Laden, A. S. (2024). *Networks of trust: The social costs of college and what we can do about them.* The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226837185

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"It's burnt."
"What?"
"So are the Chekhov books you lent me. Denny found out I was on the pill, he's burnt all me books."
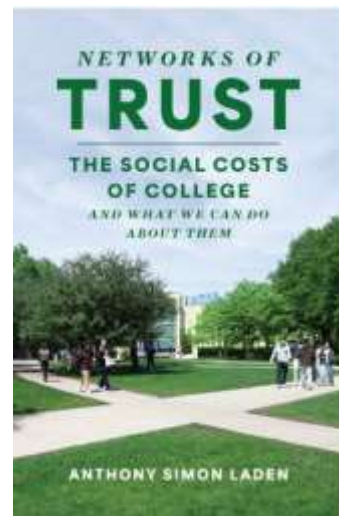*"Oh, Christ. I'm sorry, I'll get you some more books."*
"Oh, sod the books. I wasn't referring to the books. Why can't he just let me get on with me learning? You'd think I was having an affair, the way he behaves."
"Perhaps you are having an affair."
"Go 'way, I'm not! What time have I got for an affair? Jesus, I'm busy enough finding meself, let alone finding anyone else. I'm beginning to find me. It's great. It is, you know, Frank. It might sound selfish but all I want for now is what I'm finding inside me."

~From the screenplay "Educating Rita" (Gilbert, 1983)

Rita's crisis stems from the loss of friends, family, and community in the name of education—or is it indoctrination? The review of *Networks of Trust* that follows can be seen as five essays on the alienating effects of school and college education with thoughts on how to mitigate these consequences. Anthony Simon Laden, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Associate Director of the Center for Ethics and Education at the University of Wisconsin, takes the position that "for all the wondrous good [schools and colleges] do and can do, they may also do a fair amount of harm, and that the two may be more intertwined than we like to admit" (p. 9). The harm, he writes of, is not unrelated to the divisions and upheaval we are experiencing in U.S. society where voters have divided themselves into camps sometimes called "populist" and "elite." The nature of the harm is a breakdown in the students' world of "informational trust, social trust, and the entrusting of care" (p. 15). More specifically, Laden defines these terms as having to do, in the case of informational

trust, with the sources of knowledge that we accept, as well as the methods used to validate that knowledge. In the case of "social trust," Laden looks at the coherence of institutions such as universities, and whether the mission espoused in one division is complementary with the functioning of other sectors. If not, how is the student to react? Finally, the "entrusting of care" is similar to the "Do no harm" ethic we associate with professions. For example, faculty have an implicit obligation to consider the consequences of their curriculum on the general welfare of students. The thesis of *Networks of Trust* is that schools and colleges are obliged to channel students in certain intellectual directions but that this does not absolve them of the responsibility for the disruption to lives that this course of action may entail.

Informational trust is probably the category among these three networks that is most associated with education. Particularly at the college level, there is an emphasis on how to recognize valid sources of information and the processes that support them. Illustrative of this, a personal anecdote begins *Networks of Trust* and is referenced throughout. This story relates how **Laden** (pictured right) was visited one day by a student and his father who questioned whether grading in Laden's course was being used to impose subjective, ideological conformity in a way that undermines traditional belief patterns. Initially the author felt confident that he was conventionally objective and above reproach in this regard. After long reflection, however, he became less sure of his blamelessness and was motivated to write this book.

A style of academic knowledge that is rational, evidence-based, data-driven, secular, and objective pervades schools and colleges. To use another of Laden's metaphors, it is like the alphabet with which we compose writing. It is a style that limits and defines what most of us in education consider to be legitimate in our magisterium. It is the vehicle through which our institutions express themselves. In a change of perspective, Laden came to appreciate that these methods and style are inseparable from our enterprise. Also, it is worth noting, this type of information may be necessary in institutions that seek to do scientific inquiry, set aside faith orthodoxies, and encourage innovation of thought. An example is the often-posed question, "Do you believe in evolution?" The question itself deviates from the language of the academy. Theories are not meant to be believed; they are derived from observations that are continuously subject to doubt and testing. In this way, the language of faith is distinct from the language of knowledge. At the same time, reconciliation may be possible. