

I Got Graduated

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Tegan McGillivray recalls the moment fondly. She and I met up one recent weekend at Bookends down on Pearl Street. While taking a sip of hot apple cider, she describes her college experience at the University of Colorado, along with breaking the news to her parents about her accomplishments. With a grin she tells me, “I was pretty excited; I called my parents and told them I had graduated.” After her official status at the University had changed to “alumna” in the summer of 2006, she dropped by the Office of the Registrar to clarify her academic situation. The woman with whom McGillivray hoped to speak—who had been on vacation during her previous two visits that week—was finally available to help clarify some details about McGillivray’s academic record. “She informed me that I had graduated. I asked what degree I had received so I could know what to put on my résumé.”

McGillivray had not, in fact, graduated from the University of Colorado. As a transfer student, she had plenty of credits, though she had yet to fulfill the necessary requirements for a degree, having spent only two semesters at CU. (The Registrar advised that she had attained a “general degree.”) In fact, the University had failed to notify her of her status, and she had learned of it only when bills began arriving insisting that her student loans be repaid. “I got to call my parents back and told them I lied, I hadn’t graduated,” she says with a laugh. A few semesters after the mistake, she intends to graduate this coming May. But thinking back to this experience, she remarks, “You’d think they’d be able to keep track of who has graduated and not.”

Unfortunately, bureaucracy and the economics of higher education have greatly affected the quality of our institutions of higher learning, and their impacts at Colorado's flagship institution are profound. Within the College of Arts and Sciences, the impersonal, paperwork-driven system of policies and requirements is at odds with the self-characterization of a "liberal arts education."¹ In my own journey as a transfer student, I have undertaken an adventure that I had not intended by transferring: credit petitions, new and unfulfilled graduation requirements, and a lack of institutional awareness have forced me to take a long, hard look at what it means to be a liberal arts college. And although the bottom line is perhaps partly responsible for the increase in bureaucracy, it also represents an acute shift in society's support—or lack thereof—of learning.

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About mid-October, I walked up to the tall red building that houses the Academic Advising Center. Woodbury Arts & Sciences sits next to Old Main, a picturesque image in front of which lies Norlin Quad. While this might exemplify the perfect collegiate scene to many students, it struck me as an ominous structure as I strode in carrying a bundle of papers. When I arrived at the desk, I politely requested the form for a credit petition to have previous coursework reevaluated; I was asked if I had syllabi and exams from the classes, and I handed the stack of papers and photocopies of a university bulletin to the woman. The woman told me that it could take up to six weeks for the review, and that I would receive a letter in the mail about the decision. She took the paperwork and I was left waiting.

¹ As can be found on the University's website, http://www.colorado.edu/catalog/catalog08-09/arts_sciences/

This faceless bureaucracy persists in the daily academic life of CU today. Perhaps owing to the advent of the internet and email, many interactions are now removed from their human element: important messages and advising work are completed via email, and one registers for classes to which instructors have not yet been assigned. When something goes wrong, students are often directed to the campus Information Technology Services to fix the glitch, rather than someone invested in his or her individual case. Even faculty members at CU, as quoted in the *Silver & Gold Record*, notice the trend that an online drop system (for course registration) “further dehumanizes the education process” (Dodge, “ASC”). Some situations call for repeating the same action, or double- and triple-checking to ensure that a certain request really has been completed. Such paperwork comes from the endless rules and procedures designed to foster a well-rounded and liberal education, yet it creates the opposite environment.

Impersonality is common in higher education. Students fill long lecture halls—with the exception of those skipping class for a day. These classes are full of students, but teachers of such huge lectures need not work hard: midterms and final examinations consist of little dots filled in on a single page, results scanned and compiled by computer and fed nicely to the professor. Herbert Stroup, former dean of students at CUNY Brooklyn, writes, “Impersonality is characteristic of the interpersonal relationships within a bureaucracy as well as the goal and consequence of profound scholarship” (Stroup 145-46): each student is assigned a number, and each number is dutifully tracked throughout his or her four (give or take) years as an undergraduate. Each time I walk into the office of my advisor, Rogelio Garcia, he asks me for my student number (“Eight-one-zero-zero-five-zero-nine-seven-six,” I reply) before asking what brings me to his door.

