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Novel Readings: Reimagining the Value of the University

Abstract

This article considers the function and value of the university through the close reading of Tom Wolfe's 2004 novel *I am Charlotte Simmons*. Comparing the neoliberal university with an idealized university committed to intellectual inquiry, the article argues for a consideration of the academic values lost in the contemporary university, specifically the values of an intellectual meritocracy, academic identity and academic integrity. The article calls for a sustained and sincere conversation about the idea and ideal of the university.

Cet article prend en considération la fonction et la valeur de l'université par le biais d'une lecture attentive du roman de Tom Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, publié en 2004. Comparant l'université néo-libérale à une université idéalisée vouée à la recherche intellectuelle, l'article propose un argument pour examiner les valeurs académiques perdues dans l'université contemporaine, en particulier les valeurs relatives à une méritocratie intellectuelle, à l'identité académique et à l'intégrité académique. Dans cet article, on plaide en faveur d'une conversation soutenue et sincère sur l'idée et l'idéal de l'université.

Keywords

neoliberalism, higher education, function of university, value of university, academic integrity, Tom Wolfe, literary analysis, student motivation, student mental health

In his work on the idea of the university, Barnett (1990) calls on readers to think about how the university is conceptualized and the practical implications that result. He argues that while historically the “university”¹ may have had an identifiable single purpose – contemplating great ideas, training for employment, research, knowledge mobilization, or community engagement – in the contemporary moment no single idea of the university exists. That said, Barnett (2011) rightly points out that despite the different ideas that may “reside in one institution [...] still, we can identify different ideas of the university and engage with them one by one” (p. 1). By attending to these different and often competing ideas of the university we gain an opportunity to ask not only about the purpose and function of the university in the present, but also to imagine what the university could and ought to be in the future.

This article approaches the work of teasing out different ideas, functions and values of the university in the contemporary, North American context by way of a close reading of Wolfe’s (2004) best-selling novel *I am Charlotte Simmons*. The novel presents two competing visions of the contemporary university in order to explore and debate the function and value of the university. The argument advanced here relies not on the reader of this article having read *I am Charlotte Simmons*, but on noticing in their students, their colleagues, on their campuses, the unsettled and uncomfortable disparity between what the university imagines itself to be and the reality it delivers. In this introductory section I set up the arguments of the novel, which will be considered in more detail following an exploration of methodology and approach.

To this end, *I am Charlotte Simmons* explores two versions and functions of the contemporary university and asks the reader to consider what version, what kind of university ought to be. In the first version, the university is a space for the contemplation and production of influential ideas, a location of political and social integrity and activism, and the fertile ground for the development of scholar-citizens. Contrasting this idyllic, imagined vision of the university is the second version, presented as the “reality” of university: where young people come not to learn ideas, but to earn credentials; where hierarchies of race, gender and class determine worth; and, a space where intellect and ideas are either plagiarized or ignored.

This second version of the university in many ways exemplifies the neoliberal university. Neoliberalism, a political and economic theory, prizes individual entrepreneurial freedom and argues for institutional and state frameworks that protect private property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey, 2007). For writers like Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004), neoliberalism presents a significant threat to the university as its reliance on the market to regulate social policies and civic life does not align with its traditional, democratic functions. In their book *Take Back Higher Education*, Giroux and Searls-Giroux (2004) argue for a removal of corporate interests from the university and a return to the civic and democratic principles of the institution.

So, too, *I am Charlotte Simmons* presents an argument for the hazards of this university in its portrait of the neoliberal university as an academically bankrupt institution. Such an argument unfolds in the novel’s examination of how success is determined at the university. Specifically the novel considers through fraternity culture how who you know, rather than what you know, determines success. More broadly, the

¹ Differing historical, social, economic and political trajectories and instantiations of the institution further fracture the idea of a monolithic or Platonic “university” idea(l).

novel explodes the notion of the university as meritocracy by exposing the manipulations and contrivances that can undermine its academic mission.

Moving from the expansive example of the social culture of the university, the reader sees the versions of the university worked out in the novel's protagonist: Charlotte Simmons. She serves as a personification of the clash and contest of these two versions of the university. Her character represents the attempt to reconcile the desire for the university of ideas with desires for prestige that can so readily be bought. Charlotte's experience of the university demonstrates the extent to which principles of neoliberalism have eroded the institution as an intellectual community motivated by exploring ideas and expanding knowledge in favour of an institution motivated by profit.

As Charlotte struggles, so too the institution grapples with the impossibility of the university dialectic in the narrated conflict between the demands of the athletics program and the academic mission of the university. Indeed, this narrative thread moves the reader from the specificity of individuals to the expanse of the university administration and the university-as-institution. In the wider institutional lens the reader comes to see the ways in which the university, as embedded in state and national economies, enacts the drive for profit at the expense of all else, most notably academic integrity and the academic mission.

While the novel sets out the profit-motivated version of the university as the reality of the contemporary campus, in contrasting this version with the university of intellect and ideas the novel offers a striking critique of its reality and reflects on what has been lost in abandoning the university of ideas. That the novel never questions whether this university of ideas ever existed in the first place is not our issue here; rather, this paper will explore the binary versions of the university and argue that in its critique of the contemporary university *I am Charlotte Simmons* offers a vision and argument for what the university could, and should, be.

Reading with Purpose; Or, This is Not Your Traditional Methodology Section

The questions asked and explored in this novel – What is the value of the university? Of a university education? What purpose should the university serve in our society? What are the responsibilities of students and citizens to the university? – are understated in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Certainly the movement towards quality assurance in Canadian institutions indicates on one level an interest in the function of the university, but the value of the university as a space for intellectual growth stands as an unexamined question in a quality assurance discourse overwhelmingly preoccupied with quantifying the effects of education in order to satisfy the imperative to prove worth and efficiency. Reading and analyzing novels will not provide us with any hard numbers or concrete strategies. We will not conclude this paper with actionable plans; instead, we have a somewhat more ethereal, if perhaps more satisfying outcome: a space to explore these questions, react and (re)form opinions.

If only for its unfamiliarity, the methodology of literary analysis I adopt here – close reading – may be challenging to readers accustomed to quantitative and other qualitative research methods. In close reading, the reader analyzes how words and literary devices work together to produce particular meanings. Close reading is not concerned with how frequently words appear or with prepared codebooks. Rather, for literary

scholars the work of analyzing a text happens both by considering the text as a self-contained work, and by reading the text as a voice speaking to and about its wider cultural context.

At the level of the text in and of itself, analysis pays attention to how character, setting, symbols, narrative point of view, chronology, and literary devices contribute to the themes and arguments of the narrative itself. Analysis of the self-contained text, then, looks to identify the alignment and strength of these elements, viewing the narrative as an aesthetic object capable of great beauty. So too, this kind of analysis may be interested in the work as a means for the reader to encounter previously unconsidered perspectives and to explore, by reading, experiences otherwise foreign or unavailable. Whether as an exercise in exploring the aesthetic dimensions or accounting for the novel's capacity to introduce unique perspectives and experiences, this kind of analysis pays close attention to specific words, phrases, and motifs: that is, it engages in "close reading."

Just as a novel has literary elements and ideas that invite interpretation of the text itself, so, too, and inseparably, it speaks to and about ideas circulating at the time of its production. In the instance of *I am Charlotte Simmons*, the novel specifically describes university life at the fictional Dupont University, but its discussion of the contradictions, inconsistencies and fraudulence of the accepted ideal of the university speaks with resonance and clarity to the contemporary culture of higher education. As readers we take this mimetic element as a surrogate, and therefore safe, space for exploring these questions. Within the novel we do not risk the ire of students, peers, administrators or government if we ask questions about class sizes, quality assurance, declining admissions standards, grade inflation or an immature student body, because it is *just a book*.

