

Dialogic Education in an Age of Administrative Preening

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I am honored to be with you as the 2016 recipient of the Paul H. Boase Prize for Scholarship. I am thankful to Amy Chadwick, the committee, Pat Davidson, and the faculty here for this opportunity. Paul Boase was my teacher and my friend. I roomed with him at conferences for over twenty years often when I had no money and he assisted with payment. I have many stories to tell about Paul Boase: his great sense of humor, his loyalty to people, and his quiet regard for all. I simply want to thank you once again. Of all of the awards I have received, this is the most meaningful. I loved Paul Boase and was deeply fortunate to know him. I should add one other statement. My Masters thesis and dissertation director was Ray Wagner. I owe my scholarly engagement in the field of communication largely to Paul and Ray. I am thankful.

Businesses and industries invite trouble and decline when they shift their emphasis from their core principles and products to the periphery. In the United States, the automobile industry is a good example (December 2008) of the move from research and development to an emphasis on style and power. Higher education is courting a similar set of problems. We are increasingly interested in style and power—what a campus looks like and a seemingly ever-expanding pool of administrators. In a time of massive student debt (Bok, 2013, p. 95), public questioning of higher education (Bok, 2013, p. 2), and downsizing of faculty with expedient administrative growth (Bok, 2013, p. 33), higher education is losing its core values of teaching, scholarship, and service. I offer this essay as a thought piece situated within a plea for change. I am unwilling to listen to one administrator after another sell us on another dotcom era where one company after another fails (Geier, 2015). The Super Bowl commercials of 2000 consisted of 17 dotcom businesses with only 9 now in existence (Bennett, 2011; Geier, 2015). At that moment, only companies ‘not yet’ making money garnered significant investments and many stated that Warren Buffet’s era was finished (Geier, 2015; Wray, 2010). Note: Buffett is still here and many of the dotcom companies are no longer. Those company executives keep the focus off genuine productivity and, unlike Buffet, preened in front of financial mirrors.

Tenacious Hope

Dylan Thomas (1952) urged resistance to and against death, to the end. His words demanded defiance to the finish: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. The light of higher education is dimming and our response must be tenacious hope. The heart of this essay pivots on statistics about the increasing rise of administrative influence in both number and power. My advice to me and to those hearing these comments is to remember why we joined higher education: we love ideas and the discussion of them with others—scholarship and teaching are lifeblood to us. A college administrator who I deeply admired stated that the definition of an adult is the ability to love when liking is simply impossible—such is our moment in higher education today. Love of the academy must sustain us in this moment of limited likeability.

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Nurturing the positive, as I offer condemnation of the current direction of higher education, requires beginning and concluding with information that walks counter to the current shadow side of higher education. I commence and close with points of tenacious hope. Optimism turns us into consumers, lamenting that the product of existence does not match our needs or tastes. Tenacious hope, contrarily, requires us to roll up our sleeves and embark upon the work. However, following the advice of another friend, when working in the fields of higher education today, “Do not forget to wear work boots. It is inevitable that you will step in numerous messy places in the field of higher education.” Thus, before I question administrative bloat, I want to remind you and me of the vital importance of administration. Tenacious hope begins with uplifting that which assists what we love in higher education: teaching, service and scholarship.

Karen Lollar (2013) outlines a practical and conceptual map, revealing the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the doing of academic leadership from a perspective of dialogic education. She offers a voice of tenacious hope, sketching the characteristics of dialogic dwelling places that she believes administrators can nourish. Lollar provides five elements capable of nourishing the terrain of creative education within the spirit of dialogic education. First, one portrays basic respect for others, beginning with acknowledgement of uniqueness and difference. Second, one responds to the call of the Other by refusing to reduce common practices and daily routines to unreflective banality. Third, one attends to all, both those we like and those we do not. Fourth, one foregoes expectation of a template of action by assuming unique responsibility for persons and situations. Fifth, one embodies a welcoming power of acknowledgment and models its importance. Lollar reminds us that communication is a bridge from the Other to me that requires thoughtful and responsible crossing. Conscientious leaders function without prescribed action; they understand the phrase “here I am” and act on behalf of an institution and the specific Other.

Lollar accentuates administrative responsibilities and obligations inclusive of the specific/concrete Other and the institution. Lollar uses the language of Emmanuel Levinas to announce the dilemma of leadership, the tension between ‘ethics’ and ‘justice,’ the ‘Saying’ and the ‘Said.’ Ethics attends to interpersonal responsibility to and for the Other. Justice responds to institutions, laws, and regulations constructed with the hope of protecting those not at the immediate table of power and influence. Saying is the revelatory that guides discernment of ethical responsibility in the spontaneity of human exchange. The Said offers guidance in and through public structures and agreements. Leadership unites contrary terms such as ethics and justice, Saying and Said. Leaders have obligations to the Other before us (ethics) and those we cannot see and do not even know (justice). We learn from and respond to the revelatory of context (Saying) and we build together configurations that others can understand and depend upon (the Said). Lollar advocates a dwelling place of unity of contraries which permits leaders to nourish lives on dialogic ground not fearful of uncertainty or a need of undue facility of response. Lollar frames leadership as crucial in meeting the complex and the unexpected. Discerning temporal answers emerges as one addresses dilemmas where leaders feel pulled between individual persons, immediate context, organizational needs, and the desire to responsively include those not present. In the heat of attending to deadlines, quantitative information, explicating goals and expectations one cannot forget the face of the Other matters as well as the importance of those not near the table of decision making. Lollar does not paint a tranquil picture; nevertheless, she details a leader’s focus of attention, inclusive of those present, those afar, and the mission of higher education, teaching, service, and scholarship. How an academic leader responds to this trinity of education invites a dwelling of what Lollar termed dialogic

engagement or what Martin Buber (1967) called “existential trust” which permits all stakeholders to trust the ground that gathers and situates our work together.

Focus of Attention

Lollar’s essay paints an accurate picture of leadership, caught in the unity of contraries of persons and institutional obligations. Working through such daily dilemmas is the responsibility of leadership. Lollar’s insights yield a basic truth: leaders work within and with a necessarily divided focus of attention; they must seek temporally correct action as they navigate competing demands. The question posed by this essay’s title, “Dialogic Education in an Age of Administrative Preening,” unmasks what ensues when a seemingly all-administrative focus of educational attention emerges. Take for example, an exchange with a full professor and nationally known faculty member. This person came to my office with an imposed servanthood complaint, wondering why a provost feels it acceptable to say, ‘My faculty.’ My good colleague rebelled against the personal pronoun, considering three facts: (1) my colleague has a longer tenure than the provost; (2) the university, not the provost, provides an academic home; and (3) my colleague joined an academic discipline, a department, and a university, not an administrative cult. My colleague stated that the task of a provost is to facilitate good work for the institution and its members, faculty and students. The provost’s comment fell outside the horizon of tension between persons and institution and for my colleague invoked an image of “preening.” This full professor challenged a focus of attention resting on administrative strutting that omits the hard work of sorting through competing demands of persons (past, present, and future) and the mission and health of an institution.

My colleague is keenly aware of shifting power in the academic community. One senses this change in one’s own university, in professional associations, and in anecdotal tales about the academy. I offer two such stories. A colleague of mine, an outstanding administrator, entertained a large audience with the following account. When he and his wife wanted a pet, they could not agree on whether it should be a dog or a cat. Their final compromise generated a third alternative, a rabbit! A few years later, the kids wanted a dog; the family wondered how the dog would deal with the rabbit. Interestingly, the first time the dog confronted the rabbit, the rabbit bit the dog on the nose. From that point on, the dog remained afraid of the rabbit. My colleague then left his audience with a moral tied to his rabbit/dog story. For years, the faculty on college campuses acted like rabbits capable of inflicting serious wounds on administrators and members of the board of trustees. However, a dramatic shift transpired on college campuses when administrations and board members stood up and asserted a newfound fact: we are the dogs, and we eat rabbits. Since that point, the rabbits on most college campuses are cautious.

The second anecdote centers on an observation from a friend commenting on administrative mentoring programs. Such programs generally involve a senior member of the administration, commonly an associate dean or an associate provost, who meets with younger colleagues and offers comments on the process of administration. My friend states that such learning about administration is similar to meeting with a great musician who loves talking about music without taking time to actually practice the craft of music. Musicians are practicing doers as academics must be as well. Failing to engage the craft of higher education invites the dogs of administration to gather in number of dominance.

Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) wrote the *Fall of the Faculty: the Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. He is the author of approximately 25 books and 119 scholarly

articles. He holds positions at John Hopkins University and Cornell University. I cited his work extensively in an essay for the *Atlantic Journal of Communication* titled: “Educational Misdirections: Attending to Levinas’s Call for Ethics as First Principle” (Arnett, 2016). The thesis of Ginsberg’s book is straightforward; there is administrative bloat on college campuses. He asks how many of us know people who have administrative positions that are unclear in their contribution. He does not reject the importance of deans, provosts, or presidents. He critiques the expanding number and role of what he calls ‘deanlets,’ whose tasks are often amorphous. Deanlets might be a term used to describe administrators associated with Enron. I watched a video and discussion of the financial misdeeds of Enron, which generated an extraordinary number of financial changes with this country.² Interviewed Enron employees could not explicate the exact purpose of the organization. How many deanlets are unable to offer an answer that renders public support of teaching and scholarship? The ideal role of each deanlet is service that supports teaching and scholarship. If these keys go forgotten, the university loses its soul and clarity of direction; such actions result in increasing decline via lack of attention to and with core values of higher education

Ginsberg provides disturbing statistics about administration intrusion. Since 1975, the number of BA degrees granted increased 47% and the number of degree-granting institutions by 50% (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 28). The numbers of administrators expanded mightily, however, between 1975 and 2005. During this period, the number of full-time faculty increased 51%, administrators increased 85%, and other professionals including staff increased 240% (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 25). Exploring these statistics today, I am convinced we would unearth even more disturbing numbers. Ginsberg (2011) calls for increased transparency about the amount of revenue spent on administration, not only for basic deanlet salaries, but also for their staffs, meals, conferences, etc. All of their expenses challenge budgets set aside for teaching and scholarship. In Ginsberg’s words:

As a benchmark, trustees should compare their own school’s ratio of managers and staffers per hundred students to the national mean, which is currently an already inflated 9 for private schools and 8 for public colleges. If the national mean is 9 deanlets per [hundred] student[s] at private colleges then why [do some schools have 64, 40, or 31] Management-minded administrators claim to believe in benchmarking, so they should not object to being benchmarked. If I were a board member at one of the administratively top-heavy schools, I would want to know why my school employed three or four or five or six times more deanlets than the national average. (p. 206)

Ginsberg calls for resistance to skyrocketing administrative costs that marginalize teaching, service, and scholarship by the misdirection of resources and what a campus seemingly should value (Arnett, 2016).

Andrew Hacker, author of *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* and regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, and Claudia Dreifus of Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (2011) continue conversation about

² The United States has preformed a number of hearings and reports regarding the impact of the Enron event on the United States economy and citizens. These investigations continued well into the 2000s. The *New York Times* continues to report on post-Enron consequences in 2016. See Peter Eavis’s article on February 25, 2016 titled, “Post-Enron Accounting Rule Requires Companies to Report Leases.”

expanding administrative positions in higher education in a book with a provocative title: *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It*. They challenge corporatization and bureaucratization of higher education, as they underline emerging titles of administrative interest that clutter the academic landscape: Sustainability Director, Residential Communications Coordinator, Coordinator of Learning Immersion Experiences, Senior Specialist of Assessment, Director of Knowledge Access Services, Dietetic Internship Director, Credential Specialist, Director of Active and Collaborative Engagement, Director for Learning Communities and First Year Success, and Vice President of Student Success (p. 30). Hacker and Dreifus indicate that bureaucrats have one basic commitment: to enlarge their responsibilities and their staffs. The authors contend that the proliferation of administration and administrators increasingly lessen focus on teaching, service, and scholarship.

