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Classes in Advanced Fantasy: A Brief History of the Free University

When I first heard about this conference, I thought it would be interesting to compare present day agitation within the university with the 1960s and 70s free university movement. While preparing my paper, I was unaware of the Experimental College of the Twin Cities (EXCO), a free university that began in 2006 with chapters at Macalester and the University of Minnesota.¹ As it turned out, my brief history of the free university became a cautionary tale of how neoliberal rationalities can align, sometimes all too neatly, with social justice movements. While the existence of EXCO seems to give my comments a more immediate relevancy, I do not direct them exclusively at EXCO, or any other free university. Rather, my aim is to use the free university to illuminate as problematic some common and persistent beliefs about education shared by a much broader range of students and educators than only those involved with free universities. In opposition to the belief that an ideal education would be self-designed and always relevant to a student's immediate interests, I suggest that students' aversion to the impositions of formal education – required courses, evaluations, and study in subjects seemingly irrelevant to their lives – can be worthwhile and productive aspects of critical pedagogies. After providing a historical snapshot of the 1960s free university, I offer some preliminary comments in defense of imposition and irrelevance in education.

Vitals on free U's

The free university movement was an extension of the free school movement, an educational effort defined by student-directed learning, democratic and open school governance, and a lack of formal structures such as grades, required courses, and even scheduled classes. Free schoolers believed in students' natural ability to guide their own self-development and educational curriculum and aspired to align the process of learning with the spontaneous needs and desires of students. Between four and eight hundred free schools opened and closed between

¹ See EXCO's website for more information: <http://www.excotc.org/>

the mid 1960s and the late 1970s started by families and educators who sought, as free school historian Ron Miller described it, "personalistic enclaves in which every child, and every teacher, was free to think, feel, dream, and engage in interactions according to their own authentic needs and passions."² The free schools achieved this, Miller suggested, by creating a learning environment that was "intimate, spontaneous, and joyful – specifically not controlled by textbooks, curricula, instructional methods, rigid rules of behavior."³ Free schoolers often attributed the movement to the social unrest of the mid-twentieth century, and a considerable body of literature accompanied the schools that documented, discussed, and theorized how free schools might replace what were perceived as oppressive, bankrupt, and socially unjust compulsory schools. Probably the most famous free school was A.S. Neill's Summerhill, a private boarding school where students exercised complete oversight of their own education.⁴

Like free schools, free universities offered courses based on student interest, awarded no grades, were not accredited, charged minimal or no fees, and did not have formal faculty. In 1971 there were approximately 110 versions of a free university. If they had budgets at all, they were modest. The largest number I saw was \$20,000 while most of the free U's depended on volunteer labor. The average age of these projects was 2.5 years with the oldest dating back to 1964. The first Free U developed out the free speech movement concentrated on the Berkeley campus.⁵ The majority of Free U's were located on the west coast and in the Midwest and Northern Central states. Many were associated in some way to large state institutions. Over half of the courses offered (56%) were craft or skill oriented, a little over a quarter of the courses were "academic-like courses," and the remaining courses were "'head trips' focused on the achievement of new persona, interpersonal, or mystical insights."⁶

² Ron Miller, *Free School, Free People: Education and Democracy After the 1960s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3.

³ Miller, *Free Schools, Free People*, 3.

⁴ A.S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York, NY: Hart Publishing Co., 1960). See also: Harold Hart, ed., *Summerhill: For & Against* (New York, NY: Hart Publishing Co., 1970).

⁵ For further information on the free speech movement and its association with the free universities see: Michael Rossman, *On Learning and Social Change* (New York, NY: Random House, 1972).

⁶ Jane Lichtman, *Bring Your Own Bag: A Report on the Free Universities* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Higher Education, 1973), iv.



WHICH UNIVERSITY ARE YOU GOING TO THIS FALL ?

BRAND X -- Prestigious private university. Sun, palms, and football and golf for the energetic. The general study of, and its relationship to, related problems. Classes limited to less than 300. Required courses, grades, term papers, grades, examinations, grades. Preparation to take over from Daddy or, alternatively, for further preparation. Tuition \$640 each quarter.

BRAND Y -- Notorious state university. Sun, palms, and street riots for the energetic. Eclectic hemorrhoidal gothic and early plastic architecture. Examination of important approaches and principal views in context of their nature and function. Required courses, grades, term papers, grades, examinations, grades. Preparation for an early appearance before HUAC or, alternatively, to take over from Daddy. Unfortunately, due to the large size of the classes, and for security purposes, no contact with instructors or teaching assistants will be permitted. Tuition \$150 each quarter and rising to the ris

BRAND Z -- Midpeninsula Free University. Sun, palms, and celebration of all the rites of life. Wine Making, Computer Methods, Astrology, Primitive Body Movement, Rhythm of Intimacy, Psychodrama, Chinese Poetry, Karate, Doctors and Patience, Political Occultism, Advanced Fantasy, Urban Guerrilla Warfare, Black Liberation for Whites, Peace Games, Survival, Ecstasy, Progressive Relaxation. Little or no preparation necessary or promised. Class sizes range from 150 down to groups so small and intimate that they fail to meet for lack of members. Membership fee \$10.

