theories and methodologies

Does Merit Have a Future?

JOHN MARX AND MARK GARRETT COOPER

CATHY N. DAVIDSON'S *THE NEW EDUCATION: HOW TO REVOLUTIONIZE THE UNIVERSITY TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR A WORLD IN FLUX* CHALlenges us to address nonacademics, and to update our teaching, by focusing on the big picture. She calls on us to rise above departmental politics and the tribalism of disciplinary debates. Instead of engaging in those familiar struggles, we should be talking with our neighbors and our elected representatives about the advantages of eliminating letter grades; the virtues of pedagogies that are learner-centered, collaborative, and project-based; the perils of specialization; the damage that departments do by stifling change; the promise of educational technology if divorced from the profit motive; the myth that STEM degrees lead directly to career success; and, of course, the need for public reinvestment in higher education. Each of these talking points draws energy from Davidson's contention that digital media have rendered industrial models of education obsolete.

The New Education's broadly welcoming account offers a vital reminder that universities cannot hope to exempt themselves from the social relations that media create. At the top of her game, Davidson observes the sad futility of efforts to exclude networked database media (e.g., *Wikipedia*) from classrooms, where so much can be achieved by co-opting them. In her third chapter, "Against Technophobia," she usefully estranges our present by likening today's mediaphobes to late-eighteenth-century commentators who fretted over the novel's capacity to "'mesmerize,' 'capture,' and 'tyrannize' a reader's attention and volition" and by reminding us that in the not-too-distant past teachers prohibited electronic calculators for menacing the slide rule's stern discipline (76).

The New Education is too quick, however, to appropriate Robert Darnton's periodization of four "information ages," in which mass printing characterizes the epoch before the Internet, and is especially hasty in subsuming mass printing under the rubric of "the industrial age" (76). Davidson could have foregrounded the long history of university engagement with transformational "new" media—from print

JOHN MARX is professor and chair of English at the University of California, Davis. MARK GARRETT COOPER is professor of film and media studies at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Together, they are the authors of *Media U: How the Need to Win Audiences Has Shaped Higher Education* (Columbia UP, 2018) and its accompanying blog, coopermarx.net. Marx is an American Council on Education fellow for 2018–19. He serves as associate editor for *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* and has authored two books, both from Cambridge University Press, on contemporary, postcolonial, and modernist novels. Cooper is the author of two books on early Hollywood and is one of the editors of *Rediscovering US Newsfilm: Cinema, Television, and the Archive* (Routledge, 2018).

© 2018 JOHN MARX AND MARK GARRETT COOPER
PMLA 133.3 (2018), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to film, radio, television, and digital computers—before the Internet seemed to portend revolutionary change. She prefers to characterize the dominant institutional style as "industrial" and thus to take aim at departmental organization, procedures of ranking and certification, and what E. P. Thompson influentially labeled "time-discipline" (81). This gambit abets her case that today's workforce requires a different kind of training. Yet a historical narrative that grants the Internet revolutionary power would seem to invite attention to the prior work of mediation, which supported the creation of a system of postsecondary education in the United States and sustained that system's twentieth-century development. Through a polemical sleight of hand Davidson demands that new media inform tomorrow's university while writing them out of yesterday's.

This maneuver flattens the complicated pitch American universities have historically made to tout their social function and attract students. During its rise at the end of the nineteenth century, the new university's founding mission was less industrial production than it was mass cultural reproduction. Though indebted to Prussian prototypes, American schools could promise no sure pathway into the government bureaucracy after the fashion of the German system. Nor was American industry convinced of the need for college-trained managers before colleges began to train them and promote their services. It is true, as Davidson recounts, that robber-baron riches fueled higher education's growth and that its professional schools and research departments set out to improve the nation's businesses, along with everything else. She might have added that to attract students to this project entailed a sweeping cultural change. At the time, perhaps two percent of the country's eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds attended college and most jobs did not require a degree.[1] It was necessary to establish the value of college for parents and students as well as for potential employers. Mass-market magazines, then movies and radio, played a critical role in building this consensus. The stories they circulated explained both that college was fun and that it improved one's lot in life. Key to this second selling point was the idea that schools could make judgments based on educational attainments rather than on inherited privileges. So compelling was this reasoning, the economists Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose observe, that college emerged as America's de facto answer to class inequity. Where Western European democracies redistributed wealth through governmental bureaus, the United States promised educational opportunities.

