

## VIEWPOINT

# Fighting Fire with Fire

## Reinvigorating the Language of American Universities

by Aaron Barlow

*Might academia co-opt the concepts and language of the corporate world, repurposing them to meet the actual (and traditional) ends of our higher education institutions?*

The beliefs and even tactics of an enemy are usually shoved aside by the ones who feel under attack. Each of us ends up defending what we have, come hell or high water, rarely considering that the path of best resistance might be the very one our attacker has already trodden. This contains its own dangers, of course: one can easily slip into becoming one's own enemy. Take the case of higher education: phrases such as “agent of change” and “innovator,” for example, have long been associated with the foolish (in the eyes of many academics) Disruptive Innovation ideas of Clayton Christensen. As the entire foundation of academia rests on the work of the past, challenges to that foundation (demands for “change”) become challenges to the whole. What may work in a business environment (though the value of Disruptive Innovation is questioned even there) with no basis similar to that of academia does not necessarily transfer to our universities—even though it, especially its language, can be turned to academia's use.

In a 2015 *Harvard Business Review* article, Christensen, along with Michael E. Raynor and Rory McDonald, writes that Disruptive Innovation “describes a process whereby a smaller company with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established incumbent businesses” (Christensen, Raynor, and McDonald 2015, ¶ 6). According to this model, for-profit and online colleges and universities should be succeeding—if the model can be transferred to academia. After all, online and for-profit institutions concentrate on what Christensen calls “low-end footholds” and “new-

market footholds,” the former because “incumbents” “pay less attention to less-demanding customers” (Christensen, Raynor, and McDonald 2015, ¶ 9) and the latter because “disrupters create a market where none existed” (¶ 10). Although the opportunity for successful disruption was (and is) certainly there in university settings, online and for-profit institutions have not succeeded, certainly not to the degree once predicted. They may be businesses, but the incumbents they are attacking absolutely aren't—though many colleges and universities have attempted to don corporate clothing these past decades (itself another threat to traditional academic values and part of the reason that the language and ideas of business are rejected by many academics).

The single most critical reason for the increasing failure of online and for-profit institutions is that they have not understood that a model developed for one arena does not always transfer successfully to another. Initial success was possible because these businesses were able to take advantage of lax governmental oversight over student loan processes but this was never sustainable. Commercial academic institutions would have had to move toward creating their own foundations of research and scholarship, an expensive proposition they could ill afford if they were to keep up the profit margins sustaining their Wall Street positions.

Another reason online and for-profit institutions have not succeeded stems, paradoxically, from the situation pointed out by Christopher Newfield (2016, Kindle loc. 3976) in which

universities are encouraged “to ignore and conceal losses incurred by sponsored research, complex administration, and related activities.” Pressured to appear more economically viable in the corporate sense, higher education institutions have strangled their own resources, making it appear that they can keep their promise, as Newfield also says, of doing more with less. This allowed outsiders to deflate their own estimations of the importance of research and scholarship in the educational paradigm so that they too can avoid the expense. They cannot succeed, however, without it, certainly not in the long run.

That online and for-profit institutions have been declining does not mean, however, that all of the theories and suggestions and their terminologies that have been created to enhance business advancement are necessarily flawed when transferred to academia. The problem is that the approach has been one sided, for the most part, coming from the outside in. Few with real grounding within academia have been applying the concepts and language of the corporate world to the academic world in a way that respects the strengths and traditions of academia while both taking the best from that other world and building a bulwark against its incursion. Such an approach can seem both dangerous and as a capitulation (the bulwark simply a rationale) to imperiled academics, but it could also be an effective path of resistance to what many see as the neoliberal corporatization of American universities.

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Richard Cherwitz (2012), founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program at the University of Texas at Austin and an agitator for just this sort of approach, the turning of corporate speak (and the ideas behind it) to academic use, writes,

This cause requires prominent scholars to join the conversation. While understanding the distinctive mission of research institutions, many distinguished faculty also recognize the need to build connections between universities and communities. Moreover, they refuse to apologize for being scholars. Through example, they can concretely illustrate how “research” (thought and reflection) and “engagement” (action) are not inherently an either-or; each propels and contributes to the other. (Cherwitz 2012, ¶ 16)

This requires academics to reach out both to their greater communities in general but also to the commercial structures that propel our economy—but not as supplicants, as partners and even, in a word, takers.

