The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
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The following is excerpted from America’s Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects (Palgrave Macmillan 2014), authored by HEX co-editor, David Brown. The excerpt is from Chapter 3, entitled “Self-Serving Professionals.” It comes after Brown takes a critical look at the law, medical, and finance “industries,” which too often ill-serve their clients or patients. Brown notes that academe has remained relatively unscathed while being “increasingly preoccupied with preparing students to make a living, with little consideration of how to live.”

Obviously, there are many traditions affirmed and explored in a university’s curriculum, and many professors and administrators, personally and professionally, quarrel with the predominance of student ambitions to get a job and make a buck that any kind of credential supposedly offers. But in the desire to attract and retain as many students as possible, most of the recruitment literature and amenities of colleges and universities promote career development, not the moral kind. What the student wants has become the measure, not what the student may owe others. Moral development is pretty elementary but easily neglected when an institution’s “competition” ignores it and the bottom line is institutional advancement, or sometimes survival. For those embedded in America’s culture of professionalism, whatever moral sensibilities seem lacking have, strangely enough, been replaced by considering competence as a contemporary form of virtue. I have written elsewhere: “It is understandable why so many professionals treat competence as a virtue—the professional enterprise leaves so little room for anything else. Their gifts and talents, opinions and sentiments not subject to professional measure are largely ignored. . . . The problem, however, of treating competence as a virtue is that competence is really not a virtue at all. When we say that virtue is its own reward, we mean that any virtue, such as courage, honesty, or [doing] justice, properly understood and appreciated, is an end in itself. But professional competence, properly understood and appreciated, has only instrumental value; it is meant to serve as a means to other ends. If you
make competence a virtue, an end in itself, you have no grounds for finally determining the value of what you know or do, or for evaluating what others know or do.”

When competence is combined with a credential, the temptation is to put aside the traditional notion of professional service as a “calling” and substitute “I hear $ calling.” . . . The culture has allowed almost anyone with a credential to posture himself as a “professional” and exploit those embedded in such a culture who assume their interests will come before those who profess to serve them. In academe, peer oversight polices competence among colleagues sharing the same discipline, but professionals in practice do not necessarily experience such peer oversight, and clients often cannot judge competence. Most clients willingly yield to those whose esoteric knowledge is beyond their understanding or whose tacit knowledge is beyond their experience. Furthermore, the pretension of professionals seemingly knowing more than they actually do sometimes makes them resemble magicians. . . .

Nonetheless, the experience in academe conditions both would-be professionals and those who do not entertain such ambitions to accept a false premise that those in the know must look after those not qualified, with the have-nots ignoring their own unused capacities in favor of becoming dependent on those who are credentialed. As a consequence, those credentialed, who are seeking status and substantial income, too often create dependence rather than nurturing the capacities of those they ostensibly serve. . . .

Consider the example of “professional” politicians and “public servants.” I once came across an advertisement of a graduate school of political management that headlined “Professional Politics Isn’t For Amateurs.” Nothing could be more blunt—acquire professional skills or else stay on the sidelines while those who know better do the social problem solving for you. Nothing, however, could be more misleading than the proposition that the public world rightfully belongs to “professionals.” And academe often promotes just such skewed vision, but nothing could be more self-serving than to put “public service” on the shelf beyond the reach of the lay public. It comes back to how would-be professionals are educated by the example of professors yielding to colleagues on all matters not within their areas of specialization. It hardly encourages such

“Those credentialed, who are seeking status and substantial income, too often create dependence rather than nurturing the capacities of those they ostensibly serve.”
students to develop the habit of looking for themselves in any field of knowledge, and as citizens they may very well forfeit the opportunities to be active participants across a wide spectrum of public issues. Young men and women need more than training to use an “analytic mind” within a specialized field. They deserve an education that helps them develop an “inquiring mind.” Too many of them are currently schooled to assume that “problems” offered in a classroom have been perfected by instructors before being offered for “solution.” But perfect problems and perfect answers are a serious distortion of what actually goes on in social problem solving whether in government or communities where they will live. To practice their skills in a classroom on problems that come ready-made and well defined with enormous amounts of data ill serves the preparation they need to be inquiring citizens who construct as best they can, with or without professional help, the kind of trial-and-error processes in which most civic learning is grounded. Similarly, as students they may fail to develop a “strategic mind” nourished by experiencing both inside and outside the classroom what it means to get out of themselves and into “the other person’s shoes.” They are handicapped not only by normal egocentricity but by the mistaken belief, fostered on many occasions by professors who insist on “objective” analysis of a problem situation without regard for how the problem appears subjectively to others. After such students have been outfitted with a host of problem-solving methodologies, they may neglect the simple approach of finding out what others know and want and, instead, just rely on this objective analysis or that methodology. Students may learn that right answers are enough to prevail on an exam, but they are not likely to be enough in the real world where many “answers” compete and conflict. [The excerpt
is followed by a story that offers a further way of understanding the ideas being explored.]

