

Trump University and Selling Images

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The problem with the critics of Trump University is that they only provide a veneer for a collective tendency in US political life. Image counts and those with stellar university educations (consider the current President, of constitutional law fame) do not necessarily guarantee better performances in office. Political craft is not always benefited by ivy league credentials.

In US history, the famously bookish John Quincy Adams succumbed to the knives of political reality for his over-tutored bearing. Before brawn and men of action, he stood little chance. President Teddy Roosevelt also decided that brawn mixed with some vague concept of American manhood was needed for presidential valour.

As for the latest presidential contender in the mix of alpha wonders, we have Donald Trump, who has made certain segments of the commentariat flush with fear. His latest pothole is supposedly that of the failed Trump University experiment.

John Cassidy, writing for *The New Yorker*, wonders whether

“one of the world’s leading democracies [will] elect as its President a businessman who founded and operated a for-profit learning annex that some of its own employees regarded as a giant rip-off, and that the highest legal officer in New York State has described as a classic bait-and-switch scheme?”^[1]

The attack on the university itself tends to also provide a false alibi for the sanctity of education systems more generally. The impression given is that the Trump University project is a grotesque aberration in the field of tertiary education.

Again, as with so much regarding Trump, trawling through the filth reveals a broader social critique, one that will not be discussed. Many universities have succumbed to managerial hog wash, used as additive for greater deceptions. Grants are given without evidence of worth, a self-nourishing cycle of perpetuation; performance indicators suggest a bureaucratic assessment of what is, in many ways, incapable of assessment. Students are monetised, papers are categorised according to economic value and rankings.

There is little doubt that Trump University seemed particularly rotten. It was so rotten it has become the subject of a class-action suit by disgruntled users who, quite frankly, should have known better. Take the words of a former salesman for Trump University, Ronald Schnackenberg.

According to his unsealed testimony, “Trump University claimed it wanted to help

consumers make money in real estate, in fact Trump University was only interested in selling every person the most expensive seminars they possibly could.”[2] How shocking.

That selling image and constructed “realities” pervasive in Trump land has migrated as a pursuit to university is hardly a surprise. His university ended up advertising “graduate programs, post graduate programs, doctorate programs” but did nothing of the sort. Many an institution has fallen foul of such behaviour.

Politicians themselves have received degrees from universities of dubious stature, irrespective of what political system we wish to peruse. (Forget scholarship, which is regarded in the profit-driven institution as an evil to be abstained from.) The politician, the actor, the salesman, the university charlatan – all share something in common.

The Clinton campaign’s response to Trump University does the rounds about its dubious quality and deep deception, ignoring the common practice employed by innumerable institutions in an effort to milk that grand mine commonly known as students. (The campaign statement refers to “exploitation” being “the name of the game at Trump University.”)

The modern university student, as management policy at university seems to direct, are more akin to units of spread sheet value, fought over by respective departments and bled over in the name of self-interest. Out of this indecent scrap was born the notion of the student as both client and consumer. Be gone, notions of the teacher and pupil as sacred participants in an encounter of knowledge. Welcome, the service provider!

People are – and here, the tragedy of education is all too real – regularly defrauded, taken for the ride of well sold promises in the education (gnashing teeth here) sector. Instructors are tasked with the broader issue of “goals” and “missions” that sound all too often like business projections. Managers and committees constantly speak about culture change and “improvements”. Much of this urinary activity is passed off as decent, passable work, which can be happily calculated as part of that most lauded of nonsenses: the workload.

The Clinton campaign message continues: “Trump University employed startlingly unqualified instructors.”[3] The statement insists that “One former employee remembers being disturbed by the fact that a member of her sales team who had previously sold jewellery was promoted to be a real-estate instructor.” A better example might have been astrophysics, but even the Clinton campaigners fail to see the difference.

Trump University served one essential purpose: churning out genetic copies of its founder by selling false idols. It sold deceptions and productive lies. It was a perfect symptom of the ultimate financial disease, engendering misguided attitudes that came unstuck in the Great Financial Crisis.

Rather than seeing it as an exceptional manifestation, one can only understand that failed tertiary enterprise as a broader academic and institutional one, typical of what modern university life has become. Forget the real estate remit, which should have been treated with a good pinch of salt from the start. As for Trump himself, a failed businessman (or educator) in the White House would hardly be a remarkable feat. That office has seen *all* sorts.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/trump-university-its-worse-than-you-think>

[2] <http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/trump-university-its-worse-than-you-think>

[3] https://www.hillaryclinton.com/feed/everything-you-need-know-about-massive-scam-was-trump-university/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=tw&utm_campaign=20160601feed-trumpU

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