



## Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest

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Ten years ago *Academic Questions* devoted nearly a whole issue to an essay by a little-known Canadian sociologist, Ricardo Duchesne. His *AQ* essay “The World Without Us” (22, no. 2, Spring 2009), was the forerunner for his hefty scholarly tome that came out a few years later, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* (Brill, 2011). Our interest in the original essay was that it was that *rara avis*, a deeply considered and thoughtful defense of the idea that the West differs profoundly from other large scale social orders. Taking nothing from the achievements of ancient Egyptians, mighty Babylon, the Moghul Empire, Chinese dynasties, the builders of Angkor Wat, Mayan priest-kings, or the terror-empire of the Aztecs, the West has a character of its own that has enabled it, over the millennia, to become the dominant force in the modern world.

Duchesne’s thesis was entirely within the mainstream tradition of both sociology and history—and even anthropology for that matter. Claude Levi-Strauss, the most influential anthropologist of the latter half of the twentieth century, drew sharp distinctions between the historical self-consciousness of the West and non-Western peoples. Max Weber’s great multi-volume project aimed at capturing what set the West apart from the ancient Near East, India, and China. The questions that vexed philosophers and historians were not whether the West differed, but how and why.

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The rise of multiculturalism in the academy beginning in the 1970s rendered suspect the idea that the West is *categorically* different from other “cultures.” Rather, if it was allowed that the West differed in its technological preeminence and its projection of power over other cultures, it was emphatically added that such advantages could not be read as conferring on Western institutions, Western philosophy, or Western religion, any claim to being *better than* any other culture’s attainments. Cultural relativism gave a warrant not only to celebrate the accomplishments of Eastern civilizations, but to herald the achievements of the Apaches, the Andamanese, the Arapesh, and everyone else in the ethnographic record.

This change in intellectual climate—perhaps the most consequential form of climate change in our time—meant the disappearance of Western Civilization survey courses, as charted by the NAS in our 2010 study, *The Vanishing West, 1964-2010* (2011), but the subject didn’t disappear entirely, as attested by the best-selling book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), by Jared Diamond, an ornithologist turned popular science writer. Diamond explained the West’s dominance as a result of ecological luck, which equipped it with an abundance of domesticated plants and animals, a head-start in evolving immunity to epidemic diseases, and an easily transversed land mass. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond was at pains to deflate any sense of pride the West might have in its exploits. We were merely opportunists riding on a raft of tuberculosis, smallpox, and a host of other fatal maladies.

Duchesne stepped onto this stage with the rather old-fashioned message that perhaps there was something more to consider. He insisted that Western ideas of freedom and rationality had something to do with Western progress. It was a message in tune with the National Association of Scholars, but as we at NAS well know, it was not a message that was especially welcome in our colleges and universities.

How unwelcome that message is became clear in June 2019, when Duchesne was forced to resign from his tenured position at the University of New Brunswick, the oldest English-language university in Canada. As *Wikipedia* succinctly puts it, “Duchesne’s views on immigration and multiculturalism have drawn accusations of racism and support for white nationalism, claims which Duchesne has denied.”

Rising to the defense of Duchesne is another sometime *Academic Questions* contributor, David Solway. His *PJ Media* article, “A Professor Who Argues Against Multicultural Ideology and for Western Exceptionalism Now Fears for His Job,” and his *American Thinker* article “Triggering the Academic Lynch Mob,” capture Duchesne’s fall in mournful detail. Solway

observes that Duchesne had “the audacity to claim that the Indo-European legacy of intellectual restlessness, science, art, philosophy, law and civics on which our civilization is founded is now in imminent peril of disintegration.” I suppose that to say so requires audacity, if one lives in Canada, and one earns a living at a Canadian university. But plainly it could happen here too.

## Nuggets

This round of Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest is overburdened. I am reminded of a scene in Patrick deWitt’s Western novel, *The Sisters Brothers*, in which the brothers are so dazzled by all the gold nuggets they see in a California streambed that they fall into disastrous confusion. I’ll try to avoid that fate. I have twenty-one new books to which I would like to draw your attention, and then in some cases recommend that you promptly turn your attention elsewhere.

