

Notre Dame Prof Calls Higher Ed Today 'Bullshit'

Every week it seems like we hear from a professor who has become disillusioned with the higher education system.

The latest one is [Christian Smith](#), professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Last week, [his jeremiad against the modern university](#) appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Smith's beginning two paragraphs set the tone:

"I have had nearly enough bullshit. The manure has piled up so deep in the hallways, classrooms, and administration buildings of American higher education that I am not sure how much longer I can wade through it and retain my sanity and integrity.

Even worse, the accumulated effects of all the academic BS are contributing to this country's disastrous political condition and, ultimately, putting at risk the very viability and character of decent civilization."

In what follows, Smith unleashes a rant outlining what he means by "BS." All of his points are familiar territory for those who have followed the higher ed debate over the past decades, and who have at least a dim view of what universities in the past were like. Among the symptoms listed by Smith of a higher education system "drowning in BS" are: the loss of purpose, hyperspecialization, bloated bureaucracies, a flawed tenure system, obscure academic publishing, scattershot curricula, the intolerance toward views deemed "conservative," and the "sucking [of] the teats of big money."

I suppose Smith's rant may provide a temporary salve to his

fellow tenured professors who are also experiencing an existential crisis. After all, misery loves company. And his article will be shared by those whose have come to similar conclusions.

But most people don't need another generalized re-articulation of the problems in higher education. They need solutions to those problems. They need to know, specifically, how we're going to stop saddling our young generations with student loan debt, how we can stop pushing all high school graduates toward college, and how we can stop producing hordes of graduates who are the "know-nothings" [described elsewhere by Smith's Notre Dame colleague](#), Patrick Deneen.

Unfortunately, Smith's article offers no solutions. As a consolation prize, he at least recognizes that solutions will not come from within the university, but from without:

"Real change will most likely happen long-term and be forced on academe from the outside against its own lumbering inertia. That will not be pretty, nor will it necessarily produce anything better. We cannot take for granted a happy self-correction. In my view, genuinely positive changes in higher education, if they ever do happen, will have to combine some forms of visionary traditionalism and organizational radicalism. We will need people with the capacity to retrieve and revitalize the best of higher education's past and restructure it organizationally in ways that are most effective in the future."

In my mind, any solution to the higher education crisis will have to involve a reduction in the number of students who attend universities. [History has shown](#) that most people have neither the necessary desire nor ability to pursue a rigorous program of higher education, and the modern attempt to prove this historical witness wrong has helped create the fragmented, dumbed-down modern university system we have

today.

However, a reduction in attendance will inevitably result in a reduction in university revenues, which will put some universities out of business.

And let's face it: modern universities are not going to self-immolate.