Recently I have been studying the education reform ideas of the 18th Century French philosopher, Condorcet, and their relation to the ideas of Plato, Cicero, Seneca, and Epicurus. It is invigorating to read well-considered writing about the value of education. The clash of these works with the kind of ideas I hear expressed by the standard-bearers of corporate managerial ideology in higher education is shocking, however. Like many professors I am frustrated, both philosophically and professionally, by the application of a capitalist business model to education, and the hegemony of what Terry Eagleton terms “managerial ideology.”

This frustration reached an apex for me when, at the 2015 meeting of the Higher Learning Commission, I sat through a keynote presentation on the “problem of curmudgeons” on community college campuses by Tony O’Banion, president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

I felt a little like an anthropologist working incognito in an alien culture at the HLC conference anyway. The vast majority of attendees were not mere humanities professors like me. They were directors, deans, and academic officers, and their audience was packed with the vendors of the education industry. The predominant professional mentality of this group appears to be very different than my own, perhaps diametrically opposed. That is, some higher education professionals approach their jobs with the mindset of managers in the capitalist business world, even though education does not fit well into the model of products, services, retailers and consumers.

For example, there were spaces and times of the conference set aside for “networking” in which attendees were encouraged to expand their professional contacts with each other, with HLC officials, and with the hundreds of vendors with an alphabet soup of company names. I observed but did not participate in these events because it occurred to me that when you “network” you are adopting the logic of the marketplace. The university is a community of scholars and teachers who teach and research in order to be recognized by their peers. To be an effective teacher you must be a scholar, and to be a scholar you must produce, publish, and present. People who are trained to do these things are not suited to the business of networking.

I did attend conference sessions, however. In one, a speaker stated that reducing staff “demonstrated financial responsibility,” and then handed out a sheet listing various low or no-cost approaches to showing appreciation for remaining employees. These included acknowledging birthdays, repeating positive remarks about employees on electronic media like Twitter and e-mail, and passing around an employee-off the-week trophy. I groaned inwardly at the indignity of this, especially of playing upon the humanity of an employee in order better to exploit him or her as a resource.

The highlight of the conference for me, however, was the presentation by O’Banion, now a professor emeritus of college administration studies at National American University. The title of the presentation was “Rogues and Curmudgeons: Special Challenges to Community College Leaders.” I went to this presentation, which was attended by maybe 1,000 people, prepared to be angry. It was worse than I expected.

O’Banion presented research he had conducted for two reports, one on the societal problem of “curmudgeons” on campus that, is, faculty members who resist college administration policies; the other on “rogue trustees,” who also resist policies, but who are much more dangerous because of their greater power. Here are some highlights from my notes on the presentation:

According to O’Banion, curmudgeons are like “gnats” and “mosquitoes” in that they are constantly irritating; rogue trustees are like “pterodactyls” in that they can cause major damage (he actually said this). Curmudgeons are self-appointed gadflies (obviously belated with feelings of self-importance). Mostly curmudgeons come from the arts and sciences and the social sciences. They are mostly men.

O’Banion’s survey, unnamed college presidents stated that curmudgeons had a very negative effect on campus. They slowed or even stopped change and college-wide decisions. Curmudgeons also had a negative impact on institutional morale, damaged the chances of colleges to secure grants, created an unhealthy culture, intimidated other faculty, and “poisoned the well” of campus operations. Their primary targets were administrators and faculty; it was never quoted one president saying that curmudgeons were an “insidious cancer” to a college.

What strategies did presidents and administrations adopt to mitigate the damage done by curmudgeons? According to O’Banion, presidents are typically altruistic people (he said this without a hint of irony), so they usually try to “connect personally” with curmudgeons to find out why they are so unhappy. This strategy rarely worked: curmudgeons defy personal connecting because they “do not want help... they only want to destroy.” Curmudgeons “resist change, fear change, and slow change.”

What, therefore, can be done with them? O’Banion reported that because presidents almost always failed to reason with curmudgeons, successful strategies involved isolating them to limit their impact. I assume this meant not allowing curmudgeons to act on committees or to serve in any public almost always. In tandem with isolation, presidents then chose faculty who were “change agents” and supported them with promotions and appointments to critical committees.

To sum up, curmudgeons fight against change, and therefore must be isolated, and “change agents” promote change, whatever it might be, and should be supported. Since nowhere were specific changes addressed, we are either to understand change as continuous and rational, or to understand by the phrase “change agents” what we might more critically term yes-men (or women).

Needless to say, I walked out of O’Banion’s talk in a deep funk, not least because so many of the attendees seemed to agree with him — they laughed, and commented, and raised their hands to show their concurrence. I only heard one person shout afterward that he was “disturbed by O’Banion’s comments about professors.” The more I considered O’Banion’s remarks, the more disturbing I found them. To refer to faculty members who challenge or oppose the policies of a college president or administration as “curmudgeons,” who seek only to destroy or poison, is to pathologize and rationalize the application of critical reasoning and analysis. Call me an idealist, but as the sons of the Enlightenment, arts and sciences professors and their colleagues in the social sciences — identified by O’Banion as making up the majority of “curmudgeons” — are those for whom scholarship, research, and teaching specifically to deepen our understanding of society, culture and nature. This is done at least partially to ameliorate problems, injustices, and errors brought about by ignorance, bias, or malice. We (if I can include myself here) are, of course, hardly perfect — people are often wrong, are blinded by emotions, and sometimes cannot see the whole picture — but are we not supposed to be the gadflies that trouble the smooth flow or the powers that be? Critical reasoning is what Plato termed our “daemon” and it drives us to speak, unless we have succumbed to fear and loathing.