Except it is not *just a book*, at all. Rather, the popularity of the book and its author – bestsellers – suggests it is a book that resonates with an eager audience. So it is that as a scholar of both literary analysis and of the scholarship of teaching and learning I view this book as my "data." Through close reading of this novel I discuss results and draw conclusions that rely on strength of analysis and persuasion of argument to ground truth claims. Because this novel speaks to and about the culture of higher education, it is evidence of the changing and challenging culture of higher education. This idea is not a tautology, because by analyzing the text readers are able to ask and explore questions about higher education that might otherwise go unrecognized or remain inaccessible.

From Abstraction to Actuality: Introducing the University As it Really Is

One of the principal questions about higher education the novel asks readers to consider is to what extent the idealized image of the university holds true in the contemporary moment. While the novel explores this question throughout the text, the answer – the image of the university is false – appears in the opening scene of the novel as two fraternity boys, Hoyt and Vance, walk through "the Great Yard." The description of the Great Yard as "a botanical garden, two floral lawns with gazebos, tree-studded parking lots [...] so artfully contrived you would never know Dupont was practically surrounded by the black slums of a city" (Wolfe, 2004, p. 5) introduces one of the central themes of the novel: the disparity between appearance and reality. The "contrived" in this description speaks to the ways the exteriority of grand lecture halls and "legendary landscapes" (p. 5) mask the "depraved" and "vulgar" activities of the institution. As if to

cement this theme in the opening pages, the boys continue their walk only to be stopped when they notice

a man with a great shock of white hair, sitting on the ground at the base of a tree trunk with his pants and his boxer shorts down around his ankles and his heavy white thighs spread apart [...] a girl [...] was on her knees between his knees, facing him. Her big head of hair [...] pumped up and down over his lap. (p. 7)

Not only are they witness to a public display of oral sex, but Vance quickly identifies that the man is none other than “Governor Whathisname, from California, the guy who’s [*sic*] supposed to speak at commencement!” (p. 7) The Governor of California’s participation in public oral sex (not to mention the fraught questions of gendered power at work) serve to compound this initial presentation of Dupont University as a place of deceptive exteriority. Whereas the reader may easily identify the pastoral landscape so often associated with the contemplative mind of the scholar, the narrative quickly undermines this association by foregrounding the body and its base sexual desires.

Together with this portrait of the university as beguiling artifice, this opening scene also explodes the idea of university students as scholars dedicated to the pursuit of truth or the advancement of knowledge. Hoyt, in witnessing the Governor’s behaviour, identifies an opportunity for networking, and perhaps profit. While Vance fears recriminations from the Governor, Hoyt is preoccupied with the liberty afforded both by his Dupont education and his attachment to the exclusive fraternity, Saint Ray. He first points out to Vance that membership in Saint Ray is “a MasterCard... for doing whatever you want... *whatever you want*” (p. 9) and then extrapolates to the benefits of being a “Dupont Man,” noting

Dupont! Science – Nobel winners! Whole stacks of them!... although he couldn’t exactly remember any names... Athletes – giants! [...] although he found it a bit dorky to go to games and cheer a lot... Scholars – legendary!... even though they were sort of spectral geeks who floated around the edges of collegiate life [...] *the best people!* (p. 10, emphasis in original)

For Hoyt, attending Dupont is much more about connecting with “*the best people*” than it is about learning. He is unfazed by the encounter with the Governor in part because the Governor’s behaviour does nothing to complicate or contest his existing image of the university. Rather, as Hoyt expects and accepts the university as principally a place for sexual and social connection he barely registers what the reader sees as a gross infraction of the idea of the university.

In combination, the disruption of both of these idealized images – the university itself and the students who attend it – introduces the argument of the text that these scenes of depravity and these vulgar characters are to be remonstrated. That is to say, in the novel’s opening pages the reader not only encounters the portrait of the contemporary university, but its critique.