Many recent arguments, including Davidson's, appear to signal the exhaustion of this potent ideological initiative, which has always linked the university's ability to certify merit with the claim that higher education levels the playing field of opportunities. It is a peculiarity of our moment that merit and equal opportunity, instead of being seen to entail one another, more typically figure as opposing terms. Just so, *The New Education* presents merit as an old-fashioned obsession.

Davidson introduces the old, industrial higher education through the figure of Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909, packaging him as the leading visionary of a university organized into academic departments, devoted to testing and ranking, and obsessed with research innovation in support of manufacturing. True to this legacy, today's Harvard selects elite achievers and provides them with a social circle that ensures they remain elite. Although Davidson relays that Harvard now makes investment bankers rather than industrial managers (182), she paints its procedures for certifying merit as old-fashioned elitism and finds that its traditional pedagogies ill equip students to manage "the integrated, merged, and chaotic work and home lives most of us are now experiencing" (44). While we are invited to admire

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the ambition and success of Eliot's vision, Davidson's account of its obsolescence affords the schadenfreude of looking down at today's prestigious private schools as well as the pleasure of rooting for the underdog.

Enter Gail Mellow, since 2000 the president of LaGuardia Community College, in Long Island City, Queens, who champions approaches that certainly seem more appropriate for our present. In contrast to Harvard's selectivity, Mellow's LaGuardia takes pride in accepting "the top 100 percent" and equipping them with skills in "problem solving, global learning, and integrative learning" (61). Through the example of LaGuardia and select other institutions, Davidson uncouples higher education's ongoing project of improving student lives from its equally venerable task of certifying merit. Eliot's Harvard linked them by, for example, presenting entrance exams as a way of leveling the playing field for prospective students. Young men who qualified by examination might attend regardless of their backgrounds. The school accepted many on the condition that they meet performance benchmarks in their first year and provided those it judged meritorious with scholarships based on need.[2] Despite this history, standardized testing has a low reputation in many quarters. Davidson characterizes it as mainly certifying skills in regurgitating expected answers under time pressure, a process of recall at which machines now clearly best us. Although Mellow's LaGuardia apparently continues to give examinations and letter grades as the system demands, the community college uses those metrics neither to structure its admissions nor to identify and advance the most talented students. It believes that instruction should help every student succeed.

Davidson's strongest example of forward-looking instructional methods comes not from LaGuardia but from the University of California, Berkeley, which rejected them. The mathematics professor Alexander Coward eschewed quizzes and traditional homework assignments in favor of inspiring "students with ever more difficult problems" (194). He had been persuaded by research documenting how grades inhibit learning by underscoring student deficiencies. Accordingly, he rejected traditional assessment and provided qualitative, "formative" feedback detailing how students might improve. He favored group work over lectures. His introductory math class soon enrolled record numbers, and his students exceeded expectations on standardized tests. Nonetheless, Berkeley preferred a traditional approach in which the introductory lecture worked to weed out the least apt pupils. The school declined to renew Coward's contract. "If the objective is to work toward increasing specialization and professionalism," Davidson concludes, "[the traditional] system works. If the objective is to expand a field or to address the shortage in STEM training, this system is counterproductive" (200). Here, and throughout the volume, hidebound elite schools, specialization, and meritocratic sorting square off against less-well-funded innovators, wider dissemination of knowledge, and more-open access.