## Land and Other Grants

Stephen M. Gavarri is a professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University, and E. Gordon Gee is the president of West Virginia University. Together they have written *Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good* (Johns Hopkins, 2018). Gee, who has served as the president of the University of Colorado, Brown University, Vanderbilt University, and Ohio State University, has a fair claim to being America’s most practiced university CEO. But the “public good” enunciated in the book title remains a mystery. Gavarri and Gee offer such bon mots as: “We remain steadfast in the belief that our students must be as knowledgeable about the land-grant mission as they are about every other subject matter in which our universities offer coursework.”

Every other subject matter? Granted that knowledge of “the land-grant mission” might prove of more use to students than West Virginia University’s Women’s and Gender Studies 150, “Women in Movies.” That quoted sentence is just lazy writing in the service of a flaccid idea, and unfortunately it is typical. “This event,” they write about an American Legislative Exchange Council conference, “was not all rainbows and unicorns, however.”

Note to college trustees: do not hire college presidents who write like this. Their writing is a window on their minds. Look through that window and you will see an empty room.

Somewhere I reviewed Christopher Newfield’s *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Harvard, 2008)

but I missed his sequel, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Johns Hopkins, 2016). I have them open side by side and they are not the same book, but as far as I can tell, they pitch the same idea. Government does not spend as much money as it should on public universities and the universities themselves are lured by the demon of privatization. The more they seek to be “business-like” and to emulate private universities, the more they betray their core mission.

On the opposite end of this argument is Ohio University economist and NAS board member Richard Vedder, who proposes privatizing public colleges in an essay posted to *Minding the Campus* (“Let’s Privatize State Colleges,” June 6, 2019. *Minding the Campus* is an excellent place to find thoughtful, heterodox ideas about contemporary higher education.) In his article Vedder points out that the distinction between public and private colleges is porous. Hillsdale and a few others aside, the private colleges swim in the river of public money. Vedder proposes the powerful corrective of putting those funds in the hands of the students rather than the colleges. Vouchers would do the trick. The colleges in turn would have to work a lot harder to provide those students with a good education.

## Rx

Vedder’s argument appears at much greater length and is intertwined with other inversions of conventional wisdom in his new book, *Restoring the Promise: Higher Education in America* (Independent Institute, 2019.) Page for page *Restoring the Promise* is the best return on the reader’s investment of time (as well as money) in this issue’s round-up of new books. Partly this is because Vedder is so deft with hard data, and partly because he has a gift for succinct and memorable phrasing. A three-page preface to the first part of the book includes one simple bar chart, “Percent of Nobel Prize Winners with U.S. Affiliation.” It shows a steady rise by decade, peaking in 1990-2000 at 70 percent and then falling off rapidly by the half-decade 2011-2015 to 55 percent. Vedder’s oblique point is that American higher education owes its reputation to “substantial research excellence,” that is, “the creation of knowledge” rather than teaching. But the research excellence is slipping and, by other measures, our colleges and universities face substantial “delivery” problems. First on Vedder’s list is: “American universities are

vastly too expensive, often costing twice as much per student compared with institutions in other industrialized democracies. The price of tuition is vastly more than American institutions cost a generation ago.”

I had the chance to read *Restoring the Promise* in pre-publication and have found myself for the last six months going back to it frequently to meditate on various points. It deserves a fuller review than I can give it here, but I hope to have whetted the reader’s appetite.

Those who want still more Vedder can find him in chapter two of Todd J. Zywicki and Neal P. McCluskey’s edited volume, *Unprofitable Schooling: Examining Causes of, and Fixes for, America’s Broken Ivory Tower* (Cato, 2019). Zywicki is a professor of law at George Mason and McCluskey is director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. As one might expect from the Cato Institute, the volume offers a collection of free market-oriented analyses of what ails American higher education, with contributions by a dozen experts and an introduction by the editors. As a whole, these are sobering essays. George Mason University law professor Daniel Polsby, for example, spends some thirty pages “Understanding the Runaway Tuition Phenomenon,” and reaches the Vedder-like conclusion that “only one way seems possible to stop the ascent of the dotted line, and that is to decouple federal subsidies to higher education from student loans.” Those subsidies, no matter what, are “going to have to shrink.”

The shadow of the “dismal science”—economics—hangs heavy on this volume, but better that shadow than the superficial glitter and banality of books such as Gavarri and Gee’s. As it happens, Vedder’s contribution to this collection is a neat take-down of the land-grant universities that Gavarri and Gee valorize. In “The Morrill Land-Grant Act: Fact and Mythology,” Vedder dispatches the notion that these institutions have been notably successful in opening up the American Dream for lower-income Americans. Instead, he writes, they have helped to price “some poor persons out of the market.”

I wonder if “hypocrisy” is the right word for Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s oddly ungenerous new book, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (Johns Hopkins, 2019). Fitzpatrick is the director of Digital Humanities and a professor of English at Michigan State University. Her book commences with entirely accurate observations that “public support” for higher education has been “undermined by the university’s own betrayals of the public trust.” She adds that “the critical thinking that forms the center of higher education has somehow fallen out of whack,” that it now privileges “negation rather than the creation of ideas and institutions.”

This is a promising start, which along with the title primed me to think that Fitzpatrick would be a voice for intellectual openness—perhaps a left-of-center academic awakened to the idea that the savages over to the right-of-center might be worth engaging. But that is not at all what she had in mind. Fitzpatrick is, among other things, an acolyte of Christopher Newfield’s *The Great Mistake*, which she cites approvingly and extensively in eight places, on the great danger of “privatization.” One measure of Fitzpatrick’s book is her fourteen pages of references which present a who’s who of progressive thinkers from Kwame Appiah to the feminist Christina Zwarg. Few are missed: Michael Bérubé, Hillary Clinton, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Barbara Ehrenreich, Carol Gilligan, Martha Nussbaum, and many trendier if less well-known figures on the left. As far as I can tell the only recognizably conservative thinker mentioned in the whole book is Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) who is brought forward for the sake of derision:

Humanism’s triumphant belief in the power of human reason and the humanities’ study of what Matthew Arnold so blithely but searingly referred to as “the best that has been thought and said” have together long been used as a means of solidifying and perpetuating the social order, with all its injustices and exclusions.

Plainly Fitzpatrick’s *Generous Thinking* has nothing to do with civil conversation across the main ideological division in American culture, so what exactly is the generosity she has in mind? Essentially she means the actions the academic left can take to win support from the general public for the left’s own agenda. This is the pursuit of “the public good” as she styles it and “will require massive organization and mobilization.”

Thanks for the warning. And no, hypocrisy is not the right word. Obliviousness is not hypocrisy.

I have one more book at hand offering some prescriptions for improving higher education. John Warner, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* and blogger for *Inside Higher Ed*, explains *Why They Can’t Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Johns Hopkins, 2018). Like Fitzpatrick, Warner begins in a promising place. “Writing is hard.” Very few students come to it with ease. “We are simultaneously juggling what we want to say with how we want to say it.” What follows is a great deal of finding fault with teachers who teach the subject poorly mainly because, in Warner’s judgment, they rely on stale, dehumanizing techniques. Much of this any

reader of *Academic Questions* would agree with, though perhaps that reader would share my apprehension that Warner seems a little too eager to jettison some techniques that have worked rather well for five hundred years or so.

But *Why They Can't Write* veers into something more disturbing at page 127, when Warner begins to sketch “A New Framework.” Here he becomes a latter-day proponent of the human potential movement. Instead of teaching young people how to write, we should be “enhancing the intellectual, social, and emotional capacities of students.” We should steer away from providing them with workplace skills or a spirit of competition; we should avoid causing “anxiety.” And we should focus on “students’ mental and physical well-being.” That requires supplying the students with good nutrition and ending “food insecurity.” When we get around to teaching writing, we need a “reality pedagogy” that will help students be “fully collaborative inside a classroom community.” Among other things, this means ending the “tyranny of grades” and giving teachers “sufficient time, freedom, and resources to teach effectively.”