“A transcript... that’s like a ticket to a lot of money”²: Earning Credentials for your Earning Potential

The reader is not meant to like Hoyt; he is lazy, profane, and misogynistic. Just as the reader is encouraged to dislike Hoyt, the reader is encouraged to dismiss Hoyt’s instrumental approach to education: attending university merely an obligatory stop en route to employment. Hoyt might well resonate with readers of this Issue as he stands in for the voice of professional skill development in the discussions about the relationship between curriculum and employment (Craswell, 2007; Harvey, 2000).

As the novel uses Hoyt to contrast a university education for enlightenment versus a university education for employment, it asks whether these are mutually exclusive propositions, exploring what effect education-for-employment has on curriculum, student engagement and motivation. While it might be easy to dismiss Hoyt as a hyperbolic synecdoche³ for the student body, or a straw man so unlikeable readers might dismiss him because students cannot all be *that* bad, the reader must take his approach to education seriously. His approach must be seriously considered both because it resonates with popular understandings of students engaged in buying credentials, rather than earning an education, and because it exposes the neoliberal practices of students who see a university degree as part of the self-actualizing process of becoming efficient and employable workers.

Hoyt complicates the idea of the university as a meritocracy in two compelling ways: he must artfully construct the appearance of high economic status to secure the concomitant high social status; and, he secures a job not by virtue of his Dupont credential, but because of what he knows of the Governor’s sexual transgressions. The idea of the university as a meritocracy where worth and status will be granted based on academic and intellectual achievement is debunked as Hoyt, coming from the “deserving poor” and gaining entry to Dupont on a partial scholarship, conceals his history and, in another example of duplicitous exteriority, manufactures an alternative autobiography (Wolfe, 2004, p. 121). Hoyt must reimagine his past in order to secure a spot in the most “upscale fraternity at Dupont” (p. 121), and in so doing secure his position at the head of the social hierarchy of the university.

After deceiving his way into the fraternity, Hoyt lives his mantra of Saint Ray as “a MasterCard... for doing whatever you want... *whatever you want*” (p. 9 – emphasis in original) by attending few classes and rarely completing assignments, all the while drinking beer and engaging in promiscuous sex. It is only after Vance points out that the investment banks Hoyt aims to work for will expect to see exceptional transcripts that Hoyt explicitly considers his employment outcomes. His initial panic – “but his fucking *grades!*” (p. 122 – emphasis in original) – may read, at first blush, as a vindication of the meritocracy and a suitable punishment for Hoyt’s laziness and sense of entitlement; however, the reader soon discovers that while employment first depends on the credential you hold, it hinges on the nepotism of who you know. To wit: He receives an offer from “Pierce & Pierce for \$95,000 a year to start” because the Governor of California is “quite a fan” (pp. 450-451). Certainly the reader knows, as does Hoyt, that the Governor’s influence in arranging the job is a bribe for his silence, but the bribe itself indicates the

² Wolfe, T. (2004). *I am Charlotte Simmons*. New York: Palgrave. p. 276.

³ A literary device in which a part stands in as a representative of the whole.

extent to which the meritocracy of the university is presented as a flawed and mawkish ideal.

In contrast to the nepotism of Hoyt's employment prospects, the novel pits Adam Gelling, the dedicated and intellectual student. However, even as the two students evince binary approaches to academic practice, Adam, too, aims to use his University credential as a way to both employment and social status. He, too, complicates the idea of a meritocracy by exposing the ways in which it can be manipulated through strategic connections and achievements. He counsels Charlotte when he says, "You're an intellectual, but you want to be a member of the millennial aristocracy [and not "just" a graduate student or college teacher], which is a meritocracy, but an aristo-meritocracy. You're a mutant" (p. 277). He then issues his specific advice for gaining entry to this aristo-meritocracy:

'Global' is a key concept. It's a big plus if you show an altruistic interest in the Third World. Tanzania is very hot right now. East Timor is not bad. Haiti will do, but you haven't like... you haven't like gone deep enough into the third World. You know what I mean? (p. 278)

Adam personifies the strategic student who sees the university as a means to secure the kind of employment that will reap material reward. Especially because Adam has inarguable intellectual gifts, the novel presents his crass and manipulative approach to his education as a particularly strong indictment of the idea of the university as a viable meritocracy: if any student could succeed this way it would be Adam.