My orientation included an endless pile of papers—red and green and white and yellow—all highlighting a different aspect of CU that I apparently need to know, furthering the faceless interactions. (I honestly did not read half of them.) According to Stroup, “Paper work, then, is the memory system of the college” (Stroup 169). Details are written down for later use, and filed away—sometimes, perhaps even two or three times! While sitting in my advisor’s office completing a graduation packet, I was surprised to find that I had to write everything at least twice, and often a third time. These copies went to various locations, one for my primary degree advisor, another for the advisor of my minor, yet another for me, and finally a copy for the University that actually determines my ability to graduate.

Such copies of my graduation papers are just one aspect of the maddening paper trail found in education. One former university president, John Flower, writes, “Excessive bureaucracy is a continuing threat to the management of the academy.” The sheer number of records is overwhelming, and “includes the paper avalanches” (Flower 204-05) that hound students as they attempt to declare a major or a minor, or change some aspect of their academic record. In declaring my intent to graduate, I had to complete paperwork for my mathematics advisor, Carrie Muir, to affirm my minor. Before I left, she told me to check my status on the University’s web site to ensure that the forms were successfully processed. I asked why, believing she had completed all that was necessary. Yes, but according to Muir, the University’s records system had a habit of not always recording the correct status; I ought to check up toward the end of the week and ensure that, yes, I still was a minor in mathematics in the eyes of the computer.

This excessive bureaucracy is ever prevalent in the policies of higher education institutions. Flower notes that “A Sargasso Sea of red tape is created” (Flower 207) through the bureaucratic rules and structures, presenting something of a mystery. When attempting to find a path through the myriad of majors and requirements, the immensity of the situation becomes apparent to Stroup, who writes, “At times it appears that the college has so many rules and regulations that it is difficult for anyone, whether high or low in the hierarchy, to be aware of them all” (Stroup 162). Just keeping track of the most important deadlines—such as add/drop dates, the beginning of spring registration, or when tuition is due—is challenge enough for most students. But while these policies are designed to support students, some seem to backfire.

Course forgiveness is one such policy that—while well intentioned—seems to have satisfied the bureaucrats but failed at providing a true, liberal arts solution. The idea, originally started at CU in 2001, allows an undergraduate an opportunity to retake a course in which the student received a grade of a D+ or lower; the original grade is removed from calculations of a grade point average.² Yet the policy makes no allowance for students who have done poorly, but not entirely failed. Ironically, if a student is partially proficient at a course, he or she may well become ineligible for course repetition by receiving even a C- as a final grade. When discussing a mathematics grade, I was told that, unfortunately, my C+ was final; had I instead failed the course, I would be able to take it again for a higher grade.

Some students decide to quit in the face of a mediocre performance, with the prospect of retaking a class in a future semester. Paul Levitt from the English Department

² Taken from the Office of the Registrar’s website,
http://registrar.colorado.edu/students/registration/course_repetition.html

had critical words when discussing the policy during its affirmation as permanent policy early in 2006, according to the *Silver & Gold Record*: “So we have them tanking the course [on purpose]? It’s absurd” (Dodge, “BFA”). And yet it happens. Multiple students with whom I spoke explained their reaction to the policy, and how it encourages undergraduates to intentionally fail a class once they realize they are doing poorly, if only for an opportunity to retake it again later. One even described how she approached her chemistry professor before the final exam to tell him that she wanted to fail his class, and though he protested that failing would be no good, she chose not to show up for the final exam. The original idea of course repetition was to encourage students to take classes that they might not otherwise take, by removing the prospect of a failing grade permanently bringing down a student’s grade point average. Yet as it stands, course repetition allows students to retake courses only under the worst of circumstances, failing to adequately and equitably support all students, and certainly not encouraging students to branch out into other disciplines as originally intended.

