What Ails the Academy?
American higher education and its discontents
by JOHN S. ROSENBERG

From the perspective of Harvard Yard—or Yale's Old Campus, Swarthmore's sloping lawn, or Stanford's Main Quad—higher education presents a pleasing prospect: lively students; lovely buildings; an otherworldly serenity (most of the time); visible evidence of stability and strength, and the promise of progress and prosperity.

But shift the view. Away from the elite, selective universities and colleges that host a single-digit percent of American higher-education seekers, the scene changes utterly: soaring public tuitions and student debt; abysmal rates of degree completion; queues for introductory classes and required courses, often taught by migratory adjuncts; fraught battles pitting liberal learning and education for citizenship against pragmatic focus on vocational training; a stagnant or falling rate of attainment among the population as a whole.

The distressing features of this much larger part of the higher-education industry have spawned a critical, even dire, literature that merits attention for its own sake—and because the issues echo in the elite stratum, too. And for those seeking entry to the top-tier institutions, the ever more frenzied admissions lottery has begun to provoke overdue skepticism. Herewith, an overview of some recent books with heft.

Michael M. Crow, former executive vice provost at Columbia, has since 2002 been president of Arizona State University (ASU), at the center of the public-university problem: rising demand to enroll, and plummeting state funds to pay the bills. He has written and spoken indefatigably about important issues. At the forefront is the need to educate the population at large, given that "our success in maintaining excellence in a relative handful of elite institutions does little to ensure our continued prosperity and competitiveness, especially if we stop to consider the disproportionately few students..."
Montage

Picturing Frederick Douglass, by John Stauffer, professor of English and of African and African American studies, Zoe Trodd, Ph.D. '09, and Celeste-Marie Bernier (Liveright, $49.95). An “illustrated biography” built around a sumptuous catalog focused on the 160 poses of the man the subtitle calls “the nineteenth century’s most photographed American,” from c. 1841 to a posthumous image of 1895. A fascinating exploration of early photography, as Douglass tried expressions and gestures from “defiant citizen” to “elder statesman,” and wrote about the evolving medium.

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

Picturing Frederick Douglass, by John Stauffer, professor of English and of African and African American studies, Zoe Trodd, Ph.D. '09, and Celeste-Marie Bernier (Liveright, $49.95). An “illustrated biography” built around a sumptuous catalog focused on the 160 poses of the man the subtitle calls “the nineteenth century’s most photographed American,” from c. 1841 to a posthumous image of 1895. A fascinating exploration of early photography, as Douglass tried expressions and gestures from “defiant citizen” to “elder statesman,” and wrote about the evolving medium.

How the Internet Became Commercial, by Shane Greenstein, MBA Class of 1957 professor of business administration (Princeton, $35). How is it that a military and academic research tool became a ubiquitous, commercial utility? A deep dive into the engines of privatization and “innovation from the edges”—and the intersection, for remaining doubters, between government-funded basic inquiry and the subsequent growth of enterprise.

Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age, by Bernard E. Harcourt, J.D. ‘89, Ph.D. ’00, S.J.D. ’05 (Harvard, $35). A Columbia law professor brings to light just how “exposed” everyone is in the Internet era, and issues a call for “digital resistance” and for “courage and ethical choice...to do everything we can to resist the excesses of our expository society.”

Witches of America, by Alex Mar '98 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26). The author (Alexandra Marolachakis in her Crimson phase), a writer and filmmaker, proceeded from one of the latter proj-

How We Live Now, by Bella DePaulo, Ph.D. '79 (Atria/Simon & Schuster, $26). Tract houses there may be, but a social psychologist documents the increasing-ly nonnuclear families living within, and explores multigenerational households, housemates, cohousing, singedom, and more.

The Love of God, by Jon D. Levenson, List professor of Jewish studies (Princeton,
Cameras and television sets may go out of fashion, but Japanese fashion icons like Uniqlo have come to dominate the world, in part by sustaining made-in-America statements about clothing.