Adam's strategic approach troubles readers concerned with designing learning experiences to support "deep" as opposed to "surface" approaches to learning as his "strategy" is not simply taking surface approaches when possible, but more to follow only those lines of intellectual inquiry that will achieve his twin aims of money and influence. So rather than "deep" learning, Adam instead invests his time and intellectual energy in manipulating the university system to achieve his aims⁴.

While Hoyt and Adam may represent oppositional approaches to the social and academic lives of the University, they share a joint purpose in the novel of undermining the ideal of the university as an institution where hard work and merit result in success. Together their distinct approaches reveal the limits of the meritocracy by exposing its susceptibility to influence and internal manipulation. The reader is left with a portrait of an academic curriculum hollowed out of significance by the realization that students are using the culture and connections of the university, rather than its academic opportunities, to achieve and advance.

"The Life of the Mind" and the "Rut-rut-rut": Charlotte Simmons and the Incommensurate Functions of the University

The opposition of Hoyt and Adam as partying frat boy and studious strategic student, respectively, are brought together in Charlotte Simmons. In her character, the reader not only encounters the functions of the university as an institution for intellectual

⁴ This pursuit calls to mind those faculty members and administrators who find they propose research or initiatives around "hot topics, as these are the topics with research funding attached.

pursuit and the life of the mind *and* as a space for negotiating social, class and sexual identity, but as Charlotte's mental health deteriorates, the reader comes to appreciate the incommensurability of the intellectual mission of the university with its social functions, the ideal of the university with its depicted reality.

When the reader first encounters Charlotte, it is through her first person limited narration as she reads the commencement address at her high school. As she delivers the address she sees herself in relation to her peers as "on a plane far above them [...] At Dupont she will find people like herself, people who actually have a life of the mind, people whose concept of the future is actually something beyond Saturday night" (Wolfe, 2004, p. 18). Charlotte's initial idea of the university is one where academic interests are paramount and an academic community nurtures and enriches ideas. She images rooms "filled with people just like herself, bright young people [...] exhilarated by the fact they had come this far" (p. 83). Unfortunately for Charlotte, she quickly discovers that the "life of the mind" she anticipates is instead a life of the body: "the vulgarity, the *rudeness*, the *impudence*, the virtual nudity [...] and *drinking* [...] Now Charlotte was more than appalled. She was frightened [...] How could this be real? This was *Dupont...*" (p. 91 – emphasis in original).

Charlotte's initial enthusiasm for Dupont and the intellectual community she expects to find there is overtaken by the social reality she encounters of drinking, partying and sex and the academic reality of easy and boring classes. In her first French class, for instance, she realizes

they were both reading the book... in *English translation* [...] She had analyzed every line of it, practically disassembled it and put it back together – and nobody else was reading it in French, *including the professor*. How could that be? (p. 106, emphasis in original)

By way of contrast between Charlotte's expectations and her natural academic gifts, and the lackadaisical approaches of her peers and instructors, the novel readily offers up its critique of the failure of the university to promote intellectual investigation and growth. Similar to contemporary concerns about grade inflation and the dilution of a degree's worth (Cote & Allahar, 2007), Charlotte's experience reinforces the reality, represented in the novel, of the contemporary university as one of intellectual ease put in place to ensure all students complete their degree requirements.

These encounters do little to upset Charlotte's confidence in her own academic performance and gifts, but they do unsettle her pronounced desire for recognition and accolades. She observes

She was no star here at Dupont, not so far. Nothing had altered her inexpressible conviction that she would be the most brilliant student at this famous university – but how was anyone supposed to know about it, even if she was? [...] Here, if you were so brilliant who would know and who would care? [...] At this exalted institution, what was that compared to success as a girl? What should she wear? (p. 241)

For Charlotte the urge for recognition outstrips her desire for intellectual growth and improvement. While she may still enjoy and feel enriched by taking part in classes, the reader discovers that her academic success owes less to her absolute commitment to a “life of the mind” than it does to her desire to receive praise and be recognized as exceptional. In an effort to achieve the recognition that circulates at Dupont, that is to say, to achieve social status, Charlotte attaches herself to those already in possession of such status and compromises her personal principles by drinking and having sex.

