

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## The Corporatization of the Liberal Arts College: Even the Class Notes!

by Richie Zweigenhaft



"UNIVERSITY AS FACTORY? NO!" BY JOSH MACPHEE VIA JUST SEEDS

I've been writing the class notes (class of '67) for the alumni magazine at Wesleyan University (my alma mater) for the last two decades. The guy who was our class secretary from 1967 until 2002 was unable to attend our 35th reunion, and someone asked me to do the notes. I agreed to do it that one time and, surprise, I have been writing them ever since. I've enjoyed it more than I expected.

For whom am I writing? Well, I've mostly assumed that I write for my classmates. The notes serve to keep us informed about what we've been up to—jobs, promotions, marriages, divorces, various accomplishments, like books published or climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, and bragging opportunities about children and grandchildren. More recently, I've had to write more often about retirements, and about deaths—of classmates, of spouses, and, at times, of children.

I also have used the notes as a chance to continue our liberal arts experience by sharing our ideas on various topics. At times, I have used the college Listserv system to ask my classmates questions like "what is your most vivid memory from our time at school (that you can share)?" and "what courses did you not take that you wish you had?" Their responses have made for some lively columns.

At some level, I'm sure I realized that the powers that be at the college saw my notes, and the magazine itself, as something else—a way to keep alumni connected and, ultimately, as a way to encourage them either sooner or later to donate money to the school. My goals for the notes, and such institutional goals to nurture potential donors, have for the most part not been in conflict—until recently. Either I have become more political in my notes, or the college has become more cautious, or both. And, more broadly, it seems to me that this little corner of academe reflects the larger, more troubling, corporatization of the liberal arts college.

For the most part, the notes I have written three or four times a year over the last two decades have gone without any editing other than spotting typos or calling for clarifications here and there. Once, when recounting a visit to the college for a reunion, I described sitting for an hour or so at a coffee shop on campus, just hanging out, talking to whichever old classmates wandered by. I wrote that it felt just like my undergraduate days when I would sit in what was then the only coffee house on campus (the memorable Downey House—my friends and I even had a song about it), drinking coffee and shooting the shit with whomever happened by. The editor changed "shooting the shit" to "shooting the breeze." This was a reminder to me that the editorial powers that be did not want to offend any readers. I was a bit surprised, but did not think much about it.

Then, a few years ago, in 2017, I ran into a bigger editorial conflict.

My notes were due in a few weeks, and the cupboard was bare. One morning three different friends emailed me an article that had appeared in *Slate* titled "The Liberal Arts Football Factory: Is Wesleyan University compromising its independent reputation and academic excellence to build an athletic cash cow?" (<https://slate.com/culture/2017/12/wesleyan-university-football-is-good->

[business.html](#)). The author spelled out, in rich detail, just how Wesleyan had turned around its traditionally dismal athletic program to become a dominant one, not only winning the Little Three (Amherst, Williams, Wesleyan) in football but with nationally ranked teams in many sports (the college is Division III) and even some national champions. The story, as he told it, entailed the hiring of a new football coach, who then became the athletic director, and the commitment from the institution to recruit athletes more vigorously. This included support from the school's president and the admissions department to accept athletes who were substantially weaker academically than the other students.

For example, the author claimed that admissions expectations had been lowered for about 70 student-athletes per year, and that athletes scored much lower on SATS than non-athletes (he reported that those who play the three "helmeted" sports of football, hockey, and lacrosse scored 300 points lower than other students—they averaged 1100 on the SATS as opposed to 1400). He concluded that "Wesleyan and its brethren [other schools doing the same thing] have built what is essentially an affirmative action program for athletes."

I taught at Guilford College, a small Quaker liberal arts college, for 45 years, and throughout that time I played basketball three days a week and I attended many sports events on campus. I consider myself very much a sports fan. Still, I was stunned when I read the article about Wesleyan. I live in North Carolina, where many of my friends and neighbors have come to expect, and are happy to see, Duke and the University of North Carolina do whatever is necessary to enroll the best basketball players in the country (at Duke, especially, which in recent years has specialized in basketball players who only play for one year before going pro; whether they are capable of completing the requirements for a bachelor's degree is for some players quite moot). But Wesleyan? I saw this as a chance for a healthy discussion among my classmates (and a way to resolve the paucity of information I had for the forthcoming class notes deadline). I had recently seen many of these guys (Wesleyan did not go co-ed until a year or two after I graduated) at our 50th reunion, and over the course of the reunion weekend we had numerous lively debates about whether the school was too progressive, or not progressive enough, why it wasn't ranked higher in the annual ratings of colleges, and whether it was allocating its resources wisely. Throughout that weekend, my classmates showed themselves to be articulate, opinionated, and in agreement on few issues.

So, I decided to send them a link to the *Slate* article, to ask them their thoughts, and to use their inevitable divergent views as the basis for my class notes. Many wrote back, with far more of them supportive than critical of the school having turned around its athletic program. A few, however, like me, were less than enthusiastic about the trade-offs that had been part of this transition. I wrote my notes, expressing my views, and summarizing their views. I thought it made for a thought-provoking column, one that showed the complexity of the issues involved, that my classmates cared deeply about the college, and that they took very different positions from each other (and from me) about the changes that had taken place. It

seemed to me to be a nice departure from the usual reporting of achievements and awards, retirements, and grandchildren. I promised in the column's conclusion to continue the discussion next time. . . .