“A Bunch of Amateurs” (I)

Nathan Sax, the President of Pennacook University, looked out the window from his office in Bancroft Hall. There they were on a bright September morning, 75 students walking back and forth with signs saying, “Divest Now: Fossil-Fuels Make Climate-Fools,” and chanting, “Facts, facts, Doctor Sax, sell the stock or get the axe.”

Sax didn’t like the chant, but he knew where it came from. Campus Citizen, the student newspaper, had written a scathing editorial denouncing the President “for studying the divestment question to death. Even in academia, dear Nathan, there is a limit to how long you can examine an issue.” From his window, Sax could also see some younger faculty members talking with the milling students. Certain factions in the faculty were also “fed up” with Sax, according to the Campus Citizen.

Sax turned away from the window. He knew that the divestment question would be the major item on the Board of Trustee’s agenda when it met on campus for its next board meeting later in the week. The students were right, of course—Nathan Sax was slow to act. He had always believed that reasoned deliberation was the only appropriate style for a university president. There were so many people to talk to, so many meetings, so many committees. And besides, Sax was convinced that divestment was not the “climate change” issue that the students portrayed it to be. Colorful rhetoric, yes, but he was rarely moved by rhetoric. The University was too embedded in a history and a city with priorities that did not correspond to the opinions and demands of students who made their home at Pennacook for four years and then moved out, moved on.

Looking out the window again, Sax thought Paul Goodman was about right when he said, “The young are lively, beautiful and callous…and there is nothing to do but love them. If this is impossible, the next best thing is to resent them.” This morning Nathan Sax resented them, especially after consulting again with Pennacook’s investment adviser, Harry Frank, who Sax thought
was a first-rate professional, and whose advice he and the board normally followed. It was Frank who told Sax, “What do these kids know? The financial cost of Pennacook divesting itself of investments based on criteria other than expected performance would very likely be substantial. And it would not include the substantial transaction costs that Pennacook would incur by divesting part of its portfolio. I’m telling you, Nathan, you can’t afford to listen to a bunch of amateurs.”

The President reviewed in his mind the events of the last six months. A coalition of student groups, advocating divestment, Students for Divestment Now (SDN), launched a “spring offensive” protesting the failure of the university to sell all the stock it owned in fossil-fuel companies. SDN had prevailed upon the Student Senate to withdraw $50,000 of its funds, which was part of the University’s investment pool, and instead put the money in a “Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund.”

As Sax stared out the window, Sonya Manka, the University’s Vice President for Finance, stuck her head in the door and Sax waved her in. Manka had never been sympathetic to the SDN cause and, time and again, advised Sax to stick to the independent and objective advice of Harry Frank and other “professionals” on the trustee board. As far as Manka was concerned, “endowments and investments should never be used as political tools. Besides, fossil-fuel companies are dependable profit generators.” Joining Sax at the window, Manka squinted. “Well, she said, “they’re at it again and just in time for another trustees’ meeting. I don’t understand why they think divestment is a persuasive tactic with American companies. There are plenty of smart buyers of stock who are less interested in divestment than the few who sell. Divestment by Pennacook won’t change a thing.” Manka turned away from the window. “So many of the students are such hypocrites. They don’t call for a ban on campus recruiting by those same companies. They are always badgering somebody else to do something.”

Sax turned to Manka, “I’m not a lawyer, but our counsel advises me that as long as the trustees take no action that is contrary to public policy, they will be indemnified. Anyway, who is going to sue them?”
“Me,” Sonya said emphatically and then laughed. “That is if our portfolio gets messed up by selling off some of our strongest equities. You know as well as I do that since the “Great Recession,” a strong, recovering performance of our endowment remains absolutely critical to keeping this place afloat.”

The President liked Manka despite her heated opinions. He badly needed her expertise in disciplining a budget which was constantly vulnerable to the annual competition for student enrollments, the unending demands of maintenance on buildings that were far beyond their useful life, faculty always seeking higher salaries, and the wage demands of Pennacook’s unionized staff.

