

# Forum on Democracy and Education

## Ali Shehzad Zaidi

### **1. My perspective on democratizing education. My background in working to democratize education.**

If democracy is participation in power, then our universities can only be said to be undemocratic, since corporate executives and attorneys, rather than educators and students, dominate university boards and make the important decisions.

My activism began with the downsizing of the humanities at the University of Rochester in 1995, when my own doctoral program in comparative literature was suspended as part of the “Renaissance Plan.” Over the next five years, I wrote about such matters as the elimination of arts and crafts programs at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1996, the removal of university trustees at Adelphi University by the New York State Board of Regents in 1997, the strike at Syracuse University in 1998, and the faculty revolt at the State University of New York in 1999.

### **2. Opening statement on democratizing education.**

As Paulo Freire has said, any situation in which one is prevented from inquiry is one of violence. In our universities, faculty and students are blocked from the deliberations of university trustees, details of the university budget, contracts for corporate-sponsored projects, and the decision-making process of the institutions in which they teach and study. These barriers to knowledge need to be seen as forms of violence.

University trustees and administrators in the United States have decided, as if by common consent, that higher education must adjust to the market, ostensibly to meet the needs of students. Peter Denning, a spokesman for this managerial consensus, claims that students want “a more customer-oriented relationship” with their “educational organizations” (a term he prefers to “universities”). If students are indeed the “customers” of educational managed organizations, then corporations are surely the proprietors of these EMOs. Denning’s viewpoint reflects, in the words of Robert Paul Wolff, “a failure to draw a sharp distinction between the concepts of effective or market demand and human or social need.”

The corporate executives who run our universities understand what a university ought to be. After all, they use family metaphors to describe the university. However, these metaphors do not reflect the reality of universities, whose “family members” are often outsourced. By tapping into a deep need for meaning and belonging, university administrators persuade alumni into parting with their money. The corporate executives who control the universities have reduced them to a nexus of capital, rife with conflicts of interests. These days, executive profit-sharing is in vogue. College presidents get bonuses for finding ways to shortchange students and teachers.

### **3. Important campaigns for democracy in education today.**

A heartening development is the student mobilization for the anti-sweatshop movement, which includes such fine outfits as Educating for Justice ( [www.educatingforjustice.org](http://www.educatingforjustice.org)) Student labor

groups have helped improve working conditions for janitors, secretaries, security guards, and cafeteria workers at such universities as the New School, Harvard, and Fairfield University. Given the demise of the Center for Campus Organizing, the recent revival of Students for a Democratic Society is especially welcome.

#### **4. How education has changed in the U.S.A. during my lifetime.**

During the eighties, Congress granted tax breaks and exclusive patent rights to businesses involved in university ventures. Through an executive order, President Ronald Reagan extended this legislation to include large corporations, thereby inducing them to take over university boards. With university professors and even entire departments at their disposal, large corporations could dispense with hiring research scientists and laboratories.

The corporate reorientation of higher education has hit students hard. For the past two decades, tuition has increased at more than twice the rate of inflation. The value of the federal Pell Grant dwindled even as universities shifted from need-based to merit-based financial aid. Textbook prices soared. Wages stagnated. Working students were unable to participate in extracurricular activities or in the polemics of their time as they scurried from job to job. Leisure time, so necessary to a democracy, fell victim to speed-up in the workplace.

During the nineties, the humanities took quite a beating in New York, where I live. The City University of New York eliminated the graduate program in Russian Area Studies at Hunter College, the graduate program in Latin American Studies at Queens College and several ethnic studies programs at City College. The University of Rochester shut down graduate programs in German, French, Spanish, comparative literature and linguistics. The State University of New York shut down its Doctor of Arts programs in humanities and foreign language teaching at Stony Brook and Albany. It also terminated the German program at Albany, firing several of tenured professors of German, supposedly because of financial exigency.

The humanities were not only downsized, but also reconfigured. Graduate programs in English literature were replaced by ones in composition, rhetoric, and skills training. Organizational sociology, the kind that ensures the smooth functioning of the corporate workplace, rose into prominence. Meanwhile, the critical analysis of society fell by the wayside.

#### **5. Threats to public education in the U. S.A. today.**

The primary threat to public education today comes from the corporatization of our culture and institutions. These days, corporations exist mostly to make a profit, rather than to serve the public interest. To run a university like a business corporation defeats the very purpose of a university.

The disengagement of faculty from the fate of their profession is also a threat to public education. Thirty years ago, nearly three quarters of faculty members were on tenure track lines. Today, less than a quarter of the faculty is on such lines, spelling the death of academic freedom. In a phone conversation with me during the nineties, Leonard Minsky, who led the National Coalition of Universities in the Public Interest, likened the collective predicament of faculty to the disintegration of a raft. As the raft breaks apart into bits and pieces that float away, and some professors drown, others try to secure their places on what is left of the raft. Until those on the

raft concern themselves with the seaworthiness of their vessel, the disintegration of the raft and the sordid scramble for safety will continue.

## **6. Three Steps Towards Democratizing Education.**

First, student groups, faculty unions, educational advocates, and professional organizations must unite to repeal legislation that gives corporations incentives to muscle academics aside in order to leverage universities. We must rescind the Bayh-Dole Act which gave universities the right to sell to corporations those patents that were derived from federally funded research.

Second, we must democratize our educational institutions. Faculty, staff, and students should run the institutions in which they work, teach, or study. For this purpose, they must elect representative and democratic trustee boards.

Finally, we must restore the institutional memory of our schools and universities, and imagine alternatives to our predicament. We must evolve new means of communication, creating publications and forums for discussion.

## **7. A Vision for Education in the Future**

I envision universities as participatory and democratic places that foster ethical and imaginative dimensions of learning - those "magic casements" through which future generations will view our environmental and social challenges. Students will internalize an ethic that enables them, as teachers, public interest lawyers, poets, artists, social workers, or doctors, to nurture others. Universities will foster the search for truth and justice. Education will be a shared adventure rather than an ordeal of solitary confinement. Faculty will finally find their missing courage. Students will speak for the voiceless. They will bear witness to, and assume responsibility for, their times.

Published in *Liberty Tree*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (Summer 2007)