**The Journey of “A Good Type,”** by David Odo (Peabody Museum/Harvard, $45). In an entirely different vein, Odo—a Harvard Art Museums curator and anthropology lecturer—examines the Peabody’s holdings of nineteenth-century photographs of Japan. His arguments about museum collections and anthropology aside, casual viewers will be struck by the preindustrial views of Mount Fuji, the samurai armor and imperial court costumes, chair-bearing porters, and pensive girls—as if from a different, yet familiar, universe.

**Database of Dreams: The Lost Quest to Catalog Humanity,** by Rebecca Lemov, associate professor of the history of science (Yale, $35). A young historian of social science—whose teaching examines such subjects as brainwashing and coercive interrogation—examines a pioneering 1950s Harvard-anchored attempt to catalog dreams and other “soft” human experiences, anticipating contemporary databases and “big data” research.


**Breaking Ground,** by Lucretia Hoover Giese, Ph.D. ’85, and Henry B. Hoover Jr. (University Press of New England, $45 paper). A beautiful catalog and analysis of the striking, iconic modernist homes designed by Henry B. Hoover, M.Arch. ’26—many of them in Harvard bedroom communities that became important residential centers for faculty members during the mid-century academic and suburban boom (see “The Modern Revolution,” May-June, page 16G).
fee-based, and poised to earn significant
School's separate online venture, is already
offset the huge costs of creating its cours-
states interested in generating revenue to
Harvard-MIT edX online venture is cer-
funded as a for-profit enterprise, and the
puter programming, Coursera is venture-
classes to fee-based instruction on com-
online course (MOOC) versions of college
has segued from providing massive open
degrees superseded by students accumu-
"no more 'gentleman's Cs,' no grade
"will be challenging," with no more 'gentleman's Cs,' no grade infla-
tion, no more slacking through adoles-
cence." And traditional credentials, based
on course units and credit hours, "will fade
into memory," with two- and four-year
degrees superseded by students accumu-
ating "digital evidence of their learning
throughout their lives."
Perhaps. One online pioneer, Udacity,
have segued from providing massive open
online course (MOOC) versions of college
classes to fee-based instruction on computer
programming, Coursera is venture-
funded as a for-profit enterprise, and the
Harvard-MIT edX online venture is cer-
tainly interested in generating revenue to
offset the huge costs of creating its cours-
es, at a minimum. (HBX, Harvard Business
School's separate online venture, is already
fee-based, and poised to earn significant
revenue on its own and through its new
venture with the Extension School.)
Lots of those prospective learners
around the world lack reliable Internet
access, sufficient prior preparation, or the
language skills to take advantage of the
courses now on offer. As for rigor and in-
tegrity: in August, Harvard and MIT re-
searchers identified a new form of cheat-
ing on edX courses, in which registrants
create multiple accounts to get the right
answers to online exercises—particularly
in pursuit of an online credential. And thus
far, acceptance of credentials from general
online courses (as opposed to those nested
within a distance-degree program, or a
specifically vocational offering like Udac-
ity's "nanodegrees") is nil.
But those caveats about today aside, Care-
ey validly aims for the not-too-distant fu-
ture. He is sharp on the Ph.D. culture that
understandably prioritizes the creation of
knowledge, but often sells teacher training
woefully short, making "many American
universities...grotesquely expensive and
shamefully indifferent to undergraduate
learning." He appreciates the research en-
terprise, and in fact helpfully guides read-
ers to Stanford, Carnegie Mellon, and else-
where, to introduce pioneers in computing
and cognitive science whose discoveries
make it possible to envision major advanc-
es in learning.
He is vivid on "the fundamental differ-
ence between computers and every other
kind of information technology that came
before them": the distinctions between
earlier advances in information storage
(books, film) and movement (postal-en-
abled correspondence courses, radio, TV),
and, now, information processing, adaptive
artificial intelligence, and so on. In the fu-
ture, but not the indefinite future, online
learning will go beyond recorded lectures
and even the interactive exercises they
now contain to something much better, he
believes, finally addressing "the two most
important aspects of college: how much
t it cost and how students learned"—both
lamentably unaffected to date.
This vision, beyond the current crops of
MOOCs, ultimately extends to transferr-
ing certification of learning—the tran-
script, the diploma—from institutions to
the individual learners themselves,
"[o]vercoming the college diploma's tick-
like embeddedness in the labor market.
"The result, Carey thinks, will be remark-
ably positive for humanity, but not so
much for the current "inefficient hybrid
university model" whose hidden costs
and internal subsidies are "a feature, not
a bug." Thus, back to the Christensen dis-
ruptions looming on the horizon.

