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# Teaching by Candlelight

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A few years ago, after 9/11, my dean called me for a meeting.<sup>1</sup> It was a pleasant enough day, a little chilly and overcast, but nothing dramatic. I walked across the beautiful campus of the private liberal arts college where I teach in Connecticut. Along the way, I greeted and was greeted by students, staff, and other faculty. My geniality felt a little forced, because I was anxious about what awaited me at my walk's end. The dean and I had a fractious relationship, although it was neither personally unpleasant nor professionally threatening. This time, the dean's call had been brief and the summons immediate. His expression was grave. I sat in one of the plush chairs in an office that seemed unusually empty of the books that normally clutter the shelves of an academic room. He was polite, and he asked how I had been. Then he told me that he had received a few letters that accused me of being a communist and an agent of foreign powers. He laid out the facts in the letters, then leaned toward me, touched my wrist, and asked if the college could do anything to ensure my safety.

I was shocked. Not by the letters, for those are now frequent. My e-mail, answering machine, and mailbox are familiar with the bile of different kinds of hateful political forces. There is even a Web site that asks for my head. Nothing tops that. What surprised me was the dean's reaction: he could not care less about the actual allegations—he was simply worried about my well-being. As I walked back to my office, in a daze, I thought about my position of privilege. The letters that came to the dean were filled with poor English grammar, misspellings, and outrageous accusations. They could not be taken seriously in themselves, particularly when they were being hurled at a tenured professor at a private college. Of course, the same dean, before 9/11, challenged my right to teach a course on Marx, but on this score, he was upright. The braying of the multitude, even if correct, could not assail the comfortable position of the tenured professor. My academic and political freedom trumped their prejudices.

Still, the idea of the “campus radical,” the domesticated rabble-rouser who provides the academy with its illusion of ideological diversity, concerned me. As long as the radical is in a minority, as long as the radical is unable to drive campus culture, nothing is threatened. To consider the

problem of academic freedom and the recent assaults on individual faculty members on the terrain of their right to assert certain opinions, without an analysis of how many of us get away with what we do and say, or even get our views promoted, is insufficient. Shouldn't we at least be asking who gets to even hear our views or afford to sit in our classes? Campus democracy needs to be understood on a far greater canvas than in the terms of academic freedom. This narrowed notion of democracy as academic freedom allows our intellectual institutions to get away with a great deal of undemocratic activity.

I recently came upon a survey that helped me widen the way I understand campus democracy. It comes from two up-and-coming social scientists (Harvard University's Neil Gross and George Mason University's Solon Simmons). Their survey of a thousand U.S. residents, conducted for the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), shows that twice the number of those asked have confidence in the U.S. academy over the White House.<sup>2</sup> Despite the assaults on the academy by the right wing, the public's faith in the major academic institutions remains. They have not entirely bought the view that higher education is compromised by its liberalism or radicalism. It helps of course that President George W. Bush has such a low standing, so the comparison might not be fair. When asked to name the biggest problem facing higher education, a plurality (42.8 percent) pointed to "the high cost of college tuition," while 17 percent worried about "binge drinking by college students." Only a small number focused on the issue of "political bias in the classroom" (8.2 percent) and "incompetent professors" (5 percent).<sup>3</sup> Add the latter together and you get more people worried about campus larceny and debauchery than about either political indoctrination or incompetence.

The question of affordability of higher education is salient to any discussion of academic freedom. A 2000 survey of 850 U.S. residents found that less than a tenth of adults who enjoy a family income of between \$30,000 and \$75,000 believe that college education is affordable. Those who make less than \$30,000 fear that their children won't be able to go to college, and those who make more than \$75,000 also have their misgivings about college costs.<sup>4</sup> A 2005 study by the College Board found that both public and private colleges are increasingly unaffordable to all U.S. residents, but of course among the lowest income earners and wealth holders, the burden is greatest (at public two-year colleges, cost of attendance sucks up more than a third of the family income for those in the lowest family income quartile).<sup>5</sup> These high prices come at a time when the buying power of family incomes has declined, and when outright grants given to those who need them have been replaced by merit-driven (public and private)

loans. Yet there seems to be no letup in the desire of young people to go to college (in October 2005, almost 70 percent of high school graduates went to some kind of college).<sup>6</sup>

Campuses, therefore, are now home to students whose families and whose own labor are taxed highly to pay for their education. The increased level of student indebtedness and the pressure to work during college years structure students' experiences. A congressional study found that by the 1990s, when the stock market boomed and the good times rolled for the well-off, college debt spiraled out of control. Between 1992 and 1999, annual borrowing for students at four-year public colleges rose by 65 percent, from \$1,800 to \$3,000. This meant that the average debt for a four-year cycle rose in this period to \$15,000. With this burden, the congressional study noted, "students from low income families are often unable to support loans after graduation."<sup>7</sup>

If this is the case at public schools, it is not dissimilar at private schools (the cutback in federal aid to public schools is now matched by the decline in stock market-held endowments at most private schools). Three-quarters of students work, and most of them do so not to support their excesses, but to get by; the time spent on the job adversely affects their grades.<sup>8</sup> Among working-class students, the problem is acute. A large number (29 percent) work more than thirty-five hours a week, and of them a majority (53 percent) fail to graduate.<sup>9</sup>

College degrees still provide a boost to the earning power of workers. Young people are driven to college by a desire to learn and by the knowledge that today's college degree is worth the price of yesterday's high school diploma. This flow is unchecked, and it is what makes the higher education market inelastic. Prices skyrocket, and the customers continue to throng at the door. There is little choice when the job offerings are fewer. As jobless growth overcomes the economy, and as nontradable services are the only boom sector in the U.S. job market, the anxiety about getting paid after laying out a large investment in the student increases. The pressure on students to curtail imagination during their college years is immense. Find a major that guarantees a good job and spend your time on campus doing as many internships as possible to grease your way into the narrowest of doorways that lead to corporate success. For the neoliberal academy, this is the student's stairway to heaven.

The freedom of the student to enjoy the world of ideas and to seek solutions to planetary problems and opportunities is narrowed. Where is the space for the students to enjoy the ideological and intellectual freedom necessary for critical thought and expression? All the talk about a common core curriculum for a liberal student body is anachronistic and unaware of the neoliberal reality that tears into the students' ability to think outside

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their indebtedness. This is not to say that our students are always worried about debt and unable to be creative and bold with their ideas. Rather, the problem of debt in the context of jobless growth inhibits all but the most intellectually driven students, and this debt consciousness contributes to the nihilism felt by many toward our social institutions (the binge drinking is a symptom of the problem, not a problem *sui generis*).

What does all this have to do with academic freedom? The debate over the political commitments and views of the faculty is a red herring. It ignores the academy's main problem with contemporary higher education: the tendency for higher education to become increasingly vocational and less intellectual. This is not the fault of the student or of television or other such cultural shifts alone, but it is the necessary consequence of the way education has become one more capital input into the worker-commodity. The freedom of our students to think is encroached upon not by this or that individual faculty member, but by increased costs for higher education, a lack of federal support for these costs, and the fears of joblessness and indebtedness associated with both these high costs and the decreased number of lucrative careers in the offing. Helen Lowery of Boston University put it bluntly: "I really want to work in advocacy law," she told the *Christian Science Monitor*, "but from a practical perspective that's not going to happen. I just won't be able to pay back my loans."<sup>10</sup> No wonder the survey found a plurality worried more about college tuition than about the academic freedom of the faculty.

A previous president of my college had the indelicacy to use current corporate jargon when speaking to the faculty. I learned from him the term "blue skying" (thinking outside material constraints), and he once tried to get me to go with him on a fundraising junket to Europe ("wheels-up time is 9 a.m.," he said in tune with my mumbled demur). He wore corporate blue suits and walked around with a posse of vice presidents, all dressed in corporate livery, each brandishing a folder. They looked like a militia, strolling around the campus, measuring the fat, eagerly, hungrily cutting, cutting, cutting. Yet spending, spending, spending on noncurricular hardware.

Nothing about this president and his gang is unique. They are now part of the normal fabric of U.S. higher education. Indeed, the campus is no longer an ivory tower or a city on the hill. It more closely resembles that other major culture-creating institution, the U.S. corporation. Income inequality (between the president and the janitor) is stark, but this is only the most vulgar instance of the convergence of academic and corporate cultures. The assault on campus unions that try to provide a living wage for the workers, on graduate student unions that try to get a wage for

indentured teachers, on adjuncts who enjoy no security of tenure, and so on teaches our students that the corporate free-market culture is acceptable and that it is rational. As my Trinity colleague Paul Lauter wrote in 2002, “The free market ideology being taught at U.S. universities has to do with winning the hearts and minds of young Americans to the fantasy that their interests are at one with those of Enron and WorldCom executives. Such lessons are reinforced within the multiplying classrooms devoted to promoting enterprise, marginalizing labor, submerging the realities of social-class disparity, and above all, promoting the underlying ideological tenet of free market capitalism: individualism.”<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, Lauter argues that what the university teaches in its very structure is the culture of the dominant classes: the president is ensured a sweet retirement package, while the faculty is left with bleak options; a university is lauded for its biomedical discoveries, as the population that surrounds it suffers from medical ills untreated for lack of health insurance or a health care infrastructure; a college pays its “adjunct” teaching staff far below a reasonable wage and justifies this based on pleasant-sounding terms like “flex-time”; the university extends its dominion over the neighborhood through gentrification and eminent domain.<sup>12</sup> This culture of the dominant class is a culture of hierarchy. Those who are in the right schools are able to aspire to upward mobility, while others can still hope for something better than their origins. Debt becomes the necessary price to pay for the rewards of a system that is already on display on the campus.

Higher education and K–12 are one of the five major sites for the reproduction of U.S. culture (the others are the state, the military, the corporation [including the media], and religious institutions). Because the academy trains young minds when they are at their most vulnerable, the stakes at this site are immense. That such a large section of the U.S. public goes through the higher education system makes management of this site so central to the worries of the dominant class. To compound these objective fears are the nature of the personnel who staff higher education. An unpredictable fragment of the “new class,” the professional and managerial sector, staffs the academy. The cultural critic Michael Denning suggests that this fragment of the new class betrays ambivalence between the flanks of capital and labor. Such uncertainty by the cultural authors of so powerful an institution makes the stakes of social control “very great indeed.”<sup>13</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, the new class within the academy has periodically faced disciplinary pressures from the dominant class. There is a continuous line of suppression that runs from the expulsion of populist social scientists in the 1890s to the current assault on criti-

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cal intellectuals. This struggle is over the immense cultural resources of the academy and how they are deployed for the intellectual and ethical reproduction of the population. Two influential and articulate groups produce in different measures and in separate registers the assault on the new class. In 1953, the philosopher Sidney Hook called the first group the “cultural vigilantes,” among whom he included “political demagogues in *both* political parties, religious fundamentalists in both Catholic and Protestant denominations, and some zealots and marginal types in some patriotic organizations. To these must be added certain lobbyists and advertisers who wish to discount the principles of democratic socialism, the New Deal, the Welfare State . . . because the economic and social interests they represent would be adversely affected were these principles carried out.”<sup>14</sup> Sociologically, Hook’s description fits our time, with characters like David Horowitz and his eponymous center fitting the bill of the “zealots and marginal types,” while his enablers, such as Colorado governor Bill Owens (Republican) and Colorado state senator Bob Hagedorn (Democrat) donning the robes of the “political demagogues.” The cultural vigilantes draw on a widespread discontent with class hierarchy by painting the institutions of higher education as bastions of elitism; this is their unique ability to draw on mass sentiment and distort popular disgust at hierarchy against this petit bourgeois fragment rather than against bourgeois society and capitalism in general. Many intellectuals do themselves no favors by adopting the mandarin robes of high culture and setting themselves apart from the lives and labors of working people. Most of our anxiety about the assault on the new class is derived from the populism of the cultural vigilantes, and on their proximity to sections of state power. For politicians, the cry against radicals in the ivory tower is a much cheaper way to ally mass concern over the inability of many to pay for college than it is to actually create meaningful public policy that opens the doors of higher education to everyone. David Horowitz, for instance, has no plan to address the escalation of costs and tuition. It is far easier for the vigilantes to bemoan elitism and radicalism than actually to address the core apprehensions of the public. Because of their ability to influence populist lawmakers who also have no agenda for popular discontent apart from symbolic issues, they are able to make mayhem at public institutions (such as for Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado and Kevin Barrett at the University of Wisconsin). Part of the assault seems calculated with the desire to bash public institutions and to promote the free-market private model favored by the political demagogues. My liberal New England private college gets a pass for the time being.

