

Course Correction: A Map for the Distracted University, by Paul W. Gooch

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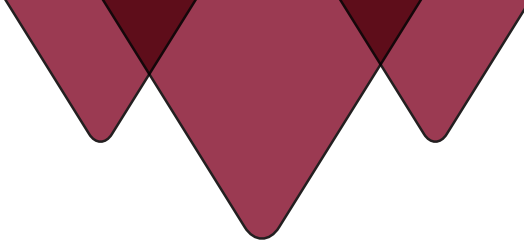
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Book Review: *Course Correction: A Map for the Distracted University*

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On 12 March 2020, as the first case of Covid-19 hit Sudbury, my university closed the campus and transferred all learning into an online format. As the pandemic spread, other universities in Ontario and across the country followed suit. Suddenly, those of us responsible for library instruction had to learn to teach with Zoom. Talk about a distraction!

In Paul Gooch’s book, *Course Correction: A Map for the Distracted University*, there are many other examples of “distractions” modern universities face that cause them to shift away from their moorings. One such example is the voices of students, parents, and governments demanding “relevant” education that will fit graduates for the job market. Another is the new technologies which allow professors to work from home. “Departmental offices sit empty for many hours a month or get shared by occasional lecturers who come in to teach a couple of times a week” (6). Many of these same faculty have unionized in the last 50 years and this has led to strikes, and at the very least more adversarial relations between faculty groups and administrators. These are but a few examples. It is Gooch’s purpose in this book to remind readers “about the proper vocation of the university in the midst of these myriad distracting voices ... by recalling the institution to its central purposes” (9). It is a book intended for those working in universities and all friends of universities.

Gooch is well placed to make his case since his whole life has been devoted to university work. Teaching, research, and administration—he has done it all, as he spells out in his Epilogue. After graduate work, he became a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto (U of T) with a cross-appointment to the Centre for the Study of Religion starting in 1967. In addition to this book, he has published *Some Puzzles about Happiness: Greek and Biblical Views* (2010), *Reflections on Jesus and*



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Socrates: Word and Silence (1996), and *Philosophical Studies in Paul* (1987), not to mention innumerable articles and book reviews. But for many, Gooch is best known as a gifted administrator. Over the course of his career, he has held the positions of chair of the Division of Humanities at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, of associate dean, vice-dean and acting dean of the School of Graduate Studies, then vice-provost of the University of Toronto, and finally, between 2001 and 2015, President of Toronto's Victoria University. When his term was over, he returned to U of T's Department of Philosophy where he too has had to cope with the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

According to Gooch, what is a “proper” university about? In the book he makes five assertions, summed up in the titles of his first five chapters: “It’s All about Knowledge, Period”; “Reputation Requires Integrity”; “Autonomy Is Precarious but Necessary”; “Academic Freedom Is Necessary and Messy”; and finally, “Decision Making Is Complicated: Boards, Colleagues, Presidents, Peers.” Each assertion is analyzed very carefully, as befits a philosopher. The chapter on academic freedom is particularly well done, and alone deserves a wide reading for anyone interested in the topic. With the five assertions explored, in the last three chapters, Gooch ponders three questions: “Is it now all about students?”; “What knowledge should undergraduates gain [these days]?”; and finally, “What and where are well placed universities?” (‘placed’ in the sense of physical location). Overall, Gooch answers these questions in an accessible, even inspiring way (although he does like the word epistemic).

Is there any university who has lived up to Gooch’s ideals of an “undistracted” university? By a happy co-incidence there is—Victoria University, the one Gooch led for 14 years. Victoria, federated with U of T, is set on a small piece of property near the provincial government buildings in downtown Toronto and consists as a graduate theological college (Emmanuel) as well as one that caters especially to undergraduates (Victoria). If the reader did not know better, the book could be interpreted as a not too subtle advertisement for Victoria. Affiliated with the United Church, Victoria has not let religion impair the academic freedom of its faculty; these same faculty have not unionized and sit on the university’s board of regents as voting members. As for students, the university attracts them from around the world and ensures that their many needs are attended to, including for recreation and engagement with the surrounding community.

However, even Victoria has not proved immune from distractions. To be sure, it does not have to cope with a “distraction” such as unionized workforce as many other institutions do, but it is subject to others that are embedded in the current landscape and that are hard to eliminate. The most notable is the loss of university autonomy.

Donors' wishes aside, provincial governments' budget cuts to universities they help bankroll are impactful. Some universities, including my own, have built into their survival strategy the expansion of online course offerings, a strategy Gooch is ambivalent about since he believes students are best educated on campus. Of course, the numbers enrolled in online courses around the country have grown thanks to demand and thanks to the internet, which allows students not only to access their courses, but increasingly the library resources they need to use in these courses.

So, where do libraries and librarians fit in to Gooch's thinking? Gooch acknowledges the evolution of online access to books and journals and quotes several results of online searches he has conducted. As suggested earlier, he only bemoans the fact that faculty and students normally do not have to enter the library itself—or even the university—to access the information they need.

More, he believes that libraries are important since they preserve knowledge for the use of faculty and students. Given his assertion that “It’s all about knowledge. Period,” libraries have a key role. He adds “libraries these days do far more than act as guardians of received knowledge; they are actively engaged in instruction in information literacy—helping students discern what sources are available and what are reliable. This is an exercise in critical assessment—the formation of judgement that is essential to reliable scholarship and research” (24). Gooch also champions the academic freedom of librarians. “In many institutions (including my own), [librarians’] work is covered by policies similar to those of faculty members. If the freedoms of academic life are constitutive of the university, then any defining knowledge function that librarians perform should be protected. These could include such decisions as acquiring unpopular material that has academic merit, mounting exhibits, or publishing reports and accounts” (81).

Unsurprisingly, there was no suggestion from Gooch that librarians should actually be considered faculty members as they are at my university... maybe because that is not the way they are treated at Victoria. That caveat aside, this is a thoughtful—although not completely realistic—book written by an expert in field and a great read, especially in the middle of a pandemic, and even after, since it reminds us all what we are about.