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The Best Idea of the University

By Kevin Carey

In the late 16th century, Bartolomeo Cesi painted a fresco of courtiers kneeling and gesturing before their king. It hangs today at the end of a long, rectangular room that once served as a nunnery's dining hall and is now among a complex of graceful buildings and courtyards housing the department of archaeology of the University of Bologna, considered by many to be the oldest university in the Western world.

Cesi's life-size figures served as a backdrop in September to a conference of the Magna Charta Observatory, an organization founded to uphold the values of academic freedom embodied in the Magna Charta Universitatum, which was signed by 388 European-university rectors in Bologna, in 1988, on the 900th anniversary of the university's creation.

The Magna Charta of the European Universities declares that "the university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies," whose "research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power." It also says that "teaching and research in universities must be inseparable," and that freedom in both is "the fundamental principle of university life."

Eleven years later, in 1999, the city was the site of a second major higher-education declaration: the Bologna Process, an international compact that seeks to standardize degree cycles and credit-granting as part of the larger project of European integration.

The first document asserted the fundamental autonomy of the university from the concerns of politics. The second subjected it to a grand political project. For a long September day, learned scholars and officials mulled over the tensions and contradictions between the two.

It's hard to imagine a better setting than Bologna. The newly opened Museum of the History of Bologna is in a grand palazzo built by a family that made its fortune changing money—specifically, the various currencies brought by students who arrived at the university from the far reaches of the peninsula and beyond. Financial exploitation of college students is an older game than I realized. Future historians may gather in the Palazzo Sallie Mae.

The museum's master narrative is one in which, through sacks, plagues, papal feuds, and world wars, Bologna and its university live

on. The city's famed medieval towers rose, leaned, and mostly fell. Napoleon and other conquerors came and went. The location of the university itself moved through the centuries, from where the first informal groups of students from different nations hired scholars for teaching, to today's graffiti-marked campus near the city center, a little worn and grimy in the good way that bespeaks an abundance of youthful carelessness, defiance, and vitality.

In the interim—that is, from 1563 to 1803—the university was housed in the Archiginnasio Palace, built after the Council of Trent to unite disparate schools of law, mathematics, physics, and medicine in a single building of classic proportions. Surgeons taught and practiced in a wood-paneled operating theater containing two marvelously wrought carvings of skinless anatomical men. The adjoining chapel featured religious-themed frescoes by Cesi until they were all but obliterated by Allied bombers, in January 1944, part of a campaign that dropped tons of ordnance on Bologna in an attempt to crack the city's transportation hub. Today the palace's stone corridors are crowded with plaques and tributes to professors from centuries past, as well as a new exhibition on Charles Dickens, who said of Bologna, "There is a grave and learned air about the city, and pleasant gloom upon it."

Bologna is a monument to the enduring university idea, a notion whose simplicity and logic—students and scholars, together, free—has stood every test of time, just as the perfect proportions and tonal harmony of a Renaissance fresco remain the standard of beauty five centuries after their creation. All of the people at the conference seemed to feel this in their bones. This is commonplace. As much as professors and administrators like to complain about their institutions, they believe in them, or at least the best idea of them, profoundly.

And yet the notion of higher education independent of all political authority and economic power seems more than a little absurd. The humanistic and aesthetic ideas advanced by Petrarch, Dante, and other Bologna alumni have been embraced by societies governing more people than the ancient scholars could have imagined. (Indeed, the university now claims all college graduates as descendants, having adopted the motto *Alma mater studiorum*—Nourishing mother of education.) Higher education is no longer confined to, or needed by, only small groups of students and scholars working in cloisters, independent of the world.

In other words, the endurance and the triumph of higher education have created an existential challenge for the university idea itself. How can higher education be for everyone, or at least most people, and keep the core of what it has always been? Students can't be left to the mercies of money-changers anymore. Mass higher education means public subsidy and thus politics, bureaucracy, regulation, and other threats to the classic autonomous university design.

Some conference goers saw this contradiction as less dire than it seems. As the keynote speaker put it, economic growth requires creativity, which requires freedom, which requires places built with both qualities in mind: universities.