**Carey criticizes the Ph.D. culture that makes
many universities expensive and "shamefully
indifferent to undergraduate learning."**

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George Wittenberg seeks the source of the assertion, "Sub-specialization is a form of protective coloration."

"his error is himself" (May-June). Julian Kitay serendipitously came across the very quotation he wrote down in a lecture 67 years ago: "Why argue with any man's error when it is his error that is he? As well seek to convince a cow that the most dazzling creature on earth is not a cow, or prove to a pig that the finest resident of our world is not a pig." He is still trying to source it. In response to the original query, meanwhile, Joshua Kolton suggested, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it"—which Wikiquote attributes correctly to Upton Sin-

"A Jew is defined" (July-August). Michael Bohnen suggested Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992) as a source, citing an article ("The Hidden Message of the Four Children") by Rabbi Avi Weiss in *The Jewish Press.com*, in which the Berkovits remark is offered as a sociological comment on the effect of assimilation. Bernard Witlieb cited an anecdote from Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust* (2006), page 27: "One wit, who clearly had genuine insights into the social and familial values of the Jewish community, would later turn Hitler's Nuremberg laws definition on its head, and defined 'a real Jew' as anyone who has produced three Jewish grandchil-
dren!" Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138 or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.
get a fat envelope or its e-mail equivalent.

By almost any metric, the process has become unhinged. As admissions rates plunge toward 5 percent (recent Stanford and Harvard classes) and the common application facilitates applying, students who formerly aimed for half a dozen schools routinely send checks off to a score. Standardized-test preparation is a multibillion-dollar industry—and obviously disadvantages lower-income applicants. No parent who knows children in a good prep school, or even a good suburban school system, is unaware of the phonied up public-service “experience,” often paid for, the chief aim of which is buffing up an essay, world betterment be damned. The New York Times, knowing its readership, blogs about admissions, and is now sponsoring a for-fee conference about it. None of this brings credit to anyone, and none of it produces much of worth for society.

One response aims at the students and parents who find themselves mid-frenzy. Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be (Grand Central, $25), by Times columnist Frank Bruni, offers itself as an “antidote” to the mania. He skewers the “industrialization of the…admission process” with its “Ivy Tower porn” marketing and, to extend the metaphor, “fluffing” of candidates. For those whose efforts fall short, the “great, brutal culling” of rejection falls with the deadly weight of a “conclusive measure of a young person’s worth, a binding verdict on the life that he or she has led up until that point.” As if admission, and not the effect of the ensuing education, wherever obtained, were the point of the exercise—sort of like confusing childbirth with the subsequent decades of the new life itself.

Bruni is a reporter; much of what he does most usefully is report on the lives of people, in every walk of life, who went to less than gilt-edged colleges (some you never dreamed of), learned a great deal, and succeeded in engaging, productive, worthwhile lives. He also reveals his own collegiate secret: after prepping at Loomis Chaffee, he turned down Yale to enroll at the University of North Carolina (his siblings went to Amherst, Dartmouth, and Princeton)—and had an absolutely foundational, broadening education. He observes the virtue of pursuing a life that does not unfold in a straight line—resisting the false, and unfair, presumption that “life yields to meticulous recipes.” And he

Guinier stresses that a college’s success “is measured by the skills and contributions of its graduates, not its admitted students.”

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sonal narratives and advice to the societal consequences of college admissions as the ultimate funneling device. In *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy* (Beacon, $24.95), the Boston College professor of law advances a broad argument about the definition of merit as social benefit rather than as individual accomplishment, and the role of inclusiveness in strengthening the civic fabric and better addressing human problems.