Hacker and Dreifus ask, "How did universities come to be such behemoths, providing plush and numerous jobs for administrators, often at the expense of their own students?" (p. 35). One, perhaps, could ask why universities have not put a stop to this bureaucratic spiral. They offer the following summary: "putting the greater good above playing it safe, has become extremely rare among higher education administrators" (p. 39). They contend that far too often college presidents are technocrats, who were agile enough to climb to the top without making too many mistakes or enemies. Their goal is to keep the ship afloat with few major interruptions. Hacker and Dreifus suggest that the answer to the common question/lament, 'where is the leadership' requires one honest answer: no one wants to lead. They conclude with a final question, 'What are the thoughts of such leaders in that strange moment between sleep and one's first sip of coffee where one asks why did I enter the academy?' Such leaders need to pursue this question further, like an Augustine, who Arendt (1961) called the first existentialist, as he probed an existential reality, that he was a question unto himself. Augustine's query emerged from a faith commitment and a long lifetime of engagement with ideas, what we might now term a liberal arts education. We need more questions of self-reflection in and from our academic leaders. Hacker and Dreifus end the afterword of their book stating:

Overall what concerns us most is that higher education refuses to look in the mirror, to acknowledge its frequent indifference to students, let alone show a willingness to put itself on track...If the professoriate doesn't embark on some serious self-scrutiny, outsiders may start prowling their once-protected precincts. (p. 259)

When we do not monitor our own and refuse to engage in serious self-scrutiny, we risk losing the soul of higher education.

This theme continues in *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* by Ellen Schrecker (2010), who is a history professor at Yeshiva University. Her work addresses budgetary issues related to increasing reliance on part-time faculty. She laments the corporatization of the academy in manner akin to McDonalds and Walmart; the downsizing of industrial jobs and increasing use of part-time workers has invaded the academy. From 1975 to 2007, the percentage of tenured faculty dropped from 36.5% to 21.3 % (p. 202). Tenure track lines moved from 20.3% to 9.9% from 1975 to 2007 (p. 202). Full-time non-tenured faculty increased from 13% in 1975 to 18.5% in 2007, and part-time faculty from 30.2% in 1975 to 50.3% in 2007 (p. 202). Again, I am confident the numbers are more devastating today. The increasing number of contingent faculty positions in higher education moves the academy into the

realm of precarity, addressed initially by Pierre Bourdieu (1963) and most recently by Guy Standing (2011). The precariat represents the under employed and the institutionally disconnected.

The corporatization of higher education is firmly underway, inviting what Schrecker terms a great recession in higher learning. Schrecker ends with a warning. In higher education, there is more than money at stake (p. 233). Intellectual growth and meaningful scholarship put thoughtfulness of citizens at risk, requiring the academy to resist corporatization. She ends stating, "Without an aware and energized academic community that can fight for all its members, higher education as a bastion of freedom and opportunity will, like the polar bears' glacial habitat, slowly melt away" (p. 233). She reminds her readers that it is our battle, our struggle to fight for students in our classrooms, and to assist those who dream of something greater than a part-time career. We have an obligation to future academics who seek a vocation that loves ideas, research, and inquiry. Their dreams remind us why we chose to enter the academy.

Derek Bok, who is the 300th Anniversary University Research Professor at Harvard University and two-time former president of Harvard University first from 1971 until 1991 and then from 2006 to 2007 as interim president, provides a thoughtful scholarly/managerial analysis in *Higher Education in America*. As a man who led Harvard twice, Bok's comments on college bureaucracy call forth attention. For every dollar spent, the amount committed to administration has increased from 19 cents in 1929 to fifty cents by the end of the century (p. 110). The expansions are simply not explainable. He calls for periodic examination and reviews. He reminds us that there is an energy of change in higher education that will, perhaps, be as significant as the decades following the 19th century and changes that trailed the generation of World War II. Today is a great period of experimentation in higher education, and there is risk aplenty. Bok and the authors cited in this essay plead for creativity and zeal tied to learning, teaching, service, and scholarship, ever wary of corporatization in higher education.

Corporatization dwells in an industrial revolution model of supervisors and workers. Adam Smith (1723–1790), who emphasized the "division of labor" in the *Wealth of Nations*, understood that this performative action requires an even greater commitment to general education. We owe much of our liberal arts and general education emphasis on the arts and leisure to creative innovations generated within the Scottish Enlightenment. A division of labor requires smart people educated with thoughtful ideas applicable in personal life and the workplace. Corporatization leans on foreground implementation, ignoring the seemingly inefficient slow collection of background information that sustains personal and professional life when foreground clarity is no more.

