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## Book Review: *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*

Bennett L. Rudolph  
*Grand Valley State University*

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long to allow treatment of all, too short to include members of anyone else's list" (17). Under the circumstances, the Speakers convincingly maintain, humanities curricula have changed very slowly and cautiously, and old monuments still dominate the landscape. The debate has not led to impulsive experiments.

In a section on "Teaching" the Speakers take up, among other matters, a question of great import: the relationship of research to teaching. Their position will surprise no one: "teaching and scholarship are properly a continuum" (20). They concede that "in the current academic marketplace scholarship has a higher priority than teaching" (20), but they still maintain that scholarship is a necessary albeit not a sufficient condition of teaching. In support of their position they offer nothing but the testimony of an expert witness, "the President of Georgetown University, Timothy S. Healy, S.J." This expert himself contributes nothing but an assertion: "these two great works stand as cause and effect" (20). (Apparently, scholarship is the cause.)

This is not argument at all. If the Speakers were not in such haste to be done with this report, they might have gone beyond expert opinions and asked some pertinent questions. Are there different kinds of scholarship, some of which is humane and significant, some of which is not? Do the editors of learned journals know the difference and does it matter? Is the scientific model useful for the humanities? In the sciences, hordes of merely competent workers can make real albeit inconspicuous contributions to an enterprise that makes progress. Is that true of the humanities?

And there are still larger questions at issue, which Father Healy unwittingly touches upon: "When a student sees that the professor is the live embodiment of a discipline,

when he understands in class or lab the excitement as well as the stress of discovery . . . this can turn his learning upside down . . ." (20). Isn't it possible to see the "disguised ideological assumption" that the life of the mind — nay, less: the live embodiment of a discipline — is the highest destiny and exactly the ideal to offer the young? Isn't it possible that one of Cheney's expert witnesses, Leon Kass, is closer to the truth when he speaks of "second-order scholarly concerns" displacing "human concerns"? I do not intend to argue here by way of rhetorical question. These are real questions and they ought to trouble us all. The Speakers, in their utter self-assurance, give no sign they have ever considered such questions.

I have reviewed only some of the issues over which the Humanities War is being fought. These issues, I think, are of great consequence. Indeed, my main point throughout this review is that this war is far too important to be left to the generals, for the generals on both sides have woefully let us down. They do not inspire loyalty. As far as I can tell, the generals don't even know the true location of the battlefield. For that piece of vital information we must turn, or return, to Wallace Stevens, per my epigraph.

Anthony Parise

Charles J. Sykes, *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1988.

Mr. Sykes's book, *ProfScam*, as the title implies, is an angry, vitriolic, and outrageous diatribe against the American higher education establishment in general, and professors in particular. The book is sensationalist in

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tone and is obviously an attempt to focus supermarket tabloid-style muckraking journalism techniques on the academic world. It is easy for an academic to dismiss this book on the grounds of being strident, exaggerated, and, to some extent, misdirected. It is, therefore, most unfortunate for academia that Mr. Sykes is fundamentally correct in much of what he says.

It must be admitted, however, that higher education's misfortune makes for a much better read than would another didactic book on pedagogy. Mr. Sykes is not pompous, morose, or recondite like Allan Bloom. He knows a good joke when he sees one. Who could deny that the state of higher education in America is humorous, in the Lenny Bruce sense of the term? *ProfScam* dramatically throws down the gauntlet, and Sykes is not afraid of a mendacious calumny or two. Yet the essence of what he says is correct.

I enjoyed every wonderfully scandalous and cynical word of Mr. Sykes's book, much in the same way I enjoy Joan Rivers. Sykes delivers a delightful and deliciously wicked load of bile, and he delivers it right in the eye. Nothing is sacrosanct. It may be sophomoric, but it sure is fun.

It is important to understand, however, that *ProfScam* is not meant to be humorous. It is meant to be a serious, albeit mordant and petulant, analysis of the problems of higher education in America. While it may fail in some degree to fulfill that aspiration, it succeeds as catharsis, much needed by anyone involved with higher education.

*ProfScam* can be divided into three essential parts for the purpose of evaluation and analysis. The first consists of charges made against professors and the American higher educational establishment. This is without question Sykes's strongest and most compel-

ling material. The second part consists of an analysis of the causes of the current problems in higher education. Here Sykes skates onto thinner ice and, in some cases, clearly has his history wrong. Finally, Sykes recommends several solutions to the problems he defined in the beginning of the book. The suggested solutions are ham-fisted, extreme, and, perhaps, malicious. In many cases they would do more damage to American higher education than the very real problems Sykes describes are currently doing. One indication of the weakness of this section is the fact that Sykes only devotes nine pages out of the 304 in his book to recommending solutions and analyzing their impact.

