

OCCUPY ACADEME – In a Time of Extremity, Equipping All Students to Make & Occupy a Better World

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“At what point does the moral [person] act against injustice?”

Craig Rimmerman, remarking on students' North Carolina sit-ins in the 1960s. *The New Citizenship*

“We think institutions of higher education could push a lot further. Becoming a citizen is as much a part of your being a well-prepared adult as learning a trade or building your intellectual capacity.” David Eisner, Corporation for National and Community Service.

With today's seemingly intractable problems, and given the power, resources, and potential of thousands of colleges and universities, Occupy Academe, a movement for radical public praxis, engages students in socio-economic, political, and transformative work. Urging institutions of higher learning to reorient the academy to prioritize such transformative work, Occupy Academe connects the institution with real-world conditions, and, when possible, with those on society's lowest rungs, many whose lives are bound in debilitating poverty, pervasive injustice, humiliating violations, and among the very poorest, lacking any means by which to alter their condition, a consequence of being born into a world not of their making, without any possibility or resources to better their lives.

Occupy Academe offers students the opportunity of profound learning, preparing them to tackle some of today's most egregious problems. Students bring what they learn in the classroom to the public square, and each term participate in a social project that tackles some situation of social disadvantage, from ecological disaster, to economic structures of inequality, to barriers of poverty, addiction, unemployment, to situations of excruciating loss, and together with other students, with those bearing the circumstances themselves, and with the larger community, collaborate in finding remedies and possibilities for bettering a hard reality, making with one project at a time, a better world.

At Augsburg College in Minneapolis, is a long-term ecological recovery Project that engages students participation from semester to semester.

A small North American liberal arts college has structured a relationship between the College and a small, poor Caribbean Island. Faculty from the College take groups of students to further advance particular projects.

The president of Syracuse University in Central New York has inaugurated an ambitious program, Scholarship in Action, to partner with its situated location, the City of Syracuse. The university is committed to using its strength and ability to advance greater social justice in the City, and to educate its students for active, egalitarian, informed citizenship.

Many important, innovative projects can be found throughout academe, but they are the exception to the weight of a traditional trajectory. Yet, they are the seedbeds of what is possible, for which Occupy Academe advocates.

Though existing in the 21st century with concentrated knowledge and means, and with prodigious potential for enacting public good, institutions of learning often are more often worlds unto themselves relating largely to those similarly positioned, and disconnected from any meaningful relationship with the poorest among us, those hidden in first world pockets of dysfunction and dystopia, and those across the globe subject to the harshest of human conditions, from brick-making twelve hours a day under a blistering sun, to brothels, to toxic mines, to sorting through garbage hours a day for scraps. Alongside the women and men forced into these inhuman conditions, are hordes of children, thousands younger than six years old.

Occupy Academe aims to forge democratic citizens, knowledgeable, skilled, practiced, and competent. It is a powerful pedagogy, not only for a self-selected few, but for all students. *All* students should be so educated, equipped for active, democratic, and effective, public/global, active citizenship. Aiming to forge students who are ready and practiced to tackle some of today's real-world problems, and, in the process, gain considerable knowledge, increase practical skills, practice problem-solving, test innovative thinking, achieve invaluable practical experience, and become equipped to identify, research, analyze, and assess complex problems, Occupy Academe takes on the real stuff of an adverse world, with real consequences that affect vulnerable persons. This radical – to the roots – pedagogy teaches skills of collaboration, persistence, sensitivity, and in guerilla mode, awake to ideas from multiple sources, seeing and seizing unexpected, workable opportunities from wherever they come.

Today is a *kairos* time for Academe, not chronological time, but a time pregnant with possibility and consequence. *Kairos* is the time announced by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: “The time – the *kairos* – has come.” It is a time that turns the world, a momentous time when what one chooses will set in motion enduring effects. For academe, it is a time of considerable consequence with regard to its purposes and relationship to *res publica*. Campus ethos, allocation of resources, local & global praxis, and selected curricula will have lasting effects on learning, on the world of experience, and on the trajectory of higher education, itself.