Those who want more details than this will have to buy the book. I don't have sufficient time, freedom, and resources to say more.

## Externalities

Hilary Landorf and Stephanie Doscher are officials associated with “global learning initiatives” at Florida International University. Jaffus Hardrick is a former administrator at FIU and current interim president of Florida Memorial University. The three have co-authored *Making Global Learning Universal: Promoting Inclusion and Success for All Students* (co-published by Stylus and NAFSA, 2018. NAFSA stands for National Association of Foreign Student Advisors, which now styles itself an “association of international educators.”) The book is essentially a 250-page infomercial for Florida International University, though there is no doubting the enthusiasm of Landorf, Doscher, and Hardrick for the cause of “global learning.”

And what is “global learning”? Geography? Economics? Beginning on page 23, the authors explain that the term, like all terms, can mean “different things to different people.” But they put off saying what it means to them. After all, they were once “uncertain too.” A table follows showing the percentages of faculty, staff, and students who agreed with various possible meanings of the term. Ten pages later we finally get a definition: “the process

of diverse people collaboratively analyzing and addressing complex problems that transcend borders.”

I was ready to close the book once and for all after learning that “global learning” is a clumsy substitute for “diversity,” but I persisted as a duty to the readers of *AQ*. By page 39, however, I could persist no further: “As promised we’re checking back in with you. What’s the status of your thinking on the meaning of global learning?”

The status of my thinking is that “global learning” is rather like “global warming”—a catchphrase that sounds as if it might refer to an observable phenomenon but that turns out to be an endlessly pliant term deployed for the purpose at hand. The purpose at hand seems to be recruiting students to Florida International University.

Nathan D. Grawe, professor of social sciences at Carleton College, in his new book, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins, 2018) knows something about the challenges facing Florida International University. Grawe is the creator of the Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI) which he explains in detail in chapter three of the book. The broader interest in the short book, however, is what the index summarizes:

Through immigration, interstate migration, and fertility differences across demographic groups, the country’s population is tilting towards the Southwest in general and Hispanic Southwest in particular. From the perspective of the higher education sector, these changes adversely shift the population away from traditionally strong markets toward those with lower rates of educational acquisition.

Not the most eloquent prose, Professor Grawe, but we get the point. If you are recruiting for a small college in New England, tough times lie ahead.

It could be worse and Joseph E. Aoun, the president of Northeastern University in Boston, inadvertently shows how in *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (MIT Press, 2018.) Aoun seeks to reassure us that robots won’t take over everything—at least if we embrace his new curriculum, which he calls *humanics*. Machines, of course, “will destroy jobs,” and “the value of human labor will be irretrievably lost.” But take heart; higher education can supply something else that, as Aoun claims in his title, is “robot-proof.” Pages and pages of folderol ensue without any clear picture of what robot-proofing humanity might entail or how higher education can corner this market. It has something to do with “critical

thinking,” but I’m not clear that artificial intelligence will fail to simulate most of that too. “Experiential learning” Aoun says is the human difference, but is it? Adaptive learning is already built in to some contemporary technology. Surely more is to come.

I read this point hearing the well-meaning voice of a man who wants desperately to reassure us while doing just the opposite. *The engines are on fire and the landing gear has fallen off, but consider how ingenious we were to build this flying machine and take heart at how good the next model will be.*