Perhaps. I'm wary of arguments that cleverly reframe problems away. In the American context, institutional autonomy often seems like an excuse for taking large amounts of public money with little accountability in exchange. Teaching and research seem obviously separable for the majority of today's university courses, particularly at the undergraduate level. Academic freedom gives voice to the brave but also comfort to the mediocre. The world of mass higher education is different, unavoidably, and maybe universities must be, too.


And yet whenever I visit university campuses, particularly those that have settled into the landscape and seen communities grow up around them, I'm always struck by how perfect and slightly miraculous they seem, oases of hope and civilization in the deserts of a too-often cruel and vulgar world. A millennium of history needs to be respected, as must an idea that has meant so much for so long.

Kevin Carey is director of the education-policy program at the New America Foundation.

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 **shelleyan** 1 month ago


Thank you so much for this inspiring post. Is it alright to put some of it on my facebook page? I know the share option on the Chronicle includes Facebook, but I can't get over my scholar's habit of asking permission from the actual writer. best wishes.

2 people liked this.

 **kevincarey1** 1 month ago in reply to shelleyan

Feel free, and thanks for asking!

1 person liked this.

 **alancontreras** 1 month ago

A typically enjoyable and interesting piece from Kevin. I wonder if the notions of freedom from politics would occur to academics or anyone else in places like Iran, Venezuela or China? It seems a western notion, albeit a good one, to the extent that it is realistic.

An ideal college should be free of government funding, but to achieve that goal is difficult and expensive. It is probably only achievable for a small number of colleges, and not for any large research universities.

As for the "Bologna Process," under which large numbers of colleges are to be considered effectively generic, their graduates and credentials interchangeable, this approach only works if all the member colleges are subject to meaningful external review and enforcement - enforcement - by a neutral external body that has the power to expel members. Otherwise it automatically results in standards defaulting to the lowest level.

That's certainly not unique to the Bologna Process, about which my knowledge is quite limited. It is the baseline problem with U.S. accreditation, too, which places the University of Chicago in the same category, for transfer and degree equivalence, as Last Chance Gulch College. A convenient fiction that allows a veneer of convenience to be glued over a canyon of difference.

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dmutchler 1 month ago

Might higher education *not* be for everyone? Or, if one prefers, why must higher education be for everyone? Access to higher ed is one thing, and I am for access for all, but I am also for standards and requirements that will, necessarily and by definition, exclude some, likely many, because education is, or ought be, a process that enables the potentialities of an individual to either be realized or not. Those potentialities are likely not the same for all, though. Why would they be other than to satisfy some sense of egalitarianism?

Not everyone wants to become a brain surgeon. Are we all potential brain surgeons? It is doubtful, yet those who wish to try should be able to do so, and even more importantly, should fail gloriously when standards are not met. This alerts the individual whereas he/she can sit back, reflect, and either apply his or herself more strongly or to give up the idea and move on.

Not everyone *should* be a brain surgeon. (And there is no 'right' to becoming such either.)

3 people liked this. [Like](#)



manoflamancha 1 month ago

The concept and existence of the Bologna university lingers on, in our minds if not in practice. I recall so long ago when very young, when passing any college on a road trip, how I was overcome with an uncontrollable urge to visit and drive around the campus. It was like visiting an old church, and I always felt a sense of reverence during those quiet visits. I suppose it was inevitable I would become university teacher. But I really wanted to be a denizen of one of those far flung small American colleges, such as Woffard, or Sweet Briar, or Davidson, or Williams College, but sadly it was not to be. Few small colleges teach my profession of Engineering. Looking back, I yearn for the classical, and wish I had done just mathematics or Physics (which I inadvertently did, with several books on the subjects) so I could take teaching, not politics or grantmanship, as my life's work. My point is this: if what you do has any practical value to the government, then your university career will be controlled by politics, in one form or another. Sputnik was responsible for my choices, and the government for funding my choices. It was a rigged game, but I was fully aware of the controlling forces, and I profited from it. There were no competing attractions and financial support from the liberal arts, so I picked the only game in town where a poor country boy could get a nearly free education. I wish it were not thus. Thank you for reminding us of the origins of our profession, and the enduring nature of academic freedom. We must be vigilant.

6 people liked this. [Like](#)



perplexed 1 month ago

"...institutional autonomy often seems like an excuse for taking large amounts of public money with little accountability in exchange."

Not so much any more.