However, after I submitted the notes electronically on a Sunday, the next morning I had a phone call from one of the editors. I was told that the class notes were not meant for controversy, or to share differences of opinion, but, rather, to share information about classmates. They would not run the notes in the magazine.

I acknowledged that it was their editorial decision, but said that I wanted to share these notes with my classmates, even if not in the magazine itself but only by email using the Listserv—after all, I had invited them to participate in a discussion about the article and they would be wondering what others had to say. The editor told me they would check and get back to me. A day later I was told that I could use the group email system to send out the notes.

I was encouraged to submit an alternate set of "traditional" notes to the magazine, and I did—a brief submission primarily about the death of one of my classmates. I also sent my classmates what I labeled in the email as "the notes from the alumni underground."

I heard back from many, some thanking me for informing them about the issue (and its apparent effects on campus), some addressing how the school does or should recruit athletes, and some expressing disappointment that the alumni magazine had not run the column. The latter comments ranged from bemused ("Hard to see why Wes would object to this discussion. Risk aversion rules.") to angry ("It struck me as sad and disappointing, as well as infuriating, that the one institution we (naively) thought was independent, goofy, 'out there', different from the Ivys and wanna-be Ivys, is falling by the wayside and joining the crowd, catering to athletics to boost revenue, dumbing-down the magazine to keep the troops asleep. Seriously. Censorship -- at WESLEYAN? Forcing you to send your content 'from the underground'?! That's worse than lowering academic standards for football players. Let my classmates go!").

It was a lesson for me. I was not surprised when the Interim President at Michigan State squelched "long-form essays" in that school's alumni magazine about how the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case had hurt the university, or that he rejected a cover image that showed a woman wearing teal lipstick, which the sexual abuse survivors were wearing as a show of solidarity ("Get that teal shit out of here" he allegedly said; <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/06/21/sources-bad-news-cut-michigan-state-alumni-magazine>). What does one expect from a behemoth school like Michigan State that is under the thumb of state legislators? But good old liberal arts progressive Wesleyan, running scared of some reasoned discussion about decisions related to admissions?

More recently, on two occasions I have been asked to remove or change wording that was deemed as too political from my notes. In one case, in writing about my decision to retire, I noted that like many retired people, I had written a memoir about how I had belatedly realized that I might have been, back in 1974, the first Jewish faculty member

hired at Guilford College, a Quaker school (*Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College*). I informed my classmates that "writing this book helped to take my mind off the woes of my little Quaker college, which is struggling mightily to stay afloat, and also helped take my mind off the woes of our country as we try to avoid a government characterized by fascism and support for white supremacy." The nice young newly appointed editor told me that the last part, about fascism and support for white supremacy, had been cut. As she explained: "You'll notice that one line was cut by my bosses, in the interest of trying to keep class notes as apolitical as possible."

The other editorial correction was, again, based on a political comment that I slipped into my notes. This time, I described a visit from a classmate, and after noting that he and his wife live in Palm Springs, Florida, I parenthetically included "Yes, they are neighbors of Voldemort" (I wrote these notes before I learned that Neera Tanden, Biden's rejected cabinet-level nominee to direct the Office of Management and Budget, also had referred to our former President as Voldemort.) I was asked to revise or omit the reference. I proposed changing Voldemort to "whatshisname." That was not acceptable either.

Over time, I have come to think about what seem to be increased concerns by the editorial powers that be at the Wesleyan alumni magazine as part of a larger problem taking place in academe, not only at large universities but at small liberal arts colleges. Many have written about the corporatization of the academy. In one survey by *Inside Higher Education* that explored the most significant changes in higher education over the years, "corporatization of the university" was one of the most frequently cited, and definitely the response that elicited the most passionate responses (<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/stratedgy/bemoaning-corporatization-higher-education>). Many decisions seem to be made using what have come to be corporate values. Even at the little Quaker college at which I taught, which prides itself on the many admirable values that have mostly been followed throughout the institution's long history, in recent years some administrators who have lost their jobs have been escorted off campus immediately upon learning of their termination. Some have been asked to sign nondisclosure agreements in order to receive severance pay, and they have been told that they would lose their severance pay if they subsequently set foot on campus. That is, some employees who worked at the college for many decades, much longer than any of the most current wave of senior administrators, have been treated as suspected corporate criminals.

Writing the class notes, then, generally an innocuous and noncontroversial task, has, like so many things, become part of a larger more polarized political process, one which seems to be driven by the desire to avoid anything that might offend those on the other side of the giant divide that permeates the culture. I know that colleges are in trouble financially, I understand that those making decisions want to avoid offending their many constituents (students, their parents, alumni, faculty, staff, members of the Board) who are, like the country itself, more and more divided in their views. Still, in the liberal

arts tradition I experienced as an undergraduate, differing points of view were assumed, and valued. I hate to see liberal arts colleges so nervous that when it comes to differing points of view risk aversion reaches all the way to the class notes.



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