

# The Rochester Renaissance Plan: Farewell to the Imagination<sub>1</sub>

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To confuse education with training and the transmission of information, and to conceive of the university as the instrument by which we become prosperous and powerful is to guarantee, insofar as an educational system can affect the outcome, the collapse of civilization.

-- Robert Maynard Hutchins

The current deregulatory climate has allowed corporations to remake institutions, both public and private, in their own image and higher education has not been spared. A new initiative at the University of Rochester (UR), the Renaissance Plan, diverts resources from the humanities and theoretical sciences in order to fund applied research that profits corporate sponsors. UR partnerships with such companies as Kodak and Xerox have turned the university into little more than a corporate annex.

Rochester is a company town, but its dependency on corporations has only impoverished it. A statement by the CEO of Kodak is enough to make front page news in the city's two Gannett dailies. A recent headline in the *Times-Union* of May 8, 1996, "Crazy About Kodak," conveys their editorial stance. The University of Rochester is the city's major educational institution; and its Board of Trustees consists of executives who believe a university is a place that prepares students for the corporate workforce. The attrition of the humanities, which began with the elimination of the sociology graduate programs, became a massacre with the arrival of Thomas Jackson as president of the university two years ago. Within months of his inauguration in summer 1994, Jackson began the first round of cuts at the request of UR trustees. The administration first closed the Asia Library, which student protests had spared several years earlier. It then ended the half million dollar annual subsidy to the Memorial Art Gallery, and suspended graduate

programs in anthropology. Moreover, it was soon clear from Jackson's pronouncements that a lot worse was in store.

In selling the Renaissance Plan to the university community, Thomas Jackson, a bankruptcy lawyer by profession who refers to himself as the "President and CEO" of the university, appropriated a humanist's lexicon in order to conceal a corporatist agenda. In the months preceding the unveiling of the plan, Jackson spoke of his "vision" for the university, invoking the notion of an "intellectual community." He also created the psychological climate for the cuts, alluding to the dire state of the university's finances, as well as the need to make hard choices in tough times. Jackson's new undergraduate curriculum, which he calls "the very essence of a liberal education," contains a feature which, according to Jackson, is a truly nifty and "elegant" idea, allowing students to devise clusters, or planned sequences of courses. While in appearance this allows undergraduates to "choose" their plans of study, in reality students are obliged to choose between different packaging of the same corporatism, in a curriculum that has been stripped of much of its imaginative content, particularly those courses which engage in social and cultural analysis.

The state of financial exigency that the administration invokes to justify the gutting of such courses simply does not exist. During Jackson's first year in office, when the first round of cuts began, the size of the endowment grew from \$624 million in June 1994 to \$686 million in June 1995, a fiscal year in which universities earned the highest return on their endowments since 1986. A *New York Times* article that appeared the day after the release of the Renaissance Plan states, "University officials insisted that the plan was not undertaken in an atmosphere of financial crisis but was the result of a year-long study." Two days later, an editorial in the *Democrat and Chronicle* quoted Jackson as saying that finances were not a primary reason for the changes. Only three days earlier, Dean Aslin had informed the faculty, in a rationale statement on the plan, that the university could not sustain its current balance of revenues and expenditures.

The Rochester Renaissance Plan was so called because it represents, in the words of President Jackson, "a virtual rebirth of the university." The plan, citing the need to focus on undergraduate education, hit humanities graduate programs hard, suspending linguistics and comparative literature, while downsizing philosophy and history. The plan also targeted those science departments out of favor with corporate interests, reducing environmental science and mechanical engineering, while eliminating altogether the graduate chemical engineering program, in which Kodak, having moved into digital imaging, was no longer interested. In a serious miscalculation, since it brought national attention, the administration eliminated the graduate mathematics program. Over a hundred scientists and mathematicians, and at least half a dozen Nobel laureates, wrote letters to the administration protesting the move. The Renaissance Plan, in the words of President Jackson, will "increasingly complement the distinctions," through increased funding, of the professional schools that give UR much of its prestige. Among them is the Simon School of Business which even before the cuts already granted more degrees than all the graduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences combined.