The second group, to upend Sidney Hook, comprises the sanctimonious liberals. These are the guardians of higher education who invoke

high-minded principles such as academic freedom when it suits them and to protect those whom it deems worthy at a certain time. During the McCarthy era, when the vigilantes raised the question of the loyalty of the faculty, it was the liberals who fired them or edged them out on the basis of academic freedom. An exemplary case comes to us from the University of Washington. On 22 January 1949, the university fired three professors for their relationship with the Communist Party. Dr. Raymond B. Allen, the university's president, defended the action as one that did not abridge the policy of academic freedom. On the contrary, the removal of the Communists would only strengthen the principle. Communists, Allen wrote a few months later, are not free because they are enslaved "to immutable dogma and to a clandestine organization masquerading as a political party." By joining the legal Communist Party or being affiliated to it in any way, the teacher has "abdicated control over intellectual life." The classroom, Allen wrote, is a "chapel of democracy," and so, the only teacher who can be allowed into this chapel must be a "free seeker after truth." Indeed, "as the priests of the temple of education, members of the teaching profession have a sacred duty to remove from their ranks the false and robot prophets of Communism or any other doctrine of slavery that seeks to be in, but never of, our traditions of freedom."<sup>15</sup> Hook, who became the leading advocate of anticommunism in the academy, sinisterly wrote of the need for "ethical hygiene" to expunge the profession of Communists.<sup>16</sup>

Allen and other university presidents produced a high-minded defense of their assault on certain academics.<sup>17</sup> Their point is simple: to be worthy of the protections of academic freedom, the faculty member must be an open-minded seeker of the truth and not a dogmatic adherent to received wisdom. Such a principle, of course, immediately excludes anyone who has a religious faith and whose views are mediated through clerical institutions (such as the Vatican, the Koran, or whatnot). Because the principle appeared so shallow, the philosopher Willis Moore wrote, "Whatever the ostensible goal of the early stages of this restrictive movement, its later intent was the achievement of a settled conservative orthodoxy in the political, economic, and general social opinion of America." The onslaught within the culture industries (including the academy), Moore continued, is designed to undermine "the more humane, idealistic and internationalistic tendencies of the past few decades."<sup>18</sup>

Academic freedom, as Allen bluntly put it, is to be granted only to the intellectual who adopts a solitary pursuit of truth. Anyone who is associated with any organized political change has, by this logic, abdicated his or her intellectual suspicion: the moment you close analysis and act, you have ceased to enjoy the protections of academic freedom. But even this is a selective use of a principle, because it does not apply, as I suggested

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above, to those who strive for change based on certain theological or even political principles (such as anticommunism). Moore, less enamored by liberal anticommunism, indicates that the crusade on campus was against ideologies and movements that fostered antisystemic change. “Free thinkers” are welcomed if they are gadflies who do not pose a challenge to the system, or if, despite their own political predilections, they worked in the arena of the sciences (where expertise shielded them from the aggression of the political commissars).<sup>19</sup>

Our liberal institutions operate with a general adherence to a concept of academic freedom that is borrowed from John Stuart Mill’s 1859 *On Liberty*, where the utilitarian and East India Company official argued that contrary opinions are important not for themselves, but because they enable society to check its truths and to ensure that social norms are not in error. We tolerate the campus radical as long as he or she is simply a foil for the correctness of liberal precepts, and as long as he or she does not indulge in any attempt to move a transformative political agenda on the campus culture. This impoverished idea of freedom is valuable for a class society that sees a critique of itself as manageable as its other, as long as it is constrained. Allen’s vulgar statements are not far from the generosity of Mill.