[Like](#)



darccity 1 month ago

A university is a magical and mysterious marvel (or is that marvelous mystery?) -- so magical, mysterious, and wondrous that it cannot be defined, let alone evaluated for its performance. It does everything and nothing. The privileged members of the university community do indeed enjoy the freedom to pursue whatever they want in whatever way they choose. Many more in this community, the students and staffers and untenured must operate under capricious and senseless dictates of those with all the freedom. It's all so much like the land of Oz with thousand cowering under the yoke of the few holders of magic books, broomsticks, and slippers. Very medieval in structure, cowardly as the lion in its governance, and as anti-intellectual as it is a seeker of truth. You will not be missed very much.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)

**waratah104** 1 month ago

--- "And yet whenever I visit university campuses, particularly those that have settled into the landscape and seen communities grow up around them, I'm always struck by how perfect and slightly miraculous they seem, oases of hope and civilization in the deserts of a too-often cruel and vulgar world. A millennium of history needs to be respected, as must an idea that has meant so much for so long." --- what wonderful sentiment, so artfully stated. Cheers!

Like

**pcsalzman** 1 month ago

Why is it that American universities are described by some as "islands of intolerance" in a sea of freedom? Do not popular views seem to have marginalized and punished those of minority opinion? Supporters of the "right to life" are driven off of campus; Jews are attacked as nazis; Christians are ridiculed. And intellectual standards are undermined for purposes of social policy: "Excellence" is now defined as gender, racial, religious, sexual preference "diversity." The only "diversity" that is not allowed, is diversity of opinion. Universities now are not the seat of intellectual diversity and exchange, but rather of populist vigilantes supported by courage-free university administrations.

1 person liked this.

Like

**fputnam** 4 weeks ago

Thank you very much for this thoughtful essay. The penultimate paragraph raises two questions for which I have no answer:

(1) Is government money truly necessary to higher education? Students, their families, and schools, assume the federal subsidiary via loans, grants, &c.; with money comes accountability, with accountability comes control.

(2) If faculty are not doing some sort of "research" (which may be as simple as reading and thinking about all of Shakespeare's history plays, not just the two that were the subject of one's dissertation), how do they maintain the intellectual vitality and vivacity that encourage in students the sense of anticipation, of discovery, that leads so many of them to "fall in love" with a subject so that it begins to become their own? (This deliberately distances "research" and even "scholarship" from "guild-centered activities.")

Thanks again--good writing provokes further thought!

Like

**Shawn Warren** 4 weeks ago

I have mentioned this to you before, Kevin.

Higher education can be offered under the protection and direction of a formal academic profession, as attorneys and engineers provide their valued services to the public. Doing so would avoid the "existential challenge" you claim universities face: "Mass higher education means public subsidy and thus politics, bureaucracy, regulation, and other threats to the classic autonomous university design."

[The proposal I have in mind requires a fraction of the public subsidy demanded by modern universities, and so a corresponding fraction of the politics, bureaucracy/administration and regulation.]

The historical Bologna you speak of is not an institution. The notion of obtaining or maintaining "institutional autonomy" (characterized by you as, draining public funds with little accountability) was non-existent. The "classic autonomous university design" you speak of (Bologna) is not present today and has not been for centuries...

That design involved at its core "a notion whose simplicity and logic has stood every test of time--students and scholars, together, free." By contrast, today's institutions of mass higher education are the core (service providers). The existential challenge is owned solely by this relatively modern institutional arrangement for HE, not classical Bologna and its more intimate education relationship.

You mention the exploitive behaviour of third-parties such as money exchangers that facilitated the service relationship between scholar and student during the early years of Bologna. The modern university is likewise nothing but a third-party facilitator of this core relationship - a middleman that simply cannot be sustained, while it insulates and exploits scholar and student!

Certainly the undergraduate courses/subjects you suggest can be distinguished from the more expensive research-intense ones present fine candidates for the professional service model. History, philosophy, sociology, economics, business, law, geography, languages, and many more, in fact at least 70% of the course offerings at any university can be facilitated as professionals do their own crucial social services.

Institutions (universities) are not needed to provide this higher education, rather the true classic model of student directly hiring scholar for service is not only sufficient but recommended.

Universities are not in need of change or respect. They are in need of dissolution.

Like

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