Our present is distinguished not by the American university's emphasis on access—which in truth has been a constant—but rather by the loss of faith in merit. Few of higher education's observers these days take it as given that the most worthy students may attend the best schools regardless of background. The view from the top is particularly grim. T. H. Rawls, a former Princeton University admissions officer, describes the practice of legacy admissions as a perverse form of affirmative action for wealthy ("overwhelmingly white") students. The Yale professor William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* decries a system calculated to churn out résumé-building, grade-grubbing stuffed shirts. Like Davidson, the law professor Lani Guinier sees the rise of American meritocracy as isomorphic with that of standardized testing, which does better at reinforcing inherited entitle-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ments of race, class, and gender than it does at promoting students capable of contributing to the commonweal. So long as universities continue to sell themselves as "rankers and sorters" without seriously critiquing their methods for doing so, argues Christopher Newfield, a critical university studies scholar, they will be mired in a stultifying competition over campus "team" and "brand" instead of engendering what he calls "mass creativity" (297). Here we arrive at the nub of the matter. These critics share the conviction that what our institutions call merit is really something else: inherited privilege, blind obedience, mere testing skills, or brand loyalty. In which case, we may be experiencing not a rejection of the principle that universities can address inequality by certifying merit but rather an effort to renew it. Maybe everyone is looking for a way for merit to be merit again.

The history of our higher education system suggests that to create a new consensus about merit would require a mass-mediation project akin to the popular magazines that first helped convince Americans of the university's value. Davidson's account notably retains some features that have distinguished the American university's sales pitch—student-centeredness and student choice, curricular and programmatic relevance, media-savvy pedagogical innovations—while rejecting others, such as selectivity and specialization. At the same time, Davidson more or less ignores other key aspects of the institution's long-standing appeal.

First and foremost, Davidson overlooks the American university's cultivation of the student experience. For students in the late-nineteenth-century academy, the historian John Thelin explains, "[c]ourses were seen as a necessary evil, a price to be paid for admission to the greatest show on earth, campus life" (163). Campus life orbited football. In the beginning, students themselves orchestrated the game and created a robust culture around it involving school colors, mascots, and alma maters. Academic officials soon learned how to make these student innovations pay. Universities now considered the elite opposites of "football schools" pioneered that effort. In 1903, Harvard led a wave of giant-stadium construction with its thirty-thousand-seat facility (still in use). The University of Chicago's founding president William Rainey Harper made the Yale University football star Amos Alonzo Stagg one of his first recruits, along with the philosopher John Dewey and the Nobel Prize–winning physicist Albert A. Michelson. At Chicago, Stagg became the nation's first tenured football coach. Meanwhile, Yale continued to thrive as a football power. It reported $1,119,000 in revenue from its football program in 1928, with a net profit of $348,500 (or almost five million in 2018 dollars) (Rudolph 389). Football promoted the early-twentieth-century university as a focal point of American culture both through stadiums whose capacity vastly exceeded the size of universities' student bodies and with budgets that accommodated advertising as well as broadcasting growth, especially when commercial radio began to spread in the late 1920s. If early football powerhouses like Yale and Chicago now seek distinction for their academic strength as opposed to their gridiron prowess, this is not because campus life matters less but because higher education has become a much larger and more highly stratified sector. Over the course of the twentieth century, students, parents, donors, and taxpayers became increasingly adept at identifying kinds of campus experiences and finding their places among them.

Campus life today interacts more complexly with academic merit (or the appearance of merit) to distinguish school brands. Various rankings schemes vie to characterize the qualities of the student experience and thus to promise fit factors geared to prospective students' extracurricular interests as well as to their academic performance and ability to pay. While some students might aspire to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

attend the best party school, others might look for proximity to outdoor recreational opportunities or student groups that share their political convictions. At LaGuardia, distribution of MetroCards to students who need help with transportation goes beyond financial assistance to signal a caring attitude. Other campus experiences promise access to the upper crust. "Harvard students know that meeting other Harvard students is the most important reason to be there," Davidson points out (182). Meanwhile, football continues to anchor a sales pitch to broad segments of the population. "Legislators want to be part of whatever event has your mascot," the president of the Arizona Board of Regents, Eileen Klein, informed a convention of higher education lobbyists in December 2017, after cautioning them to stop complaining about budget cuts (Kelderman). Any effort to renovate merit, it follows, will also need to engage the complex system of social distinctions that pertains to campus life, in which class hierarchy and lifestyle choices intersect.