Some educators argue that the systems created for a liberal education have themselves failed to provide just that. Carol Schneider writes, “The root of the problem is a curriculum model that was originally intended as a design for liberal education but that, over time, has evolved in ways that frequently make it an impediment of the very goals it was initially created to achieve” (Hersh et al. 68). With so many requirements, a liberal arts degree is not so much about well-roundedness as about finding ways to complete each skill set. In CU’s College of Arts and Sciences, requirements span three distinct categories: MAPS (minimum academic preparation standards), core curriculum, and major requirements. It is a model that “calls for students to take a ‘distribution’ of courses in the

humanities and arts, the social sciences, and the sciences, with additional requirements in mathematics and English composition” (Hersh et al. 69). The total number of requirements beyond a major necessary to attain a degree could well take two years, providing students few opportunities to explore other fields in depth; while created with the intent of providing students a broad education, such requirements have backfired.

In some cases, even, it might not be possible to take the required coursework in the expected four years: were a student to not take or not pass a prerequisite course early on, and were the following coursework to be offered only on a yearly basis, a student could possibly fall a year behind. For students in engineering or some sciences, one course is all it takes to fall behind. Within the humanities, multiple required courses are often offered at conflicting times, making it hard for students to find a solution that fits their academic schedule. Such onerous requirements “discourage individual undergraduates from broadening their curriculum” (Froomkin 35), yet again undercutting the idea of a liberal education.

Does this system of higher education truly embody that institution of learning that it proclaims to be? I would argue—from my own journey—that we have lost much of what makes college an individual experience. Because college is an expensive endeavor, many students are forced to attain a degree as fast as possible. Students must navigate through endless requirements and creatively fulfill them as fast as they can. As for those majestic, liberal values our higher education is based upon? They seem lost in the clutter.

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It would be a mistake to forget that economics are a major driving force in the world of higher education. As the world has changed, so has higher education. The bottom

line is a major factor at each and every institution, and is represented in a variety of ways. But what is stunning is the dramatic shift in sources of funding for universities.

Political lobbying has intensified as academic institutions fight for any funding they can see. Professors studying education policy found that “The number of registered higher education lobbyists increased nearly 2000% from 1981 to 2003” (Breneman et al. 175): schools are in dire need of money, and look toward the legislatures for support. Even at CU, this has become a reality. In a 2005 report to the Board of Regents, it was noted that “a relocation [of the Office of the President] to Denver would provide better access to the legislature and other state agencies, as well as the business community” (“Executive Summary”). That stood at odds with one former CU President, Gordon Gee, who had refused to relocate after seeing “a greater downside that outweighed the benefits: removing the University president from the community of scholars” (Dodge, “President’s Office”). But those sentiments were not enough to keep the president amid CU’s flagship campus in Boulder: the University moved the office in 2006.

A more profound shift away from scholarship occurred during the selection of the University’s current president, Bruce Benson. Having attained only a bachelor’s, he is the first of CU’s presidents to not hold a higher degree. A successful businessman, he represents the “CU ought to be run like a business’ school of thought” (Martin). The questions during his selection process came down to this: should a university be run like a business? and does a man without a higher degree have the qualifications to preside over an institution of higher learning? Although many people disagreed—particularly faculty—the Regents decided that the answers to both questions were yes.

The University of Colorado has certainly felt the financial crunch. In the past decade, the state of Colorado has cut back funding so much that the University qualifies as an “enterprise” institution (Baggett et al. 4). Through TABOR,³ the state’s fiscal budget is severely limited; consistently, higher education has been one of the first cuts to be made. Some educators have cautioned about the future, should support for higher education begin to dry up:

we do not believe that for-profit institutions are a significant competitive threat to most of traditional higher education, despite views to the contrary expressed by some observers. (This conclusion could change if the financial circumstances of traditional higher education were to change, e.g., if state support for public institutions were to erode substantially.) (Breneman et al.

x)

Looking back to the history of CU’s funding, it seems apparent that state support for our flagship institution is nearly nonexistent. Where it once received some 60% of its budget from the state, by 2003 it was receiving enough to cover 12%, a number that dropped to just 7% the following year (Baggett et al. 3, 8-19). Those numbers are echoed elsewhere in the country. California, for instance, saw its share of funding to public higher education drop from 13% in 1990 to 9% in 1995 (Campbell xxi). This lack of support is a clear shift in the way Colorado lawmakers—and their constituents—have valued higher education.