To refer to those who dare to speak as curmudgeons is to make critical reasoning a disease, and to render the speaker a psychopath for which the only cure is quarantine or elimination. The ultimate logic of this is that the knowledge that makes us who we are — the knowledge about the relationship between professor and student is reduced to that of an employee selling a product for a profit in a private transaction, not as a social good. In such a system — the retail capitalist model — the consumer is never encouraged to give of himself.

Education as classically and properly understood, however, is impossible to imagine as a profit-driven enterprise, for by education we mean that a student is learning to be free. That is, he cannot become a whole person, something more than a human resource until he has committed himself to discovering what he is in his essence, and then learning how to care for that self on his own. The ancients called this arkeia and its goal was to become sofrosynas or wise and temperate. Its first step was the Delphic Dictum: to know thyself. Such knowledge required, in the beginning at least, a teacher into whose soul the student searched to discover the thinking, which is wisdom. But wisdom was a lifelong work, a discipline, an arkeia that never ended. Even the teacher was always a student.

According to Plato and his followers, someone who has not learned to take care of himself in his essence cannot be free. A free man may work for his bread, he may follow the directions of his employer, but his soul is not enslaved. The person who is not free also works to support others in physical existence, but he cannot contemplate critically the situation of himself or his fellows because it is others who take care of him, not himself — but they take care of him for their interests, not his own. They tell him, therefore, that he needs a smart phone, certain clothes, social status, wealth, and power, and that without those things he will be wretched. But as Socrates said to Alcibiades, wealth cannot relieve anyone of wretchedness if he is a slave in his soul. Freedom, he implies, is not the ability to buy the newest iPhone or a Ferrari, but the ability to resist, as Socrates says, “both the need and the good of them.” And hence, “says Socrates, “it is not he who has made himself rich that is relieved of wretchedness, but he who has made himself temperate [or wise, sofrosynas].” (Alcibiades I, 134B) A professor of philosophy, or history, or literature, or anthropology cannot sell the knowledge of the self to a consumer—student. The professor can only be an imperfect guide, since she is always on the journey herself — for wisdom is not a product of training so much as it is a destination we are trying to reach, and a student must be willing to go that direction. We know the subjects one must study on the journey, however. They are the ones Michel de Montaigne explored in more than 1,000 pages of writing, his famous Essais, as he sought in the midst of terrible crisis to understand humanity and thus himself; they are the subjects Seneca exhorted his friend Lucilius to study in order to live according to nature, and they are the ones Condorcet insisted be at the center of his proposed educational curriculum designed to enable the exercise of real freedom in Revolutionary France: the natural and social sciences, mathematics, history, fine art, philosophy, literature, music, and languages.
These subjects might earn one a material livelihood; it is even possible they might produce wealth and goods, but that is not the primary reason for studying them. By widening and enriching our knowledge of us as a species, as a collection of societies and cultures, these subjects provide the basis for critical consciousness about us, without which we are not free people. The ancient Romans called these subjects the Liberal Arts precisely because they were those things that free people needed to know in order to exercise freedom.

All education, but this one especially, is (or should be) a social good. Training to do produces the skills by which we sustain the material existence of our society. Whether or not it provides individual wealth is irrelevant, for that wealth and the skills that produce it benefit us all. Education to be, however enables freedom — the freedom to challenge, promote, criticize, debate, and argue intelligently, without which freedom of speech and the right to vote are useless. In a word, it makes the gadfly, the curmudgeon, the gnats and mosquitoes who refuse to stop their irritating buzzing in the ear of power possible. If we no longer value education that teaches us how to be, then we desire slavery. We will be nothing but human resources, and we can abandon hope for a better or more free world, and instead put our hopes in getting a better iPhone. In that world, the gadfly is forced to drink the hemlock over and over again. Or, worse, she is insultingly called a curmudgeon, and her colleagues look away in shame as the managers move her to a lonely office where she cannot harm anyone with her bad attitude, her refusal to adopt the values of the managerial ideology — hierarchy, loyalty, and objectification — and instead insists on values that have become a sign of insanity and mental illness — inquiry, criticism, and individuality.

In a better world, the one I would like to live in, there are no for-profit colleges or universities, nor is tuition at for-profit institutions climbing at 300 percent of inflation because in that world a society that desires to be free would value education as a social and an individual good, and would actively promote and pay for its dissemination to the greatest extent possible, nor seek to limit it to the wealthy few, or to cripple with debt those who seek it out. In the colleges and universities of that better world, the gadfly would never be the lonely curmudgeon, he would be everybody. G. Mathew Adkins is an assistant professor of history at Columbus State Community College in Columbus, Ohio. You can reach him at gadkins@cscc.edu.

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