This concept and course of action, most certainly, is not new. Cherwitz himself has been pushing it for decades, but attention needs to be shifted to it with increasing urgency. As David L. Hildebrand (2005, ¶ 9) wrote more than a decade ago:

Rising tuition, war, and a myriad of scandals on college campuses drown out the deep investment universities are trying to make in our collective future. But without public recognition and endorsement, the social compact between higher education and the state it serves will disintegrate; all of us as shareholders will lose the social security of a future intelligently anticipated and planned for.

Hildebrand, too, is taking up the language of corporations (“investment,” “stakeholder”) and doing so of necessity, for it has become the language of the American public sphere. Though this should never have happened, it has, and that language needs to be turned to the benefit of academic institutions where it once hastened their downfall.

One of the other buzzwords with a specific neoliberal, corporate meaning that has been forced on higher education

in ways that may not always be quite appropriate is “accountability.” As Cherwitz and Thomas Darwin (2005, p. 63) write, this needn’t be quite the problem it has become:

By approaching external pressure for accountability as an opportunity to undertake self-evaluation, universities have the potential to improve their educational services based on sound academic principles and practices defined by those intimately familiar with education. Local ownership of accountability would arm universities with persuasive data on educational impact that might support requests for increased appropriations.

That is, “accountability” should be turned to real academic use. Unfortunately, in most instances, “accountability” has been defined *for* universities rather than *by* them. As a result, they are evaluated today in terms (often quantitative in nature) that make no real sense (when it comes to actual academic utility) in higher education settings, terms often having more to do with money and immediacy than with the real purposes of universities, which are concerned with another kind of currency (knowledge) and the long term, both past and future.

What Cherwitz and Darwin are advocating is a change from looking to education outsiders, the current controllers of the terminology of corporate structures, to higher education insiders—hijacking, if you will, neoliberal terminology and repurposing it to meet the actual (and traditional) ends of our educational institutions. They write, “To tackle complex issues such as access to education, lack of fiscal resources, and declining public trust, it makes sense to draw upon the vast and varied intellectual resources of the institution, including staff and students who, in addition to being stakeholders, possess critical knowledge and experience” (Cherwitz and Darwin 2005, pp. 63–64). In the past, educators have bowed to outside expertise in part because those outsiders were controlling the language that was being applied to educational “commerce.” It was felt,

therefore, that this control equated to expertise and that the antiquated vocabulary (in terms of the increasingly corporate public sphere, as Jürgen Habermas [1989] describes it) of universities showed only how out of step academics are.

What is strange is that it took so long for academics to recognize what had happened to them and that, as of today, so few have responded adequately. After all, as George Orwell wrote in 1946:

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. (Orwell 1946, p. 253)

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Though there are certainly other ways to reverse this trend toward what might be termed academic alcoholism, to convince academia’s constituents that they are not the cause of the decline of universities and that, in fact, the decline is the fault of those defining the “decline,” Cherwitz and IE provide one model worth considering—if for no other reason than it turns the language around, and without apology.

The very word “entrepreneur,” redefined by Cherwitz into an academic possibility, has long been used to exclude academics as well as to reposition people in the commercial world from shopkeepers and contractors into “leading-edge” dynamos—without changing their activities at all. I experienced this myself in the early 1990s when on opening a store and café, I found myself toasted when bragging I was an “entrepreneur”

and ignored when I said I kept a store and served coffee. An academic who claims “entrepreneurship” within the academy, however, is still generally snubbed unless the activity is outside of traditional higher education boundaries. What Cherwitz is trying to do is bring it within so that it can be owned by the constituencies that make up colleges and universities—not in imitation of commercial models but as a descriptor of activities with long higher education pedigrees. The result would be to put academia on an equal footing with the commercial realm. As the “About IE” page says:

Intellectual entrepreneurs understand that genuine collaboration between universities and the public is tantamount to more than increased “access” to the academy’s intellectual assets. It is more than “knowledge transfer”—the exportation of neatly wrapped solutions rolling off the campus conveyor belt. Collaboration demands mutual humility and respect, joint ownership of learning and co-creation of an unimagined potential for innovation—qualities that move universities well beyond the typical elitist sense of “service.” Knowledge, after all, involves the integration of theory, practice and production. (Intellectual Entrepreneurship 2014–2016, ¶ 4)

Because it has ceded control of the language of innovation and change to the corporate world, academia has developed something of an inferiority complex, feeling its activities aren’t as important as those generating quantifiable income. The more nebulous profits from colleges and universities have long been discounted in the corporate world where “accounting” refers almost exclusively to money. This has led to a wresting of control of the discussion of the purposes of higher education away from academic institutions, placing it in the hands of corporations quick to exploit their new position for their own “bottom lines”—and at the expense of the public, the traditional beneficiary of the scholarship and research that has long been the bedrock of our institutions of higher education.

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