This lack of financial support severely degrades the ability of a university to provide a meaningful education. Lecture classes are even more preferred, as they are hardly labor-intensive, easy to teach, and cheap to support for the university as it needs

³ Colorado’s “Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights,” passed in 1992.

fewer instructors (Hersh et al. 134). At CU, for instance, one of the required foundation courses for students of English, *ENGL 2010: Intro to Literary Theory*, has two offerings of a small class, and one large lecture hall that accounts for nearly two-thirds of the possible spots. Thus, a majority of students enrolling in this required course are provided with little choice but to go through a decisively non-liberal arts course in an impersonal lecture style.

More unfortunate is the lack of offerings by full faculty. Former educators write that “Frequently, required courses are taught by adjunct faculty or graduate assistants rather than full-time senior faculty” (Hersh et al. 69). While talking with a former professor over the phone, discussing my lack of connections with full faculty members, I was informed of a disturbing tale: at some points in the past, it was possible for a student to attain a degree in English from CU having taken few or no courses taught by a full faculty member. And it all comes down to money, and finding ways for the University to spend less—in this case, by hiring graduate students to teach.

Education has taken the back burner in the state budget, and is often disregarded as unimportant. While institutions like CU have begun to fight back and lobby directly, they do so in an economic climate with little flexibility on the part of state budgets. Tuition and fees have dramatically increased for students as communities offer less help. Yet the benefits from higher education are not solely reaped by students themselves: strong institutes of higher learning promote the local economy, along with creating a more viable and valuable workforce; it is a part of why we created institutions of higher education in the first place. (This says nothing about the individual merit of attaining a bachelor’s degree or higher!) The lack of financial support, among other examples, represents the diminished valuation of education and learning by the rest of society.

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Judith Albino, president emerita and professor at the University of Colorado, writes the fundamental question: “What has happened, I wonder, to our commitment to the life of the mind? To our higher calling?” (Campbell viii).

Our system of higher education appears at a crossroads, attempting to balance between providing knowledge and preparation for the world beyond, and doing so in a fiscally plausible manner; how it proceeds from here is unknown. Striving for a liberal education has in many ways done just the opposite, creating a challenging bureaucracy that fails to fight for the student. At the University of Colorado, where fiscal policies influence and dictate general requirements and curricula, I have been sent from office to office, signing a number of forms to be able to finally say that I am—or at least, *ought to be*—graduating this coming May. Looking back at my time here, I realize that, while perhaps not quite achieving the “liberal arts education” that the College of Arts and Sciences might proclaim, I have most certainly learned to navigate the bureaucratic world of academia and have endured; this experience has provided me with skills useful for my own future. But sadly, I am likely the odd duckling, and not representative of the system at large: talk to almost any student, and you will likely hear at least one harrowing tale of some bureaucratic blunder that had to be corrected, often at the student’s own expense.

But back on Pearl Street, Tegan McGillivray is in happy spirits. Finishing her apple cider, she studies for an exam as we chat. School has been going well since her, ahem, *graduation*. She has two “quite stellar” advisors—one of whom recently gave her a 45-minute lecture on why she ought to graduate this year, rather than take another semester. Having completed her own graduation packet, and after signing all the forms, she can once

more call up her parents and proclaim—this time correctly—that *she is graduating*. In recent weeks, McGillivray has begun preparing for life after college, one evening by attending a talk about graduate school admissions. She is already looking toward the future, and what requirements she must complete in order to continue working toward a higher degree.

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