Before releasing the plan, the administration asked each department to justify its graduate programs. While the administration made much of the "input" it had received, it was soon clear from Jackson's statements what kind of "intellectual community" was being fostered, as this one, which appeared in a special issue of the *Campus Times* the day after the release of the plan, suggests: "The impact of the plan is so dramatic that we'll hit the people we need to hit." Jackson revealed the leeway for dialogue and debate at UR in his commentary in the glossy alumni magazine, the *Rochester Review*: "... any attempt to debate the relative importance of subjects such as math, foreign languages, English, western civilization, non-western civilization, or computer literacy risks derailing the entire reform." In a letter to the faculty, Jackson informs them: "As the Rochester Renaissance is successful, new resources will be created to reward those departments that have been most successful in supporting the new endeavor of the College. Departments... will find new rewards in the future, in terms of higher compensation, enhanced support for departmental activities, and ultimately, in enhanced faculty positions allocated to departments. We wish to make clear that, in the new College environment, resources will flow more generously to those departments which succeed best in supporting the overall goals of the Renaissance Plan...."

The reason for the cuts lies in the intention of the Board of Trustees, which consists almost entirely of CEOs, attorneys, and tycoons, to divert university resources to corporate research. During the 1980s, Congress enacted legislation which granted huge tax write-offs, along with the right to purchase patents derived from academic research, to corporations that engage in partnerships with universities. The result has been a growing number of cooperative ventures between research universities, corporations, and the Pentagon -- ventures that diminish the educational experience. Universities must build infrastructure for research scientists who do little teaching but who command much higher salaries than their colleagues who do teach and who, as it turns out, belong disproportionately to the departments that are being cut. One such venture at UR is the optics project funded by the Department of Defense, the university, and several corporate partners, including Kodak. While the resulting developments in optical technology may improve the night vision systems in Apache attack helicopters and reap hefty profits for Kodak, little benefit will accrue to students. Tuition at universities has been rising at twice the rate of inflation during the past decade, owing to the growing demands of corporations which, in effect, now dictate the priorities of those universities. Public resources and student tuition all too often fund research that allows corporations to sell products at a monopoly price.

Many professors were appalled by the Renaissance Plan, and by the manner in which it had been imposed upon the university community. Dirian Dohanian, an art history professor, said in regard to the Renaissance Plan and the decision-making process at UR, that: "Faculty is, in fact, never involved. They might have talked it over with people they expect to agree with them. There was no discussion with anyone they thought wouldn't rubber-stamp them. I don't think this constitutes faculty involvement." Another individual expression of dismay came that day from an English professor, George Grella: "I think that the trickle-down effect will continue, and I know what's trickling down on me... Let's not dignify this [plan] by calling it a vision." At the same time, William Green, a dean

who oversees much of the implementation of the plan, said consolingly, "Just because you're smaller doesn't mean you can't do more."

The problem at UR is not scarcity but a redirection of resources, the question being not what the university budget can cover but what the trustees want it to cover. In the final analysis, the Renaissance Plan reflects UR's corporatist proclivities rather than a calculated response to a fiscal emergency. This corporatism clashes with the Renaissance Plan's stated aim of a liberal education for undergraduates. Speaking of the paradox underlying education at UR, a local journalist, Jack Bradigan Spula, asks, "How is it possible to be a humane institution and still develop the nuts and bolts of mass destruction and ecological disaster?"

By pitting departments against one another, the administration deprived them of support. The administration's strategy against the mathematics department is a case in point. The department had a powerful ally in the American Mathematical Society, which sent a team to UR to ask the administration to preserve the math graduate programs. Furthermore, the importance of math to the other sciences gave the math department a constituency that might have acted on its behalf. To forestall such action, the administration advanced a proposal that the math department keep its graduate program on the condition that other science departments agree to give up 10 percent of their budgets to pay for it. Moreover, the proposal mandated that the math department would have to publicly acknowledge the decisions of other science departments that refused to contribute, and that the math department would also have to include that information in any external communication that criticized the decision to cut the program.

The administration reinstated the math doctoral program several months after announcing its termination, thanks not only to the efforts of the American Mathematical Society and of scholars around the world, but also to the commitment of the UR math professors to their vocation. The controversy led to much debate as to the centrality of mathematics to a university education. The UR administration claimed that it had decided to reduce the full-time math faculty from 21 to 10 members, because the math department did not engage in enough "linkages" with other science departments. As the administration proceeded to cut the theoretical sciences, it also bolstered the laboratory sciences which engage in applied research of profit to corporations. At stake in the math controversy was whether scientists would engage in research purely for its imaginative content.