“You’ve heard it before from Harry Frank. ‘Don’t give in to a bunch of amateurs.’” Manka glanced again at the students outside and then promptly left.

Nathan Sax was soon off to consult with Francis Moody, the board chair, at Moody’s office in the First State Bank downtown, but first he wanted to visit with the demonstrators outside. As he was leaving, his assistant Tim Delroy stopped him to report that SDN had requested the Pennacook alumni list for a mailing.

“What kind of mailing?” Sax asked.

“They didn’t say. I have heard, however, that they want to discourage contributions to annual giving until the trustees act favorably on divestment. The SDN also wants the alumni to join them in getting the Board to enlarge its membership to include pro-divestment students, faculty and alums.”

Sax groaned. “That would be an awful precedent. The trustees will never buy that, never.”

“Do we give them the list?” Tim asked.

“I don’t see how we can refuse them.” Sax headed for the door. “Tim, I’m going out to see the students, then downtown for Francis Moody.”

Delroy held the door for the President. “Do you really want to debate the SDN this early in the day?”

“Better outside now than having them sitting in my office when I get back.” Sax walked out into the glare and blare of the September demonstration.
After years of teaching philosophy, Nathan Sax had developed the Socratic habit of playful, and sometimes not so playful, debate with whatever issue students confronted him. It often got him in trouble, however, when Pennacook students, soberly engaged in an important cause, became infuriated with his seeming detachment. Sax tried to adjust his style but old habits die hard. As Sax walked toward the students, the chanting stopped and several of them walked quickly over to see the President.

“Have you decided to move the trustee meeting off campus? We heard that…”

Sax cut them off. “I’ve heard no such thing. No, the trustees will meet where they always do, in the Curtis Room of Bancroft Hall.”

The students now surrounded him. He looked at each student in the circle. He did not know many of them by name but he recognized some and nodded in a friendly way. They smiled and nodded back. A few remained sullen.

“Doctor Sax, we’d like to know what your recommendation will be to the trustees?” The others shook their heads in agreement.

“Who says I’m to make a recommendation? I didn’t know the trustees needed my recommendation. They are quite able to act on their own, you know.”

One woman, Jenny Stackhouse, whom Sax had met before on the issue, from the outer edge of the circle which had now grown three deep, raised her hand, then laughed at the gesture and moved to the President’s side. “Doctor Sax, what we want is for you to care, for the trustees to care, for Pennacook to care about what’s going on with climate change.”

Sax turned to her. “What makes you think that we don’t care? I’m surprised you think that we don’t…”

Stackhouse persisted. “You don’t care enough to make a sacrifice, if that’s what divestment means to you.”

Sax looked at the other students. “I’m sorry but I don’t understand why my caring for Pennacook, trying to avoid unnecessary costs, trying to keep your tuition within reason…” Some students started to hiss. Sax went on. “What we care about can be a very complicated business. My job is to…”
“Your job is to lead,” another student edged closer, “Your job, to follow your logic, is to make us care about this University, and you can’t do that if you put dollars ahead of saving the planet.”

“I hear you,” Sax looked at the student. “Is our decision here at Pennacook meant to be effective or symbolic?”

“Both,” many students said in unison. “Both, Doctor Sax.”

Jenny Stackhouse resumed her argument. “It is the right thing to do.” Her eyes glistened. “It shows that we care, that you care, Doctor Sax, that the trustees care.”

Sax thought she was starting over again. He couldn’t stop himself. “Caring, all right the subject is caring. Let me ask you if we were talking about companies which are important to this town or which provide jobs for people who live here, would you still say that we should divest?”

“The students looked at each other. They didn’t understand Sax’s question. “C’mon Doctor, that’s a hypothetical, a red herring. What companies in this town will be hurt if Pennacook divests?”

“I don’t know,” and Sax really didn’t know, but he had made the argument and now he felt compelled to continue. “But if they were, would you care if it meant people lost their jobs?”

“No,” one student said emphatically. “When it is a matter of climate change, everyone has to pay their dues.”

Sax thought he saw an opening. “Oh, I’m sure they’re willing to pay their dues,” he looked intently at the student, “they just don’t want to pay yours.” The students hissed again and started to drift away.

Sax started walking and a few students followed along to ask more questions about what would happen at the trustees’ meeting. Sax could hear them chant again. “Facts, Facts, Doctor Sax…” He had said too much or not said enough. When he reached the campus gates, the students turned back and he stopped momentarily to make some notes. “Next time,” he vowed, “I won’t use any hypothetical.”
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