## Big Picture

I would as soon not take up too much space on “Nicholas A. Christakis’s *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*” (Little Brown, 2019), but the new book by Yale’s acclaimed sociologist bears notice here simply because the author is *that* Nicholas Christakis—the man mobbed on the quad in the post-Halloween demonstration of snowflake thuggishness in November 2015, and subsequently hounded from the university. Yale and he have reconciled (in 2018 Christakis was named a Sterling Professor, Yale’s highest academic rank) and he has offered up a 400+ page hymn to the spirit of benevolence and cooperation in the human species. It is highly readable, wide-ranging, informative, and, I suspect, deeply wrong-headed. Perhaps we have some cultural need at the moment to believe that Darwin’s struggle for survival isn’t the only engine of evolution. Christakis fights with determination to secure a place for altruism. I can’t help reading into that determination an attempt to justify the implausible dreams of utopian reformers, though Christakis never lands there. He recognizes “the fundamental good that lies within us,” but allows that we have “both competitive and cooperative impulses, both violent and beneficent tendencies.” This comes to the edge of saying that the competitive side of humans is violent, and the cooperative side beneficent. I’d like to remind him that the mob that attacked him on the quad was plenty cooperative. That’s what makes a mob so dangerous and so lacking in “beneficent tendencies.”

Lawrence M. Mead, professor of politics at New York University (and a friend of mine) has published a book that raids my discipline, anthropology, to buttress a provocative thesis. In *Burdens of Freedom: Cultural Difference and American Power* (Encounter, 2019), Mead argues a form of American exceptionalism centered on our individualism. In broad outline,

he takes the rest of humanity as embroiled in collectivist cultures. The anthropologist in me wants to rush in with distinctions. The Pueblo Indians, yes, collectivist. The Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia? Not so much. See Ruth Benedict. But be that as it may, Mead has stuck his neck out to criticize U.S. immigration policies that have brought into our nation a great many people whose cultural habits are collectivist, and who have little incentive to break out of their communities to embrace the individualist ethic.

*Burdens of Freedom* is another book that deserves a full review, rather than a mention, but better a mention than nothing. This book belongs in the company of Ricardo Duchesne's *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* with which I began this essay.

While on the topic of large books, let me salute in passing the eighth edition of Norman Melchert and David R. Morrow's *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford, 2019). Melchert is emeritus from Lehigh University and Morrow is a visiting fellow at George Mason. Their history doesn't confine philosophy to the West. The Vedas and the Brahmanical schools, Confucius, and other Chinese philosophers are granted ample room, as are great theologians including Augustine and Aquinas. Their history of philosophy extends from the pre-Socratics up to the post-modernists and contemporary figures. It is important to remember that in an age when survey courses and comprehensive textbooks are ever fewer and thinner, we have works of such depth and range still being published.

## Politics

Some short mentions. Amity Shlaes's "graphic" edition of her fine history of the great depression, *The Forgotten Man* (2007), has just come out in French. It is illustrated by an exceptional French artist, Paul Rivoche, who has a noir style perfectly suited to the subject. I include it in books of academic interest mainly in the spirit of a slap at the current generation of American college students who suffer the delusion that they are suffering a social calamity worse than history has ever recorded.

Among those who have awakened from such delusions, we can count Howard Hyde, whose *Escape from Berkeley: An Ex-Liberal Progressive Socialist Embraces America (and Doesn't Apologize)* (CitizenEcon.com, 2016) fits into a well-defined corner of the world of political memoirs. Hyde has a good story to tell, but the book is better in scattered episodes than it is a whole. His "escape from Berkeley" comes by way of a four-year sojourn in

France, 1982-1986, as a bohemian musician playing jazz trumpet. This seems an unlikely basis for a political conversion, but that's what makes the story interesting. The admiration of ordinary Frenchmen for America opens his eyes to what he had missed when he actually lived in the midst of American freedom and abundance.

But lest we wander too far in the romance of America, let's take note of Ashley Jardina's new book, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge, 2019). Jardina is a political scientist at Duke University who focuses on racial solidarity among ordinary white Americans. Her focus is not the Ku Klux Klan or other extremist groups, but the "30 to 40 percent of the white population who identify with their racial cohort" but who reject "white supremacy and racism." She calls these people "white identifiers," and has compiled an abundantly detailed account of their social and political attitudes. Simply writing about the topic seemingly puts her at some risk for being Duchesne'd, but the book is scrupulously free of attitude and opinion. Jardina does attempt to measure such things as "white guilt" and "white privilege," but as items to be surveyed rather than as terms of abuse. The existence of "white identity politics," however, is a troubling reminder of how successful the left has been in reinforcing ethnic self-consciousness as a basis for political identity. We need some generous thinking here, or perhaps some global learning. Our coming robot overlords will not tolerate this stuff.