Integrating a system of (what we may erroneously call) merit with a system of cultural status distinctions has been one of the traditional jobs of the humanities and particularly of English departments—a project on which Davidson remains notably silent. As Richard M. Ohmann explained in *English in America*, post–World War II English departments supported class hierarchy not only, or even primarily, by controlling the list of books that expensively educated people were expected to have read but also by elevating particular procedures of reading and discussion. By engaging in bookish debate, expensively educated people signaled their membership in a club.

The version of the humanities Davidson champions still does this work of socialization, but for everyone and without specialized protocols of reading. She promotes a humanities that defines itself through the propagation of "soft skills, including strategies, methods, and tactics for successful communication and collaboration" (8). Davidson celebrates humanists who abjure the practice of curating specialized approaches to literary canons in favor of experiments in "rebundling" techniques like the one at Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, whose founding director is the English professor Randy Bass. The center, aka the Red House, urges its student participants away from "legacy definitions of what constitutes a 'field' and what counts as mastery or excellence in a specialized, traditional discipline (say, English or biology)" (231). Instead of promoting specialization, it fosters collaborative research in which the affordances of the Internet and whiteboard "mind maps" figure prominently. Through such means, Davidson envisions the better institutionalization of a humanities-inflected pathway to securing the college wage premium. "[T]he latest research shows that study of STEM subjects by itself does not necessarily lead to better career outcomes in the near or the long term and that expertise in the humanities and social sciences very well might," Davidson explains (137). Soft-skilled humanists can even help STEM-focused companies thrive, for "[y]ou need to be able to understand cultural and religious traditions if you want your science to have an impact" (142). There is something of a contradiction in this defense of humanist training, which spurs movement away from "legacy definitions of what constitutes a 'field'" while valuing the "cultural and religious traditions" that humanities fields traditionally curate.

It is understandable that Davidson would put her finger on collaboration, clearly the undervalued side of the scale in most humanities departments. Yet it seems equally necessary to recognize that collaboration of the sort Davidson supports is itself a kind of expertise. The beating heart of Georgetown's Red House, like that of other experimental research nodes Davidson admires at Arizona State and Stanford Universities, is "design thinking," a vital component of the post-1960s renovation of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pedagogy in institutions across the country and around the world. As a *Google* search will immediately reveal, the approach has well-established roots in the design profession (which links art, systems theory, and engineering) and holds crossover appeal in the sciences and humanities, as well as informing a fad in business. Broad in application, design thinking is nonetheless a specialized approach, replete with an intellectual genealogy (*Wikipedia* provides a timeline), conferences, degree programs, recognized experts, and all the rest. "Narrow specialization doesn't guarantee a future," Davidson rightly argues (142), yet *The New Education*'s case against *all* specialization should be taken with the same grain of salt as its denunciation of merit should. Against the current configuration of inward-looking STEM and humanities disciplines, she pitches a design-based alternative.

Thankfully, Davidson dispenses with interdisciplinarity, the procedure whereby new approaches seek to distinguish themselves by appropriating objects and methods from other disciplines while, most of the time, preserving the hallowed status of the scholar toiling in solitude. Instead, *The New Education* promotes synthesis, which Davidson associates with Sha Xin Wei, the director of Arizona State's School for Arts, Media, and Engineering. For Sha, Davidson relates, synthesis means "a new way of tackling complex problems," in which students learn "to grasp the math, sociology, and philosophy of any problem and see how each discipline offers a tool that's useful" (143). This formulation preserves disciplinary specialization as a virtue teams of investigators must learn to navigate. Interdisciplinarity, in contrast, typically makes tourists out of humanists who pick up a titch of economics or a skosh of computer code. Synthetic approaches solve complex problems better than other approaches, Davidson argues, and also require (and reward) the soft skills of communication and empathy, because students must learn how to work in groups composed of individuals with different perspectives.