Colleges and universities are educating those who will graduate into both the pathologies and *possibilities* of this century's public life. Yet, In a time of extremity for so many across the planet, educational academies are primarily preoccupied with measurable outcomes, assessment, grade inflation, competitive grade-point averages, prestigious listings, and the ever on-going call for *excellence* (excellence without a soul, charges one college president). To all who will listen, Bono and others cry “Today is an *Emergency!*” as they purposely visit and view up close the debilitating and degrading conditions of those with untreated disease, and who every day experience enervating hunger. They are enlisting governments, religious groups, and institutions of “higher” learning, to bring their resources to bear on this emergency in an effort to stem the evil, and find lasting, transformative solutions.

But, curricula and course interests throughout academe continue, largely, to ignore the billions of people who suffer acutely. Students are graduating fixed on careers and anticipated income, with little to no thought of a world in which literally billions, without recourse, are hungry, degraded, displaced, & diseased. What do these students know of the reasons *why* so many men, women & children are forced to endure such lives? In a world with breathtaking beauty, great human achievement, inspired masterpieces of art, literature, architecture, & music, and with astounding discoveries in science, how can it be that the world allows children to carry pails of toxic materials all day in miserable and dangerous mines, or to pick through garbage on fetid dumps to gain something to eat, or women and young girls forced into brothels, assaulted, used up, and discarded? Why is there not outcry, outrage, and refusal of business as usual until such horrific realities are overcome. How is it that academe allows students to remain uninformed of such tragic truths, and therefore is complicit in their pursuit of private benefit over informed, and competent citizenship.

In every country and clime, in every genocide and repression, there seem always a few who resist the prevailing dehumanization. These few try in vain to stop the horror, to warn, to sound the alarm – in Cambodia, in Rwanda, in Iraq, in Bosnia a few saw the horror coming and tried to stop it. Martin Neimuller in Nazi Germany, the helicopter pilot in My Lei, Myles Horton at Highlander in Tennessee facing down the Ku Klux Klan. Perceiving early the pending evil, these advanced souls buoy up others, rescue when they can the harmed and hunted, live to love, to heal. Their magnanimity inspires the rest of us to our better selves. Occupy Academe introduces them in the curricula, these ordinary human beings and at the same time, exemplars of what is possible, extending students' horizon of possible attitudes and actions, presenting witness that it is possible to love in the midst of hate. But what of those who do hate - who slit the throats of young children, cut open pregnant women and stomp on their baby, who commit atrocities without noticeable remorse? What is the nature of human beings, the nature of the universe that both good and evil exist in the same world, at the same time? As equipped and active citizens, students will meet both realities in their public work, and in reflection circles will contemplate together the profound questions of the universe. Graduates today are usually well trained by higher education for the careers to which they aspire, but have practically no knowledge of this larger world of humanity and inhumanity. Out of view, in Christopher Hedges' words, is 'the world as it is'.

Occupy Academe brings this "rest of the world" into view. Recovering academe's early purpose of educating for citizenship and professional service, Occupy reconfigures an institution that has become insular and irrelevant to those relegated to a painful location outside the academic gate, those without entry to "higher" learning. At such locations, college students meet for the first time men, women, and children whose lives are so different from their own that they inhabit a different world. For those students who embrace the "left out," the "marginal," those out of view, they will begin to see an angle on the world – from below – that is revelatory.

Connecting the classroom with the public square, bringing students to a location unseen from more privileged sites, to a place absent from their curriculum and classroom, they will meet people they would likely never otherwise meet, human beings who *feel* the deprivations of their lives, whose lives are often truncated. It is here, at a location largely

ignored by academe- where the buffer of resources, education, and a support network mean access to remedies and goods - that the barriers keeping poor people poor are seen, up close, as the pernicious impediments they are.