## Academic Freedom

The less academic freedom we have in higher education, the more books are published extolling the merits of the idea. Last year we ran a round-up review of the six or seven newest entries at that point. Here are four more: three of dubious value and one worth your attention.

Lee C. Bollinger and Geoffrey R. Stone have published an edited volume, *The Free Speech Century* (Oxford, 2019). Bollinger, the president of Columbia University, is frequently touted, as he is here on the cover of the book, as "one of the foremost scholars of the First Amendment and freedom of speech and press." His record of actual support for such freedoms at Columbia is mixed. He stood up for the right of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2007. On the other hand, he did nothing to protect the free speech of Jim Gilchrist of the Minuteman Project in 2006, and oversaw a less-than-wrist-slap to the students who violently disrupted the event. At the time, even the *New York Times* called him out ("A Columbia Expert on Free

Speech Is Accused of Speaking Too Softly”). In the years since, Bollinger has often made a practice of supporting students whose free speech consists of unsupported accusations, while leaving the targets of such attacks to fend for themselves. Most recently this has included ignoring complaints from pro-Israel students that they have been harassed by anti-Zionist groups. See for example, “Students at Columbia U Protest Harassment from Pro-Palestinian Activists,” in the *Jerusalem Post*, October 18, 2018.

Bollinger’s co-author is a professor at the University of Chicago and the chairman of the Committee on Free Expression that issued its now-famous statement in January 2015. That statement has been endorsed by many organizations and adopted by a fair number of other universities. I have been lukewarm towards it from the beginning on the grounds that it asserts the value of “freedom of expression” without offering any foundation at all. Unlike the Woodward Report (Yale’s 1974 vindication of free expression), which upheld that freedom is necessary for the pursuit of truth, the Stone report treats freedom of expression as a good in its own right.

The sixteen articles in *The Free Speech Century* are the work of prominent legal scholars ruminating on First Amendment jurisprudence. These contributions vary in their relevance to the university. Catherine MacKinnon’s screed (“The First Amendment: An Equality Reading”) on how the First Amendment has become a weapon of the powerful, and that it needs to be reinterpreted to advance “substantive equality” may not be very helpful. Robert Post’s contribution (“The Classic First Amendment Tradition Under Stress: Freedom of Speech and the University”) takes up the key point: “[S]peech within universities cannot be governed by classic First Amendment doctrine.” This leads into a pertinent examination of disinvited speakers and shoutdowns.

Henry Reichman’s *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Johns Hopkins, 2019) features a blurb by Post, among others by Michael Mann and Joan Wallach Scott—which is to say that we are within a relatively small circle of progressive writers who approve one another’s work. Reichman is an emeritus professor of history from California State University, East Bay, and chair of the AAUP’s Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure. I read his frequent posts on the *Academe Blog*, where he inveighs against “academic capitalism” in much the same spirit as Christopher Newfield inveighs against “privatization.” In fact, one day last August Reichman devoted his blog to Newfield’s “essential and devastating critique of the privatization of public higher education.”

Reichman can be counted as favoring intellectual diversity on campus and rejecting the notion that some speakers should be “no platformed” because they espouse ideas that the left dislikes. But he holds to this position almost reluctantly. He is “torn,” he says, between his dislike of “tolerance and the meritocratic definition of academic freedom” on the one hand, and “my sense of the university as an ideal locus for the sort of unfettered “testing of ideas”” championed by Mill.

Joan Wallach Scott, professor emerita in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, joins the discussion in her new book *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom* (Columbia, 2019). Her jacket features blurbs by Hank Reichman—a fair exchange—and by Michael Bérubé, which serve as brand identifiers. Scott’s slim volume consists of five essays that cluster on the theme that “right-wing groups have intensified their assaults on the university as a place of critical inquiry.” Readers who can swallow this premise will no doubt enjoy the self-righteous fairy tale that follows from it. Just remember that, as Scott puts it, “The university is not a marketplace of ideas in the sense that any opinion is worth hearing.” Higher education exists, in her view, to promote the “common good,” the definition of which seems to be left entirely to progressive thinkers. In that sense, Scott’s argument resembles Fitzpatrick’s notion of “generous thinking.”

