

Reviews



Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education, Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt (New York: Routledge, 1999. 336 pages).

Reviewed by Sharon Crowley, Arizona State University

In their preface to *Academic Keywords*, Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt report that when they presented their “very bleak, even apocalyptic, portrait” of the “prospects” of higher education to faculty at the University of Chicago, a member of the audience dismissed it as “Mulder’s version” of events. He countered their portrait with “Scully’s view” (presumably his own), which we are left to imagine was upbeat, sane, and scientific. I can see why a University of Chicago professor might want to resist Nelson and Watt’s view of the corporate university. Whether or not Nelson and Watt see themselves as Mulder and Scully is an interesting question. They certainly do their best to uncover what they call “the material conditions” that govern work in the American academy. If there is a conspiracy lurking in the shadows, Nelson and Watt do not name its perpetrators. Perhaps the conspirators who invented the corporate university, if they exist, will prove as elusive as the *X-Files*’ character Cancer Man.

I hope that my tone does not suggest that I am in league with the professor from Chicago. On the contrary, I believe that Nelson and Watt are correct to argue that American universities are now typically run like corporations. In a corporate university, making a profit is the highest value held by university trustees and administrators. In the corporate philosophy of management, traditional academic values—teaching and learning—are clearly secondary. In such a milieu, as Nelson and Watt observe, the bottom line *is* the bottom line. This realignment of values is responsible for the erosion of tenure and full-time faculty lines. It also accounts for the relative economic success of departments whose work advances corporate agendas (although Nelson and Watt argue that departments in thrall to corporations have made a devil’s bargain).

Since those of us who profess composition are generally more hip to the way universities are run than are our colleagues in literary studies, I expect that readers of *JAC* will not be as resistant to the argument of *Academic Keywords* as was the estimable faculty member at Chicago—although they may be surprised to find forceful arguments against part-time employment being made by the likes of Nelson and Watt. And here is my chief objection to the usefulness of this otherwise estimable book: the relative privilege of its authors renders them unable to see the view from the bottom, a view that might lend their account a somewhat more invested tenor. Watt is a tenured professor of English and cultural studies at Indiana University, Nelson is the Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois. Their privilege permits them to write scathing commentary on the MLA, the AAUP, the NAS, English departments, provosts, deans, and professors without fear of losing their jobs. But their privileged ignorance also allows them to depict composition as a job held by people who would prefer to be doing something else.

Nelson claims elsewhere that he became interested in academic employment practices because of his empathy with graduate students' inability to find work (*Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*). Hello! To be fair, Nelson has since become an eloquent advocate for graduate students—see, for example, *Will Teach for Food*, a collection of essays that he edited focusing on the graduate student strike at Yale University. And with the publication of *Academic Keywords*, Nelson signals his discovery that the plight of part-time teachers is no bed of roses either.

Academic Keywords does not offer a linear argument exactly; rather, it is a collection of dictionary entries that examine specific practices and institutions. Sample entries include *apprentices*, *electronic mail*, *the job system*, *mentoring*, *research*, *teaching* and *tenure*. Nelson and Watt argue that the dictionary format allows them to illustrate the interlocking or webbed nature of issues that are of current professional concern. Hence, a few entries are followed by cross-references. For example, *part-time faculty* is cross-referenced to *academic freedom*, *the corporate university*, and *faculty*.

The list of entries is idiosyncratic. Some inclusions are startling—there are entries on *cafeterias* and *company town* and the *teamsters union*—all of which evidence Nelson and Watt's rewriting of university practices in terms of the discourse of labor politics. Some exclusions surprise. For example, there is no entry for *English studies* (although English is skewered in an entry entitled *America's fast-food discipline*, which charges, correctly, that the discipline played a key role in the

devaluation of faculty expertise, thanks to its time-honored practice of staffing first-year composition with marginally-employed teachers).

Some entries are brief—a defense of dissertations takes place in a little more than a single page—while others amount to full-blown essays. The authors claim that the length of entries was not determined by the relative importance of a given issue but by the amount of previous attention given it by scholars and journalists. Since *affirmative action* has an extensive secondary literature, for example, the authors content themselves with “a concise, principled statement highlighting key problems.” In practice, however, the space afforded to entries devoted to well-worn issues actually depends on the authors' assessment of the quality of previous discussion. *Sexual harassment* and *part-time faculty*, for example, both have large secondary literatures, and yet they are the subjects of relatively lengthy discussion here. A longer discussion usually indicates that the additional argument supplied by its author is not entirely sympathetic to received opinion on the issue. For instance, Nelson's entry on sexual harassment is generally supportive of anti-harassment policy, although it severely criticizes policies prohibiting consensual relationships on campus. “Some of our best friends,” he writes, “were once each other's students.” Reading this, I am reminded once again of Nelson's privilege. Nonetheless, solidarity politics dictates that those of us who are interested in improving the working conditions of composition teachers should welcome the likes of Nelson and Watt to the table, since they bring with them both a high profile and a relative freedom of speech.