Initially, the UR administration decided to hang tough and not cede to pressure as it had done in 1991, when it backed down from a decision to cut several graduate programs. "We will not change our minds," said Jackson in regard to the suspension of graduate programs. The administration received encouragement from its friends in the corporate press and from like-minded university administrators. Speaking both of the decision to cut the math program as well as of the principled self-respect of mathematicians, a dean at the University of Virginia, where Jackson had served as provost prior to coming to UR, said: "It is clearly a blow to the status of mathematicians and to their princely egos. But

they're not killing off a premiere-to-10 program, and there are probably more institutions that should do something like Rochester has done."

This intransigence led scholars in many disciplines to admonish the UR administration in letters that rapidly accumulated as the weeks passed. This comment, taken from a letter by David Goldschmidt, the director of the Center for Communications Research at Princeton, to Thomas Jackson, pretty much summarizes their feelings: "I don't want to be rude, but you need to know that Rochester is fast becoming the butt of some serious cocktail party humor." In a letter to a UR math professor, John Kenneth Galbraith said: "I cannot think of a more questionable way of saving money than this and there is the interesting question as to why we should be saving money in this time of general affluence." Many students at UR were also dismayed at the administration's decision to cut math. "The administrators are running UR as... a business firm. Education has to develop some ideals," said UR senior Bond Masuda.

Faced with an embarrassing and widening controversy, the administration abruptly changed course. In a March 28 memo to UR faculty, the administration announced that it was "revitalizing mathematics," stating, "A welcome product of the Rochester Renaissance Plan was a series of unprecedented conversations involving selected mathematics faculty and the central administration." Even as the UR administration celebrated the math department's new cooperative spirit, Aslin was savaging the math profession in the March 29 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: "If our decisions at Rochester have the effect of releasing other administrators from the false belief that mathematics cannot be touched as a profession... is that really so disastrous?" Despite their initial elation over the restoration of the math graduate program, the mathematicians saw their department suffer a heavy loss, since it would be reduced to only 15 professors, with some serving as joint appointments with the physics department. The number of students in the doctoral program was also greatly reduced. Even worse, UR's mathematicians had become handmaidens to the other sciences, thus allowing the administration to claim the real victory. The reduction of the math department is a setback for the idea of a liberal education at UR. Placing mathematics and ethics at the core of interaction of what ought to be a liberal education, George Steiner reminds us, "Mathematics instructs consciousness in the constancy of human error, in the strangeness of things, in the secret music of relations between the smallness of man and the infinity of our world."

Sadly, this consciousness is on the wane at UR, where faculty have been pit against faculty, undergraduates against graduates, humanities students against those in business and science. Many undergraduates remain under the impression, thanks to helpful tips from administrators, that their tuition subsidizes graduate study. They do not regard the elimination of graduate programs as an impoverishment of their own programs of study, even though most graduate courses are crosslisted with undergraduate ones. The Intercultural Council, which was the only forum for the faculty, graduate students and undergraduates to come to together to discuss curricular issues, was defunded and terminated when the first round of cuts began under President Jackson. Without such a forum to unite the university community, resistance to the Renaissance Plan has been

scattered and ineffective. Our isolation is such that we remain unaware of what happens in other departments, even those in allied disciplines. I have seen the effects of isolation on the graduate students of my department, in the instances, among my classmates and friends, of suicide, hospitalization for depression, nervous breakdown, and entanglement in the administrative meshes of the institution.

One of Jackson's fondest desires is to be able to measure the value added by a university. In his view, students have a certain value, measurable by SAT scores and the like, when they come to a university. Students then leave the university with value added, owing to the prestige of their degrees. Jackson presents the Renaissance Plan as increasing this value. In a letter to UR graduate students in the College of Arts and Sciences, informing them that tuition would increase to \$19,630 for the 1996-97 academic year, Jackson says: "Undoubtedly you know of our comprehensive, long-term plans for marked improvement in the quality of programs and facilities, even as we act prudently with regard to financial expenditures. We know that the now-considerable value of a Rochester degree will increase as these plans are implemented."