Charlotte accomplishes being recognized for her “success as a girl,” (p. 214) but only temporarily and at great personal cost. Charlotte compromises her personal ethics by having drunk sex with Hoyt, and in the lead up to this climax she experiences what she identifies as the appropriate attention and admiration of those around her. However, once she has literally had sex and symbolically compromised the integrity of the “life of the mind” by prioritizing her physical body, she experiences the simultaneous punishments of social ostracism and failed academic performance.

Why are these punishments wedded? For practical purposes Charlotte is so overcome with grief and remorse she cannot concentrate on her studies. The third person limited narrator considers,

Why hadn't Charlotte Simmons done the same reading? Why hadn't *she* kept up? Why hadn't *she* found time to think about these things... and have a life of the mind? She knew she shouldn't dwell on the answer. She couldn't afford to lapse back into tears. (p. 677 – emphasis in original)

Practically speaking, her emotional distress has prevented her from concentrating on her academic work.

On a symbolic level, by reading Charlotte as a personification of the ideal of the university as intellectually driven, her focus on recognition and her subsequent realization that recognition will only come from social, rather than intellectual, performance reveals the shift in purpose and function of the university from ideas to bodies. The depression and declining grades that stand as unjust consequences for her focus on achieving “success as a girl” reinforce the novel’s condemnation of the contemporary university and the impossibility of the two versions of the university discursively coexisting.

A more troubling reading of Charlotte’s compromised intellectual life comes in the representation of her as a “fallen woman,” as suffering mental distress and as being emotionally overwrought. While Charlotte is practically and symbolically punished, men like Hoyt and Adam who participate in similar activities continue to succeed socially and academically. While outside the scope of the reading here, the reader might well question the gendered politics of the novel that unproblematically represent the sexually promiscuous and hyper-emotional woman.

Even while questioning the gendered representation of Charlotte, the reader feels little sympathy for Charlotte as she struggles to reconcile her academic failure with her sense of self as academic star, just as the reader may feel unsympathetic towards students who do not fully commit to the academic mission of the university. When Charlotte’s experience is compared to the compromised integrity of the academic mission of the university, however, it becomes more difficult to justify the sense that she received what she deserves, that is to say a poor grade for her absent academic effort.

“You can’t let anybody know you’re actually *interested* in a course [...] then you’re really fucked”⁵: Exploring the Academic Mission of the University

I am Charlotte Simmons has parallel and sometimes intersecting narrative threads that serve to highlight and complicate the questions circulating in the novel about the value of university. One of these parallel threads reveals that Charlotte’s concerns about her academic performance are misplaced because the university itself is more preoccupied with its social image than its academic mission. In the parallel narrative, Adam Gelling, who tutors for Dupont’s athletics department, writes an essay for one of the student-athletes he tutors. The athlete’s teacher, Jerry Quat, identifies the plagiarism and proceeds to follow the policies for academic dishonesty governed by the university.

However, before Quat can take the case to the academic review board, the President of the University intervenes. The President recognizes that “A case indicating that Dupont had tutors who wrote the athletes’ papers for them would explode all that [the perception of academic performance without compromised academic standards] in the public eye” (Wolfe, 2004, p. 558). That is to say that if Quat succeeded in arguing for one of the most commonsense tenets of the university mission – that students conduct themselves with academic integrity – then he would risk exposing the reality of the university’s academic mission as one devoid of intellectual rigour.

Such an exposure, the President realizes, would have significant consequences for the University because “bigtime sports created a glorious aura about everything the university did and *in the long run* increased everything sharply – prestige, alumni donations, receipts of every sort, as well as influence” (p. 560 – emphasis in original).