Snapshot of a free university

The above poster is for the Midpeninsula Free University (MFU), one of the more successful free U's. MFU formed circa 1966. The poster reflects popular opinion of higher education by comparing three "brands" of university: the prestigious private university, the

notorious state university, and Midpeninsula Free University. It lampoons the first two, casting them as irrelevant, out dated, and in service to esoteric and exploitative aims. The poster captures the yawns elicited by the offerings of the prestigious private university and the notorious state university (so boring, they hardly deserve mention), and the belief that higher education operated in a kind of feedback loop that generated rationales for its continued existence. Brand X, the poster jests, offers "the general study of, and its relationship to, related problems" while Brand Y offers "Examination of important approaches and principle views in context of their nature and function. The juxtaposition of the students in dark, heavy, institutional, water logged clothing with the naked sunbathed couple holding flowers and hands underscores further the sentiment that higher education was one huge, unnecessary imposition.

This sentiment eventually worked against the free university, particularly those that attempted to steer free U curricula toward political action. Again, MFU provides example of the resistance among students to what might be described as the impositions of social justice. In the winter of 1969, 1,275 people enrolled in MFU's 278 courses, twenty of which free U chronicler Jan Lichtman describes as overtly political.⁷ In 1970, new coordinators at MFU changed the focus of the curriculum from "popular psychodrama/encounter/crafts combinations to political theory" and introduced courses such as "History of the Black Panthers, Marxist-Christian Dialog, Cuban Socialism, Cuba, American Monopoly Capitalism, Russian Revolution, Oppressed People, and Prisons."⁸ In June 1971, enrollment had dropped to 67 people and MFU closed the following month.

Free U failings and accomplishments

Given such stories, it would not be hard to make the case that the free university movement was an academic and political failure. The movement was short lived and efforts at building activist structures and coalitions proved ineffectual. Nevertheless, the free U's accomplished important work. Free universities were successful in pressuring formal universities to develop accredited classes and disciplines in previously unrecognized and ignored areas of study. Some of the early free U course such as "The Homosexual and Society," eventually led to what some of us might now consider indispensable departments and fields such as ethnic,

⁷ Lichtman, *Bring Your Own Bag*, 19.

⁸ Lichtman, *Bring Your Own Bag*, 19.

gender, and popular studies. Even some of the "craft-oriented" and personal growth-focused courses helped legitimize the study of alternative histories and cultural theory. Indeed, the distinction Jane Lichtman makes between "craft" oriented courses and "political" courses, depends on a narrow definition of the political. A course on herbal abortions, for instance, might be categorized under crafts, but it was arguably political, as was a course on organic gardening, or a "People's Law" course that focused on everyday law as it related to students' lives. Using a broader definition of the personal and everyday as political, the majority of free U courses were political in nature, but the focus was on changing individual habits and consciousness in order to enact political beliefs rather than altering structural inequalities and injustices.

A cautionary tale

Despite these successes, I would not choose the free U's as a model for political action, but I fear that it already serves as such. The wholesale rejection among free schoolers of educational and political impositions rings familiar. Today, the formal universities, not the free U's, lure new students with the promises of self-exploration and the realizing of individual potential. This is as true for graduate programs as it is for undergraduate studies. The overriding objective of higher education is career development either in the form of occupational skills or else in the achievement of notoriety through publications and tenure. The obsessive and myopic focus on one's own career path modeled by professors fits all too well a neoliberal sensibility that measures value solely in terms of individual achievements and gains. Even our activism is self-serving!

It is my hope that the process of re-thinking the university involves shedding such attitudes toward education and cultivating instead an appreciation of formal schooling as *demanding* in the sense that it requires us to recognize our obligation to others. Higher education, at its best, can stretch us beyond ourselves and inspire awareness of our social obligations. It can direct our attention to distance happenings that don't directly involve us, and from which we may never directly benefit. The degree to which we can achieve that recognition should be the criteria by which we evaluate the impositions of education and its contribution to the public good. Secondly, I question the emphasis free U's placed on offering "relevant" courses and I cheer *irrelevance*. I do not wish to diminish in importance the political work we all do throughout the

everyday and I hope we attend, as free schoolers did, to changing our everyday habits. At the same time, there is a need to study subjects and do work that is not immediately relevant to our lives. Relevance is overrated. Would a better standard not be plurality? Rather than asking if a course, subject, or discipline is relevant, shouldn't we ask if its absence would diminish intellectual pluralism? In short, I suggest we defend higher education for what it is: demanding and irrelevant.