These are not arcane ideas. A majority of those surveyed by the AAUP in 2006 (62.6 percent) said it was acceptable for the university to “dismiss professors who join radical political organizations like the communist party.” A smaller number of people (57 percent) felt that “there’s no room in the university for professors who defend the actions of Islamic militants.” In this same pool, a majority (61.5 percent) said it was acceptable for a professor to oppose the Iraq war and to “express anti-war views in the classroom.”<sup>20</sup> The same dean that worried about my safety challenged my right to teach a Marxist class on *Capital*, because, in the words of another colleague, “that book is responsible for genocide” (and what about the Bible?).

It is a sign of our times that the academic Left has taken to the principle of academic freedom, not only to defend it against the opportunistic assault of the political Right, but also as a shelter for our opinions. What happened to Ward Churchill and what happens to countless faculty who, for example, take the side of campus workers or attempt to explain U.S. imperialism’s blowback or who fight against the indignity of campus culture for so-called minorities is to be expected. The academic Left cannot rely on institutional protection for our adversarial positions; but then again, being embattled and disorganized, this is to be anticipated. When we take positions that challenge the status quo ideology and institutions,

particularly in a time of war, we have to find some means to defend our right to those positions. Given the prejudice of academic freedom to protect our individual right to speak, we tend to coast into that safe harbor. This becomes more convenient than defending our right to an opinion based on the social force of the ideas—a defense that is not covered by the institutionally validated horizon of academic freedom. Our political weakness has resulted in agoraphobia. The struggle over academic freedom, as it is generally constituted, is more than that of a principle, but it is over ideas. The principle is against the creation of the very social force (what the Communist Antonio Gramsci called the ensemble) that would allow our ideas to have cultural valence. That is what makes its defense insufficient.

Alongside a defense of academic freedom, affirmative action, and other such liberal principles, it is imperative that teachers push for a genuine campus democracy. This includes all that we already do, such as give support for the creation of a culture of solidarity over a culture of hierarchy on campus. Unions, collaborative work among students, enriched intellectual debates over contentious issues: all these are fundamental. But none of these is sufficient without the insistence that higher education be a free public good (alongside free preschool). The debate over affirmative action, for instance, is impoverished because all sides accept the neoclassical assumption that educational access is a matter of scarcity and resource allocation. Since there are not enough seats, the colleges have to make some choices of whom to accept. But what if there were enough seats nationwide for all those who wanted to go to college, and what if no one had to compete with anyone else for grants? Colleges would still have to choose their own student body based on a variety of contested factors, but at the very least the applicants would not be barred from entry into campus because of a lack of spaces. In other words, racism and antiracism is not solved by the displacement of neoclassical constraints, but the debate over prejudice will be healthier if it does not occlude the structural problems of scarcity driven by profit-centered and social Darwinist capitalism. If students could come to college on tax money, it would allow them to spend time on ideas and to depart into the world without the albatross of student debt. Their freedom would be greatly enhanced by such a measure.

The call for free higher education is not at all idealistic or utopian. Of the main advanced industrial countries (the twenty-four Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development states), in only three do public funds cover less than half the costs for college (Japan, South Korea, and the United States). In most of these states, government money accounts for between 70 percent and 90 percent of college costs (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy,

Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey). The governments of Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom contribute between 55 percent and 70 percent of the college costs.<sup>21</sup> As the Labor Institute's Sharon Szymanski found, "the tuition and fees at all public degree granting institutions is approximately \$24.7 billion. This is a relatively small amount, equal to approximately 1.3 percent of current federal budgets."<sup>22</sup> A readjustment of military expenditure or corporate tax breaks could easily account for this money. Instead, colleges raise their fees and tuition and make higher education increasingly undemocratic. The campaign for free higher education needs traction, and it needs to be combined with the struggles for affirmative action and for academic freedom.<sup>23</sup> In these scoundrel times, we need more of some things, less of others: more imagination, more resources, more solidarity; less vigilantism, less militarism, less hierarchy.