Ironically, then, it is the President of the University, along with the athlete’s coach, who argues that Quat drop the case, while Quat defends the academic mission of the University, noting,

I take plagiarism very seriously. Offhand, I can’t think of a worse crime against scholarship and learning and the entire mission of a university. There may be those weary cynics on the faculty here who think the university can no longer claim to have a mission, but I’m not one of them. (p. 693)

Quat’s declaration here gets to the heart of the argument of the novel that the academic mission of the university *has already* been eroded to the extent that classes are made easier, assignments are completed by tutors and the brightest students are driven to drop classes and fail exams to maintain their social standings. The narrative exhaustively documents the many ways the cynics are right in that the university “can no longer claim to have a mission” and in representing Quat as an extremist faculty member - “*a little pissar*,” (p. 553 – emphasis in original). Indeed, according to the President the academic ideals of the university that Quat defends are similarly extreme, aggravating, and above all *distracting* from the contemporary functions of the university as profit generating and a forum for establishing social hierarchies.

Finally, the scene pitting Quat against the President and the athletics coach also exemplifies the extent to which the academic mission of the university has come to adopt a defensive position in contemporary conversations about the function of the university.

⁵ Wolfe, T. (2004). *I am Charlotte Simmons*. New York: Picador. p. 196.

Rather than scenes of united outrage at plagiarism, the reader is presented a portrait of a complex economic negotiation where the costs of exposure, and in this exposure preserving the integrity of the academic mission, are budgeted against losses in prestige, influence and real dollars. That the public face and administrative leader of the University, the President, sees quashing plagiarism to preserve image and economic value as a foregone conclusion speaks to the distance between the neoliberal realities of the contemporary university and its imagined ideal.

“In Latin, *liber* means free, it also means, book”⁶: Concluding Thoughts

In popular discourse about the purpose of higher education workplace training reigns paramount; employment preparation and professional development surpass the ideals of investigating and advancing truth *for its own sake*. Whether this ideal is, in fact, worth adopting is not the question here or in the novel: intellectual exploration need not be a *sine qua non* for the purpose of the university. The argument advanced here is simply that the function and value of the university, and the embedded contradictions and oppositions of its purpose, need to be explicitly and vigorously explored. That the risk we run in perceiving these discussions about the function of the university as either foregone conclusions or intellectual exercises without practical – or measurable – outcome does a disservice to our responsibilities as educators and citizens. We owe it to the Hoyts of our campuses who see the university as a ticket to a good job just as we owe it to the Charlottes who come to university seeking the “castle in the air” of intellectual purpose to discuss and debate what the university promises to be and what it practically delivers.

As educators, we bring these conversations into our classrooms in the explicit discussions of the relevance of course material to employment (Wlodkowski, 2011), in conversations about academic integrity and in our stated expectations for student participation and achievement. Our teaching philosophies may make us more and less likely to explicitly discuss the value of the university with students, but our course designs and conduct as instructors implicitly raise the questions: What do we reward and value in learners? In the university? What are we doing here?

To answer these questions on the purpose of the university we can turn again to the novel, to Charlotte and to the Humanities. She advises a colleague to take classes in the liberal arts, approaching his studies with integrity and gravity because

The Romans would let the slaves get educated in all sorts of practical subjects, like math, like engineering [...] But only Roman citizens, the *free* people – *liber*? – could take things like rhetoric and literature [...] Because they were the arts of persuasion – and they didn’t want the slaves to learn how to present arguments that might inspire them to unite and rise up or something? So the ‘liberal’ arts are the arts of persuasion and they didn’t want anybody but free citizens knowing how to persuade people. (Wolfe, 2004, pp. 195-196 – emphasis in original)

Charlotte, in many ways, anticipates this Issue because she sees the value in the Humanities for providing students and citizens with the skill of persuasion. The portrayal of Charlotte, Hoyt, and Dupont is also a means for a bestseller to do justice to – by

⁶ Wolfe, T. (2004). *I am Charlotte Simmons*. New York: Picador. p. 195.

staging them – the liberal arts’ promise: asking significant and rebellious questions and providing persuasive arguments for consideration.

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