While at Duke University, Davidson ran a pedagogical experiment in synthesis that sought to warp what she regards as the default "broadcast" model for MOOCs (massive open online courses). Instead of opting for a series of prerecorded lectures, she wanted "something student-centered, not just for the onsite students but also for the thousands taking the MOOC online" (104). She handpicked a diverse group of fourteen students from several universities in the area, who "devised many different ways to counter blind technophilia and one-way pedagogy, turning Coursera's for-profit MOOC into a DIY peer-to-peer learning experience" (115). In contrast to the world-historical miracles of the data analytics and massively scalable asynchronous lecture delivery touted by major MOOC providers, *Wikipedia* is presented by Davidson both as a key teaching medium that offers students easy access to alternative histories and as an iterative model of knowledge production to which anyone might contribute. For instance, *Wikipedia*'s inclusion of Chinese precursors of Gutenberg productively destabilizes what students think they know about the history of printing and, guided by Davidson, incites further investigation. This inclusion brings our habitual experiences with database media into the learning process and, as such, characterizes Davidson's pragmatic attitude to today's new media more broadly. Presenting students with a grand challenge is the other major feature distinguishing her approach. Instead of schooling the masses in the basics of Python or providing an approachable introduction to the English novel, Davidson's course invited students worldwide to revise the history and imagine the future of higher education.

In this peer-to-peer learning experiment, some peers were more equal than others. Managing a global conversation turned out to be a lot of work for Davidson's on-campus cohort, who, by design, had a significant role

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in determining how the course would evolve. "My students often came to our actual class meetings exhilarated and exhausted from a global twenty-four-hour workday" that they themselves imposed, she explains (115). The hardworking on-campus students distinguished themselves by their efforts. All, Davidson notes, went on to write thoughtful pieces about the experience for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which they expressed skepticism about business models for MOOCs that de-skill pedagogy through reliance on underpaid instructors with fixed-term contracts. Davidson not only allows us to see that she selected these successful students but also tells us something about her principles of selection: they are "gifted and vastly different" from each other, both demographically and in disciplinary backgrounds (106). On top of the selectivity that enrollment at their various institutions already represents, then, their positions as leaders in the course are supported by the pedagogical imperatives of synthesis, which is also, this example makes plain, a management philosophy. By the term *management* we do not mean sinister exploitation but rather a means of dividing work and orchestrating complex tasks. Precisely because it distributes decision-making, empowers differences of opinion and expertise, and emphasizes broad dissemination of knowledge, Davidson's management philosophy qua pedagogy looks less alienating to us than most going models do. Her examples suggest, without explicitly affirming, a new kind of meritocracy, one we might endorse.

The sweeping proclamations about the current information age that start *The New Education* are perhaps best regarded as attempts to clear the field for this new merit that dare not speak its name. "Everyone has a platform. No professional-managerial class is in charge. No degree required," Davidson early proclaims (6). As she surely knows, generations of professionally supervised specialists developed the platforms that "everyone has" access to, although only to the extent that communications policy supports that access.[3] A utopian view of contemporary media, moreover, has been nurtured as much by industrial self-promotion as by dissident visionaries, and it has been constantly shadowed, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun among others points out, by dystopian pronouncements of surveillant control.