From the outset of Jackson's initiative, administrators at UR gave every indication that they anticipated that the Renaissance Plan, expertly wrapped in an aura of historic inevitability, would usher in a major transformation in higher education. The administration told the university community that it had arrived at its decisions only after having examined every conceivable alternative. Dean Aslin said of the faculty on the day of the plans release, "They all knew this had to happen." Administrators represented the plan as belonging to a larger design in higher education. In a column written for *Rochester Review*, Jackson says, "It is right for Rochester, while simultaneously placing us at the forefront of the kind of changes that the nation has been waiting for higher educational institutions to make." Jackson does not specify what those changes are, nor does he say why they must occur. It was sufficient, apparently, to know that what was happening at UR was about to happen elsewhere. According to Robert Goergen, chair of the Board of Trustees, the plan will "set a new standard for other leading institutions." A few weeks before its release, Jackson said of the plan that, "This is a realization that you can't do every field and do it really well. Within five years, all American universities will have to go through something like it." As a result of what Jackson calls "a natural market response," fewer PhDs may emerge from U. S. universities.

A few months after the release of the Renaissance Plan, administrators at the Rochester Institute of Technology, the other major research university in the Rochester metropolitan region, announced that cuts were forthcoming in several arts and crafts programs. The RIT administration calls its new agenda the Strategic Plan, a name which declares the corporate war on the arts and the humanities. The RIT administration's justifications for the proposed cuts echo those of the UR administration. Administrators speak of focus, and of developing institutional strengths rather than trying to be all things to everyone. Upon hearing of the impending cuts, hundreds of RIT art students rallied in protest. With the permission of an art professor, they used canvas to shroud his artwork at the Memorial Art Gallery, while also covering the railings that he designed on the Main Street Bridge to show what it would be like to live in a Rochester without art.

That the savagery of the market should prevail so completely over voices of wisdom and understanding, that corporate theft should pass for fiscal necessity, that the bottom line should pass for vision, and that the orders and instructions that have turned UR into a corporate plantation should pass for the dialogue of an intellectual community, is indeed the very measure of our disenfranchisement.

At the first meeting that brought together members of the university community to oppose the plan, we learned that not only was the university rolling back employee benefits, but it was also accepting bids from subcontractors so as to avoid paying even those reduced benefits. Our goal, whether as employees, faculty, or students, should be to have a voice and a stake in the institution in which we work or study and to participate in the decisions that affect our lives. In order to do so, there must be full disclosure of university budgets. Outside audits would reduce the likelihood of business decisions masquerading as innovative education. We should insist on the appointment of educators as trustees of the university. We must reduce the exorbitant salaries of administrative officers, who consider themselves, and indeed are, a privileged class. The rate of increase in the salaries for administrators should be tied to the rate of increase in faculty pay; or better still, to that in graduate stipends. We must stop corporate intrusion into higher education, the political process, and the public sphere.

By reducing the university community by 900 undergraduates and 300 graduates, and by envisioning a residential campus on which virtually all students will live, the Plan will devastate the adjacent 19th Ward, the only integrated neighborhood in Rochester, leaving rental space unoccupied, reducing land values still further, and threatening the neighborhood's racial diversity. Rochester follows the pattern of other urban areas, ringed by gigantic shopping malls that cater to affluent suburban residents and deprive the downtown of commerce. As urban blight spreads and city tax base is eroded, the white middle class flees to the suburbs where zoning laws keep the poor out. The Renaissance Plan will accelerate that trend by depriving city businesses of the patronage of 1,200 students, a reduction that defies the logic the university's plans for a College Town across the Genesee River. In 1980, 25 percent of the public school children in Rochester lived in poverty. Today, 80 percent do. The university should create partnerships in the public sector -- with schools, community associations, cultural institutions and neighborhoods -- which would help to reverse this trend.

The university has a time-honored mission, which is inscribed, lest we forget, on the Rush Rhees Library. On the cornice, often looked at but rarely seen, are the names of a dozen philosophers, poets and mathematicians. They stand for much more than themselves; together these names represent what is indispensable to education: the imagination. It is for this that we must strive: a curriculum that includes not only what is but also what could be, an education that goes beyond the skills needed to survive. It is time to will our ideals into living realities.

**Note**

[1](#) This essay originally appeared in *Z Magazine*, October 1996.

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