up the show's ratings.

Sometimes I feel like the immigrant South Vietnamese grandmother a friend of mine once interviewed for the *San Jose Mercury News*—clinically depressed about the future because I have been condemned to live out the rest of my days in a language I can't really speak. I desperately want to go back to the days before professors were written off as overpriced commodities, before the animosity led "Professor" to start popping up as #1 on Internet lists of the "Ten Easiest Jobs."

According to Kuhn, a state of crisis is a key that a paradigm is on its way out. Chaos can be a boon. When things get so bad that the practitioners in a given field are willing to try *anything*—even the ideas they've been laughing out of the room for decades running—to achieve some resolution of the questions on the table, that's *exactly* when a new paradigm will begin to be possible.

San Jose State University's president, Mohammed H. Quayoumi, has been on the forefront of public university administrators advocating for experimentation with massive open online courses (MOOCs), in

part to solve the crushing budget dilemmas faced by his institution. In a letter published in the May 2, 2013 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, philosophy professors at San Jose State responded quite vehemently to the suggestion that they incorporate into their curriculum a (MOOC) version of Harvard Professor Michael Sandel's course "Justice," produced by the company EdX.

That solution—which, the professors allege, forces San Jose State students to settle for watching Harvard students debate amongst one another, and denies San Jose State students the same privilege—strikes many of us as draconian in the extreme. I'm glad we're still laughing (or crying) that idea out of the room. As committed as I have always been to the idea that teaching should be a subversive activity, I must admit to my profound hope that reading, say, Plato's *Apology*, will get those philosophy students at San Jose State all riled up. Surely many of them have school loans it will take them the rest of their lives to pay off! Let them realize that their poverty can be their witness, as Socrates' poverty was his. With any luck, the eloquence of their witness will lead us to the new funding paradigm we so desperately need in American public higher education.

As director of the MFA program, I'd like to bid a fond farewell to President Randy Dunn, who will, alas, shortly be moving on to take over the presidency of Youngstown State University in Ohio. All of us in the program have always appreciated his good humor and steadfast moral support in a tough fiscal climate. It should be noted, too, that he plays a mean trombone once in a while at Racer basketball games. He and his wife Ronda will most definitely be missed.

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