The charges Sykes makes are well known to anyone who is aware of the various governmental inquiries and foundation commission reports on higher education in the last thirty years. While Sykes mainly uses anecdotal evidence and picks and chooses his illustrations across a wide variety of higher educational institutions in order to make the problems appear as damaging as possible, others have conducted enough formal analysis of these issues for most people in academia to admit that the problems do exist and that they are extremely serious. Almost everyone who works in higher education will feel a sense of recognition as they read Sykes's description of the problems of American higher education.

The first, and probably most salient charge Sykes makes is that teaching is not only de-emphasized in higher educational institutions, but is actually seen as odious and held in great disdain at many institutions of higher learning. Naturally, Sykes, as a good muckraker would, takes his evidence mainly from major prestige research universities rather than small liberal arts colleges.

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Sykes claims that teaching reminds professors that they are mere pedagogues, like high-school and grammar-school instructors, rather than glamorous, avant-garde, professional researchers. Sykes comes up with fairly damning evidence of this attitude, both in the form of statistical studies and anecdotal quotations from administrators at major research universities. One example that Sykes cites is that Harvard did not grant tenure to three recent recipients of its yearly Outstanding Teaching Award. While several of these recipients also won prestigious prizes for their research efforts, the book quotes one Harvard administrator as saying that outstanding teaching is prima-facie evidence that a professor is not devoting enough attention to research.

Sykes states that at most schools everyone pays lip service to teaching, but that it either means nothing or counts as a negative when promotion, tenure, or salary increases are being considered. At many institutions, popular teachers are considered panders to mass tastes. Sykes quotes several noted professors as saying that success in the classroom and intellectual prowess are essentially mutually exclusive. While Sykes plays fast and loose with the evidence he presents, it is hard to believe there is anyone in academia who has not at least heard attitudes such as these.

Sykes spends a considerable amount of time discussing the damage done by universities when they de-emphasize teaching. Probably the most damaging is the development of mass lecture classes at major research institutions. These classes often enroll several hundred, with discussion sections taught by ill-prepared "academic slaves" (teaching assistants, adjunct instructors, or permanent visiting faculty), many of whom "have great difficulty communicating in English." Once again, Sykes's tabloid-style anecdotes are wonderfully scan-

dalous. For example, he mentions two or three distinguished institutions where, in certain majors, large numbers of students have graduated without ever being in a class taught by a full-time faculty member.

Sykes claims that another detrimental aspect of the academic establishment's attitude toward teaching is that the more money given to higher education, the less likely tenured professors are likely to teach. Sykes once again utilizes statistics gathered from a few highly selective research universities in order to demonstrate that additional financing is almost always funnelled into research, rather than enhanced instruction, contrary to what state legislatures typically intend when granting funds. Sykes claims that when additional research funds become available, professors typically "flee the classroom" and turn their instructional duties over to teaching assistants. At the particular schools mentioned in Sykes book this may, in fact, be the case. Even in the examples cited, however, it would be difficult to generalize as Sykes does without knowing the actual resource allocation process at each institution. Statistical correlation does not prove causation.

While *ProfScam* mainly focuses on major research universities, Sykes does reserve a few choice comments for regional state universities and their pathetic and ridiculous attempts to ape major schools in their disdain for teaching and attempts to turn themselves into "research" institutions. Sykes implies that these institutions, instead of concentrating on teaching as small liberal arts colleges do, are even more trendy and status conscious than the major institutions, since they are aware of their low ranking in the world of academic prestige. While these comments are gross generalizations that might be difficult to prove (or disprove for that matter), they certainly

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are appropriate criticisms of some regional institutions.

Sykes goes over a great deal of material purporting to demonstrate how badly most college graduates have been educated. While many of these studies have been cited dozens of times, most recently in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, they do represent an embarrassment for educators. One study I had not seen before indicated that nearly one third of Harvard's political science seniors could not find England on a world map.

While everyone tries to place the blame for America's well-documented cultural illiteracy and intellectual short comings on someone other than themselves, Sykes feels he knows who is responsible. According to him, naturally, the blame rests squarely on the shoulders of professors and America's higher educational establishment. Sykes points out that high-school and grammar-school teachers are merely products of this establishment.

It appears Sykes has a rather romantic notion of the teaching profession. If a student doesn't learn, Sykes always blames the professor. He naively assumes that all students attending the university are both willing and able to learn if only the professor would bother to teach. While this may have been true in certain parts of Europe at a time when higher education was extremely elitist, it certainly is not true in present day America's egalitarian system. Our current system gives virtually everyone a chance at a college education if they want to attempt it. While we should be justifiably proud of our egalitarian achievement, we cannot assume, as Sykes seems to, that all students are equally ready and able to learn. Many students have few or no intellectual interests. They take vocationally-oriented courses whenever pos-

sible and generally avoid what is intellectually challenging.

Sykes claims that the majority of the research produced by professors has no other purpose than to impress promotion and tenure committees or colleagues. He states that if the "publish or perish" system collapsed, most academic journals would immediately cease to exist. Sykes points out that \$130 billion dollars are spent each year on academic research, and that in the humanities alone, one study comes out every two minutes. Most of these studies, Sykes claims, are read by no one. (Sykes even mentions a few investigations which indicated that even journal editors could not recognize resubmissions of articles they had published several months earlier. Moreover, they often turned the resubmissions down when they were credited to less prestigious institutions, thereby demonstrating they had probably not even read the published article in their own journal and their "blind evaluation" process was not so blind.)