Scott is not comfortable with some of the ways campuses have deployed the notions of trigger warnings, microaggressions, and sexual harassment, which she sees as “the substitution of the politics of individual entitlement for the politics of collective equality and social justice.” She concludes we need academic freedom to “interrogate” those “neoliberal” formulations.

Last in this group of books is George R. La Noue’s *Silenced Stages: The Loss of Academic Freedom and Campus Policy Debates* (Carolina Academic Press, 2019). La Noue is a research professor in public policy and political science at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and a briefer summary of the findings in this book was originally published in *Academic Questions*.<sup>1</sup> Unlike these others, *Silenced Stages* actually reports original research. La Noue set out to determine on the basis of public records how often policy debates occur on college campuses. Focusing on the years 2014 and 2015, he gathered his evidence from ninety-seven campuses and twenty-eight law schools at top-ranked public and private colleges and

<sup>1</sup>George R. La Noue, “Promoting a Campus Culture of Policy Debates,” *Academic Questions* 30, no. 4 (Winter, 2017).

universities. This provided a wealth of material for analysis, but the basic finding is that “serious on-campus policy debates” are rare.

For example, La Noue found a total of sixty-seven policy debates in 2014 in ninety-two institutions, collectively enrolling 991,802 students—a policy debate per 1,000 student ratio of .067.

The finer detail is fascinating. But the general reward of a book like this is that it replaces a general and widely held impression that colleges these days steer clear of serious intellectual debate. We now have a carefully wrought examination of the facts that shows that impression was right.

### Parental Guidance Suggested

Publishers never tire of addressing the anxieties of parents about to send their children to college. Jon McGee’s *Dear Parents: A Field Guide for College Preparation* (Johns Hopkins, 2018) is a simple shopper’s guide that gathers together in 150 pages all the soothing banalities and half-truths that the higher education establishment routinely rolls out for the parents it is about to beggar. A nice touch is the interweaving of “Dear Parents” letters from college functionaries, such as Pam Horne, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management (Retired) at Purdue University. I wish I could warn potential readers, “It’s a sales brochure!” But I doubt they would listen.

John Bader’s *Sending Your Millennial to College: A Parent’s Guide to Supporting College Success* (Johns Hopkins, 2019) is the same publisher addressing the next stop on the train. Your son or daughter is now enrolled. What can you do to improve his or her chances of academic and career success? You can—to go by some of the chapter headings—“Rethink Your Relationship,” “Appreciate Their Academic Choices,” and “Invite Them to Be Uncomfortable.”

I mention these books as a small reminder that efforts to improve American higher education must be, sooner or later, addressed to McGee’s and Bader’s readers. McGee and Bader aim to reassure, but all too often those reassurances are in vain. More than a third of the students who enroll in four-year colleges will never finish. Of those who do finish, nearly 40 percent will not have advanced a bit in the “critical thinking” skills that colleges tout. And more than half of college graduates (54 percent) will end up in jobs for which no college degree is required. These are figures that can be found in Vedder’s book and other places, but oddly not in *Dear Parents* or *Sending Your Millennial to College*.

### **An Item of Academic Interest**

This quarter's item of academic interest is my alligator staple remover. It is much like an ordinary staple remover but is fashioned as the head of a scaly green gator about to snap shut on his prey. He has glass eyes staring out at the swamp of papers, and in addition to his staple-devouring fangs, he has been equipped with upper and lower jaws full of green peg teeth. The dentures contribute nothing to his capacity to extract staples, but they add a touch of fierceness to his smile. How I came in possession of this little work of functional art I don't know, and the opportunities to employ his talents on stapled papers have, of course, dwindled. He sits at the edge of my desk, nigh my stapler, forever hungry, a symbol of every academic's hidden desire to tear asunder.