The quality of the entries varies wildly. In the entry on *electronic mail*, for example, Nelson voices his fear that Big Brother actually is watching us. Yet the entry on *mentoring* provides a long and useful list of the many things that full-time professors actually do that are not accounted for by the methods of evaluation used by universities. (As one of my colleagues says, “We've got to find a way to turn this stuff into data!”) Nelson's list is particularly welcome at the present time because graduate student mentoring now endures over many years—from the dissertation through the job search to promotion. I recommend that readers of *JAC* take a look at this list when next they are required to compose self-evaluations.

The entries on *the corporate university* and *faculty* are central to Nelson and Watt's overall argument. *The corporate university* begins with a useful historical overview of the intrusion of corporate money and management styles into universities, beginning in the 1950s when scientific research began to be externally funded and extending into the 1960s and 1970s when many universities experienced phenomenal growth.

According to Nelson and Watt, during this period “the organizational intimacy of a small college gave way to the administrative complexity of managing 30,000 or 50,000 students and thousands of faculty and staff.” They argue that when research funding is supplied by corporations, “institutions become more broadly addicted to the corporate profit pipeline,” and thus “their whole *raison d’être* begins to shift.” The profit-making function within those departments that depend almost wholly on corporate funding “begins to dominate their other activities, from student recruitment to faculty hiring to curriculum design.” A further effect, of course, is that disciplines that do not attract such funding, such as disciplines in the humanities, lose whatever educational priority they enjoyed when public universities depended primarily on tuition and state legislatures for their funding.

But Nelson and Watt’s major critique of the corporate university focus on the effects of its staffing policies. Watt presents chilling data in this entry on *faculty*: between 1975 and 1993, full-time faculty positions declined from fifty-six percent to forty-nine percent of all faculty positions (the largest decline, nine percent, occurred among probationary positions—that is, at the assistant professor level). At the same time, part-time faculty positions rose from twenty-four percent to thirty-three percent of all positions. The eye-opening feature of these figures, though, is the percentage of change: universities employed ninety-seven percent *more* part-time teachers in 1993 than they did in 1975. I have watched this change occur because it coincides almost exactly with my tenure in the American academy. As state legislatures and private donors decreased their support of universities during the economic difficulties of the 1970s and early 1980s, large numbers of full-time faculty were retired or retrenched. When students continued coming to college (as they tend to do during times of economic hardship), the vacant faculty lines were filled by part-time teachers. Once administrators realized that this temporary measure was a moneymaker, they made it a permanent feature of their hiring practices. Watt does the math, clearly showing that the practice of staffing many sections of first-year composition with part-time instructors yields the university hundreds of thousands of dollars in pure profit. The result is that by some counts full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty positions now constitute only one quarter of all faculty positions in higher education. Nelson and Watt cite figures for a few states where the ratio of full-time to part-time faculty is one to four, meaning that for every one full-time position there are four part-time jobs.

Nelson and Watt apparently did not consult the literature by

compositionists that depicts the professional lives of part-time teachers, such as Eileen Schell’s *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*. Nonetheless, they are surprisingly sympathetic to those who hold what they call “academic McJobs.” Narratives by part-time teachers appear throughout *Academic Keywords*. Perhaps more important, in the entry on *part-time faculty*, Nelson gives excellent advice about how to combat the creation and maintenance of part-time positions. He suggests, for example, that disciplinary organizations should stop wringing their hands over part-time employment; instead, they should establish and enforce minimum wages for part-timers. Furthermore, professional organizations should censure institutions that resort to abusive employment practices (a recommendation made almost fifteen years ago in the Wyoming Resolution). Finally, he recommends some specific tactics that professional organizations should adopt in order to force full-time faculty, who benefit from the exploitation of part-time teachers, to acknowledge their share of the responsibility for that exploitation: he recommends that full-time faculty and administrators from censured schools be barred from receiving privileges at professional meetings (for example, discounted convention room rates), barred from advertising in professional publications, and prohibited from publishing in the official journals of professional associations. These measures might wake up full-time faculty, especially since the list of censured schools would surely include highly privileged institutions such as Yale University.

Nelson and Watt defend controversial positions, and they are persuasive. They name names and present data to document their claims. I think that writing program administrators and composition teachers who read *Academic Keywords* will recognize the effects of the corporate management practices that Nelson and Watt dissect. Even though we might not accept all of the arguments advanced in its pages, *Academic Keywords* offers a coherent explanation of how we arrived where we are in higher education. Even better, it offers some good advice about how to get out.

Words in the Wilderness: Critical Literacy in the Borderlands, Stephen Gilbert Brown (Albany: State U of New York P, 2000. 229 pages).

Reviewed by Richard Marback, Wayne State University

Composition studies exists in a borderland. On the level of immediate experience, teachers of writing are all too aware of a mandate to teach