Focusing on the SAT as a proxy for credentials, and on admissions to selective schools (which she knows as student at Radcliffe and Yale Law, as professor, and as Yale College parent), she goes after the “testocracy, a twenty-first-century cult of standardized, quantifiable merit [that] values perfect scores but ignores character.” Its sway not only excludes those whose life circumstances and means disadvantage them in test-taking (see Bruni’s “fluffing”), but devalues “democratic merit,” an “incentive system that emphasizes not just the possession of individual talent and related personal success but also the ability to collaborate and the commitment to building a better society for more people.”

One need not accept the wider argument to acknowledge Guinier’s focus on the defects, from society’s perspective, of the Darwinian, quantitative admissions process: “Meaningful participation in a democratic society depends upon citizens who are willing to develop and utilize these three skills: collaborative problem solving, independent thinking, and creative leadership. But these skills bear no relationship to success in the testocracy.” Her examples of programs and teaching practices that elicit leadership skills and learning gains underscore the narrowness of rote testing, much grading, and many of the winnowing devices that make deluged admissions officers’ lives simpler—but perhaps deliver little else of value.

In a way, Guinier is attempting to return education to its first principles. In the final exam for a Harvard Law class, she permits (but does not require) students to work in small groups, modeling the way she has practiced law in collaboration with colleagues—a small instance of testing “as a learning opportunity rather than just a judging opportunity.” Her larger point is
that an educational institution’s success “is measured by the skills and contributions of its graduates, not its admitted students.” It is distressing to have to be reminded that that is true value-added—the antithesis of admissions as personal branding.

Bruni begs students and parents to change their behavior within the application process. Guinier would reengineer the system itself. Both refocus on the aims of education, rather than the winner-takes-all admissions gauntlet, with its many individual losers and diminished prospects for social gain. What that education will look and feel like in elite institutions is relatively familiar, at least for the nonce.

But for the vast majority of students in the vast majority of less selective schools, the terrain is shifting in face of economic pressure and technological opportunity, from Arizona to the U of Everywhere.

John S. Rosenberg is editor of Harvard Magazine.

Adam Freudenheim

Photograph courtesy of Pushkin Publishing

“Once Upon a Time” in Translation

A publisher brings world literature to young Anglophones.

by SPENCER LENFIELD

Most American kids have probably never heard of Tonke Dragt’s The Letter for the King—a fantasy tale of good and evil, feuding kingdoms, and a questing teenage squire named Tiuri—but for millions of Dutch readers the book is a childhood classic, akin to Charlotte’s Web or The Hobbit. First published in 1962, Dragt’s book had never been made available to English-language readers until Adam Freudenheim ’96, the publisher and managing director of the London-based Pushkin Press and its imprint Pushkin Children’s, took on that task and published a new edition last year.

As translator Laura Watkinson finished each chapter, Freudenheim took it home to a highly critical test audience: his two elder children, Nina and Max (then 10 and 8 respectively). “They’d ask, ‘What’s next?’ And I had to say, ‘I don’t know!’” he recalls. Then Watkinson sent the second half of the book in a single chunk. Freudenheim took it home as usual, but found the next morning that Max had stolen the 150 pages in the middle of the night and read it all in one sitting. That, he says, “is when I knew I had a hit.”

The Letter for the King was named a “Book of the Year” by several critics and sold so well, Pushkin has reprinted it three times. More important to Freudenheim is that the book helped fill a gap he has found in the English-language middle-school-aged children’s market. Picture books “have had an incredible renaissance over the past couple decades,” he explains, and young-adult books can be rainmakers for publishers. But pickings are far slimmer for the age group in between. Wary of what he calls the abundance of “me-too” series (hastily written to catch the latest trend), Freudenheim decided to look instead for engaging stories “with a literary appeal” and “children’s writers who are writers, not just writing for children as a cynical marketing exercise.”

The result is an impressive and diverse catalog. The Oksa Pollock fantasy series, written by French librarians Anne Plischota and Cendrine Wolf, stars a plucky 13-year-old who learns that she is not only