Naturally, for this section of the book, Sykes draws almost all of his examples from the humanities and social sciences. (Amazingly, business administration is never mentioned anywhere in the book, which is a pity, since it is the source of some of the most ridiculous tripe published in all of academia.) The hard sciences are never mentioned in regards to research except in a later section of the book where Sykes talks about academia's greed in selling the results of scientific research to government and industry. One would guess that such research must have some value, since government and industry is willing to pay greedy professors so much for it.

While some of the specific research projects cited by Sykes are clearly ludicrous, other studies, not mentioned by Sykes, show that those who are active in both consulting and

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research also get the best teaching evaluations. Sykes's response to this line of argument would probably be his much-repeated charge that those who do research have very little occasion to teach, since they are usually relieved of that responsibility.

Sykes also charges that it is in the professor's interest to make everything as arcane, esoteric and obtuse as possible. Without this type of "cover," the general public and those subsidizing research could easily see how inane much of it is. The professor's best protection against this is to use jargon and mathematical formulas whenever possible, because these things frighten off those who are not part of the *cognoscenti*. If these techniques do not work there is still hope: some people are easily frightened by credentials and academic prestige. While I may quibble with some of the specifics, there is no doubt Sykes is basically correct here.

I, myself, once had an article rejected from a journal because it was clearly written. I rewrote the same material using the most arcane jargon I could think of and a much more confusing style. Naturally, the same journal accepted the article immediately. I am sure Sykes would agree with me in saying that viewing the "Wizard of Oz" is good training for a scholarly writer.

As Sykes points out, perhaps the worst damage this arcane and myopic focus does is that it often carries over into the classroom. Instead of teaching undergraduates what they are supposed to learn, some professors teach academic trivia. In some cases, this is because professors are preoccupied with their research, while in others, it is used to hide the fact the professor does not know much about the topic being taught. Although we may not have been in a good position to judge these things while we were undergraduates, we can now

look back on our own education and see that Sykes is correct about at least some academics.

While *Profscam* is fundamentally correct about much of what is wrong with higher education, Sykes's assignment of blame is rather arbitrary. Specifically, he states that lazy professors are at fault for the entire mess. He believes that professors have taken up research because quality teaching is too taxing an effort.

Sykes simply does not have any empirical evidence for this charge. From personal observation, after having worked for many years in the business world, I would say that I have met very few lazy professors and that most academics work much harder than the typical business person (at least in marketing, my field of specialization). I would even go so far as to speculate that there is no higher percentage of lazy professors than there is of lazy doctors, lazy lawyers, or lazy accountants.

Sykes claims that professors took over almost total control of American universities in the 1930's, and since that time have been operating them in a self-serving manner, making their life easy and comfortable with little regard for either students or administrators.

Sykes obviously must be reading different history books than I read. It has always been my understanding that professors had almost total control of medieval universities and that the pendulum has been swinging in favor of administrators ever since.

In any case, the real issue isn't laziness, but prestige and status. That is obviously the reason most people tend to get Ph.D.'s (and it is why many Ph.D.'s are insecure people). Many, if not most, professors desperately seek recognition. It is not how hard they work, it is just that they are misdirected and often work at the wrong things. They believe that research will bring them prestige and status.

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They know that teaching certainly will not. Administrators are, if anything, more status conscious than professors. Because they are not directly involved in teaching, the only thing they have to indicate their success is the amount of status and glory the school achieves under their administration. In most cases, they tend to care even less about teaching than the professors do. Therefore, blame for higher education's current dilemmas will have to be shared, not placed on the shoulders of professors exclusively, as Sykes attempts to do.

The solutions section is clearly the weakest part of the book because Sykes doesn't have any realistic or workable ones. His enjoyment seems to come from exposing fraud, incompetence, and arrogance. In the case of higher education, that alone is a worthwhile service.

The solutions he does offer are suitably outrageous. They consist primarily of putting an end to most academic research, increasing teaching hours, eliminating teaching and research assistance, and abolishing tenure. Obviously, under these conditions anyone who had a talent that could be sold elsewhere and, therefore, could leave academia, would do so. It is hard to imagine how these suggestions would improve teaching quality. Clearly their intent is to punish professors rather than change anything positively.

Probably Sykes's best advice is not included in his agenda for changing the structure of higher education. Instead, it is offered to individual parents helping their son or daughter choose a college. He states that while small liberal arts colleges are very expensive, they are probably worth the money if the prospective student appears to have the talent to become a serious scholar. This is perhaps good advice, but not many families can afford it.

Sykes's strong point is not solutions because his real goal is to destroy the present system.

Academia very much needed a good tabloid style muckraking. In *Profscam*, we have it.

Bennett L. Rudolph