Explaining how we should feel about new media has always involved a lot of old-media work. As a visionary pedagogue and deviant MOOC maker, Davidson could be more self-conscious about the labor congealed in "the various tools we used, from video cameras and software editing programs to cue cards and websites like Lynda.com, which offers instruction in all of these things" (104–05). Although she registers how those tools alter the division of labor by requiring "a few technical staff, a first-time producer" to help build the course (104), much more could be said about the massive corporate engineering and advertising initiative that encourages a DIY ethos by making media seem easy to create. There is hardly a point in chastising Davidson for glossing over this media work, however, because her overall approach so readily accommodates it. Davidson's examples consistently and rightly tell us that media technologies alone do not actually do very much. Their work requires diverse teams, effective collaboration, and the right kind of supervision. Given the "big problems" approach she takes, moreover, it seems that true merit here, as in many media endeavors, might be best judged post hoc based on its success with audiences, instead of, after the industrial fashion, according to specific criteria set by managers in advance.

In effect if not intent, *The New Education*'s indictment of selection urges revision of meritocracy. Nowhere is this effect more evident than in Davidson's skeptical account of "unbundling," the term of art in commercial education technology for strategies that

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press

detach skill-building classes from the "'frills' of brick-and-mortar campuses" (230). Her many examples make plain that innovation in teaching is widespread, eager to make use of media affordances, and, above all, situational. The student bodies of LaGuardia, Arizona State, Duke, and Georgetown invite different ideas for innovation and require the particular talents of local administrators and teachers to bring those ideas to fruition. The new education offers generalizable principles but is emphatically "bundled" with local staff members, as befits a management model that favors a flexible division of labor over standardized deliverables. No consideration of such campus packages that does not encompass extracurricular life can be considered complete, we have observed, although this mostly falls outside Davidson's scope. In sum, if universities are once more to compel the conviction that they certify something other than preexisting privilege, advocates of the new education will need to work in several modes, across old media as well as new, in and beyond the classroom. In this effort, it can only help to acknowledge that the American research university has always been a new-media platform.

Notes

1. Although enrollment growth accelerated in the first half of the twentieth century, the second half witnessed a far more dramatic expansion (Snyder 64–65).

2. Harvard's and Radcliffe's annual reports are available online and illuminate how the colleges worked to balance selectivity and broad access during Eliot's administration (Harvard and Radcliffe Annual Reports).

3. While we were writing this essay, the Federal Communications Commission flamboyantly rescinded net neutrality rules, and some United States senators began to advance legislation that would restore them.

Works Cited

Carnevale, Anthony P., and Stephen J. Rose. "Economy Goes to College: The Hidden Promise of Higher Education in the Post-industrial Service Economy." *Center on Education and the Workforce*, Georgetown University, 2015, cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-economy-goes-to-college/.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. MIT P, 2006.

Davidson, Cathy N. *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Basic Books, 2017.

Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. Free Press, 2015.

Guinier, Lani. *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*. Beacon Press, 2015.

Harvard and Radcliffe Annual Reports, 1826–1995. *Harvard University Archives Research Guides*, Harvard Library, 13 June 2018, guides.library.harvard.edu/c.php?g=638791&p=4471938.

Kelderman, Eric. "Higher-Ed Lobbyists Are Told to Make Peace with Republicans." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 Dec. 2017, www.chronicle.com/article/Higher-Ed-Lobbyists-Are-Told/241999.

Newfield, Christopher. *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.

Ohmann, Richard M. *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*. Oxford UP, 1976.

Rawls, T. H. "College Legacy Admissions: Affirmative Action for Whites." *The New York Times*, 6 Aug. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/08/06/opinion/college-legacy-admissions-affirmative-action-for-whites.html.

Rudolph, Frederick. *The American College and University: A History*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.

Snyder, Thomas D. "Higher Education." *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*, edited by Snyder, National Center for Education Statistics, Jan. 1993, nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf, pp. 63–74.

Thelin, John. *A History of American Higher Education*. 2nd ed., Johns Hopkins UP, 2011.

Thompson, E. P. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past and Present*, no. 38, 1967, pp. 56–97.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.678 Published online by Cambridge University Press