I end my reflections by revisiting an essay entitled, "Metaphorical Guidance: Administration as Building and Renovation" (Arnett, 1999). I published this essay in honor of my father, who ran a small business that never employed more than two people at a given time. He generated a high quality of life for his family, and each day proudly went to work in a truck with his name on its side. He was a grey-collar worker; he owned the company and, simultaneously, did the work. In the evenings, he spent time with my mom as they completed paperwork associated with the business. When I reflect upon the contributions of my father, I understand a depth of tenacious hope. He did the work; he assumed the responsibility and the risk; and at the dinner table, I never heard him complain about the work. In fact, I never heard him complain! Conversation at the dinner table never centered on the activities of the day at work. The conversation ranged from fishing to hunting to sports, and always, there was space for listening to my mother talk about books. My father

never did new construction. Like the title of the essay in his honor, he made his money doing renovation. He fixed what was no longer working. My distinct memory and consistent reflection of him was that whenever he encountered a new job, he always walked into the building and smoked a cigarette. Sometimes he sat; sometimes he walked around, but always with a cigarette. I found the behavior odd when I was young. Only later did I understand that he was attending, listening, and reflecting to and upon the building he had just entered. He did not impose upon the structure; he worked within the limits of the building.

My father listened to buildings; he attended to them. He heard poetry in old rickety structures. Today, the person I hire to do work on our house exhibits a similar responsiveness whenever a problem happens upon him. Each quandary brings a smile to his face, because he knows he will learn something from that house, from that structure, and from that which he did not previously know. Renovation does not begin with the assumption that all can be easily fixed; renovation commences with a humble joy that one will learn as one meets the unexpected. The essay in honor of my father begins with the assumption that renovation does not commence with confidence in the personality and charm of the builder, but with appreciation for sustained hard work that requires attentive listening and appropriate response.

My father and the good man who does work on our house link joy with renovation. They listen and attend to a sense of memory housed in the era of a given building and its materials. Academic campuses carry such memories within their bricks and mortar; they point to what Hannah Arendt referred to as the missing link between past and future—tradition to which we can respond and over time change. Institutional loyalty lives in the enactment of such constructive activities. The loyalty begins with a love for a profession that asks us to seek the right tool for the right job, protect the safety of all on the construction site, and recognize that each task carries a bit of our soul in the performance.

Renovation in the aristocratic terms of Aristotle is an ongoing engagement of *phronesis* where one discerns action within the demands of moment and context. The *phronesis*, the action, the response, has moments of temporal completion but does not ever grasp a final stop. For the labor is necessary each day in order to live and support a family. The labor is tangible, situated within a craft-based virtue structure, reflecting the story of a man putting one brick on top of another with some suggesting he is only accumulating bricks; yet, the craftsman understands that bricks can build cathedrals. Sacred spaces require understanding that the work itself is sacred. The work is not only a living and a task, but a chance to build shelters composed of sacred repetitive practices.

I offer a plea. Those within administrative positions, as often as possible, ought to return to the construction site of higher education and do the work of teaching and scholarship. Each administrator must refuse to forget the joy of why he/she joined this profession. We must count on faculty and administrators who nourish the sacred space of higher education. We must accept the burden of this time and renovate sacred spaces with teaching, scholarship, and love of our students. Our task is to honor teaching and scholarship that permits us to uncover that which many attempt to obscure. The college campus is a sacred space that all of us must protect and promote. Daily, we must remind one another of the importance of teaching and scholarship, even as such sacred practices fall subordinate to the schemes of corporatization. Today, the sacred has secular ties in that it reminds us of something other than the ordinary and the routine.

Gregory Bateson in his writing with his daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson (1987/2005), reminded us of the secular task of preserving sacred spaces. The title of that book, *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*, suggests that faculty today must go

where angels may fear to tread. Faculty must walk into terrain of sickness, remembering families with illness who somehow call forth persons of courage capable of holding all together. When there is a project at work that seems to be falling apart and someone quietly assists, I gather a brief phenomenological glimpse of my father. He was a decorated World War II veteran and a member of the Seabees. Interestingly, I only learned the fact that he had been shot and decorated at his funeral. It is amazing how human beings manifest the courage to go where angels fear to tread. Great teachers, great scholars, and great administrators must muster the courage to walk where angels fear to tread, countering the corporation that seeks to cloak the sacredness of what we do on college campuses. Sacredness requires love even when there is little to like but, indeed, much to renovate.

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