Given this stark reality in today's world, what is the responsibility – and *possibility* – for the academy as it readies students to find their place in this complex, contrary world? How equipped to participate in making the world a more fair and better place are those who are privileged with education? Aside from the question, are today's graduates prepared to participate in making this world *better*, the harder more revealing question is do they *want* a world more decent, democratic, hospitable, equitable, and fairer for all tribes and folks? Or will today's graduates accommodate themselves to expediency, better pay, to creeping corporatization – even becoming unwitting accomplices in structural arrangements, both national and international, that perpetuate hardship and hunger for so many, and vast, increasing wealth for a very few. Are most graduates even aware of these “arrangements”? How can they consider the consequences for others of the choices they make, of what work they do, if they do not have more than superficial knowledge of the socio-political and economic structures impacting the planet and its people..

Before today's students can *care* about each sick old woman, forced child soldier, unschooled girls sold to brothels, a work-enslaved father, the “refuse” out of view, they have to come to realize the rigged workings of the world – the *Why* - of those intractably entangled in the world's greed, terror, violence, and denial of their human dignity and worth. In his introduction to Parker Palmer's text *The Heart of Higher Education*, Mark Nepo comments, “The magnitude of the issues confronting the world requires us to review the human purpose and meaning at the heart of higher education” (cite). With most graduates having little knowledge of this enormous scope of misery, most are unequipped to intervene, or to initiate a project for change, or to even think about taking serious responsibility for the world around them. That said, however, once made conscious of ‘what is’, there are a good number of students who find some way to take the side of those injured, violated, exploited, oppressed.

Imagine! If every college student had close, personal experiences with persons trapped behind barriers of poverty, lack of opportunity, ill health, low, insecure wages, and with no recourse to the injustices they bear! What would the student learn at once? Perhaps, that one can work very hard – even working 2-3 jobs - just to keep a family going. That not so many poor are just lazy as once thought, and furthermore, readings in psychology might show predictable reasons for dysfunction, violence, attraction to drugs, of oft abandoned responsibility.

Imagine! If Academe recovered its early purpose to educate public servants, and made its collective skills, knowledge, and resources available for the common good! And, even more, prepared *every* student for critical, responsible, and active citizenship. Perhaps, the world would turn over. Critical theorist, Benjamin R. Barber, an iconic voice for community service pedagogy, writes, “The first aim and mission of any institution of education has to be to forge responsible, thoughtful, critical, competent citizens” (cite).

If academe occupied the possible with its prodigious power and resources, and prepared students to take on the 'world as it is', as competent, inspired, and willing participants, might the real world become closer to a world as it should be – more fair, equitable, just, nonviolent, compassionate? In view of the extremity of misery crying for redress, the extremities of such as slavery, starvation, humiliation (*today!*)unbelievably little known among ordinary people busy with their own lives, Occupy Academe is at the core committed to conscientizing today's students. Beyond all the traditional knowledge imparted by academe, there are four categories that exceed an insular curriculum:

1. Conscientization (Paulo Friere) – making students aware of a vast world of social suffering
2. Inspiration = learning of the lives of those on the front lines of social transformation
3. Praxis – combining active participation each semester on a social project with research, analysis, roundtable reflections, and public-oriented written work
4. Public oriented – making available to public consciousness what was learned in the Project; explicating the hardship of the situation tackled; what was achieved by the Project; what problems remain.

Occupy Academe is not alone with its vision and practice. Scattered like hardy flowers pressing out of concrete are other efforts by visionaries and practitioners among today's colleges and universities, those who often work alone and find themselves marginalized, not out of approbation, but because academe is not primarily structured *at its core* for public praxis- oriented curricula. The point of this paper is in this time of extremity, to persuade academe to educate and equip *all* students, not just those self-selected, to tackle seemingly unyielding social problems, and in the course of this orientation deliver a full-bodied education that benefits both students and society. Occupy Academe aims at nothing less than redirecting the resources and energy of today's academic institutions toward the equitable well-being of *all* peoples, thus contributing to making and occupying a better world.