## Notes

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1. That dean is now gone, as is the president who appears later in the essay. I now work under a new dean and president, both of whom are aware of the dialectic that constrains and drives academic work in our age.

2. Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, "Americans' Views of Political Bias in the Academy and Academic Freedom," working paper, 22 May 2006, 4. This study was commissioned by the American Association of University Professors, and it can be downloaded from its Web site at [www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/DCF3EBD7-509E-47AB-9AB3-FBCFFF5CA9C3/0/2006](http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/DCF3EBD7-509E-47AB-9AB3-FBCFFF5CA9C3/0/2006).

3. Gross and Simmons, "Americans' Views of Political Bias," 10–11.

4. S. O. Ikenberry and T. W. Hartle, *Taking Stock: How Americans Judge Quality, Affordability, and Leadership at U.S. Colleges and Universities* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2001), 34–35, and Laura W. Perna and Chungyan Li, "College Affordability: Implications for College Opportunity," *NASFAA Journal of Student Financial Aid* 36 (2006): 8.

5. College Board, *Trends in College Pricing* (Washington, DC: College Board, 2005), quoted in Perna and Li, "College Affordability," 17.

6. "College Enrollment and Work Activity of High School Graduates" (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006).

7. Ellen Ficklen and Jeneva Stone, *Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America: A Report of the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance* (Washington, DC: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002), 11–13.
8. Ficklen and Stone, *Empty Promises*, 11, and Tracey King and Ellyne Bannon, *At What Cost? The Price That Working Students Pay for a College Education* (Washington, DC: Public Interest Research Group, 2002), 2–3.
9. *Access Denied: Restoring the Nation's Commitment to Equal Educational Opportunity* (Washington, DC: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001), 11.
10. Chris Gaylord, “For Graduates, Student Loans Turn into an Albatross,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 May 2006. Janet Kidd Stewart covers the parents’ point of view in “College’s Major Dilemma: For Love or Money,” *Chicago Tribune*, 6 November 2005.
11. Paul Lauter, “From Adelphi to Enron,” *Academe* 88, no. 6 (2002); see [www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2002/02nd/02ndlau.htm](http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2002/02nd/02ndlau.htm).
12. Paul Lauter, “Content, Culture, Character,” *Works and Days* 41/42 21 (2003).
13. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 134.
14. Sidney Hook, *Heresy, Yes, Conspiracy, No* (New York: John Day Company, 1953), 11.
15. Raymond B. Allen, “Communists Should Not Teach in American Colleges,” *Educational Forum* 13 (1949). The context of the story is well summarized in Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 94–112.
16. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 107.
17. For a range of views, mostly in favor of curtailment of Communists, see Benjamin Fine, “Majority of College Presidents Are Opposed to Keeping Communists on Their Staffs,” *New York Times*, 30 January 1949.
18. Willis Moore, “Causal Factors in the Current Attack on Education,” *AAUP Bulletin*, no. 41 (1955): 623–24.
19. This is the view of Noam Chomsky, R. C. Lewontin, and Ray Siever, collected in *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, by Noam Chomsky, Ira Katznelson, R. C. Lewontin, David Montgomery, Laura Nader, Richard Ohmann, Ray Siever, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Howard Zinn (New York: New Press, 1997).
20. Gross and Simmons, “Americans’ Views of Political Bias,” 14.
21. Sharon Szymanski, “Free for All: Free Tuition at All Public Colleges and Universities for Students Who Meet Admission Standards,” Debs-Jones-Douglass Institute working paper, 2002, 29.
22. Szymanski, “Free for All,” 29.
23. Information on the campaign is available at [www.freehighered.org](http://www.freehighered.org). In addition, see [www.debthitshard.org](http://www.debthitshard.org), a campaign led by Campus Progress (thanks to Madhu Singh). For an excellent call for free higher education, see Preston Smith II and Sharon Szymanski, “Why Political Scientists Should Support Free Public Higher Education,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, October 2003, 699–703.

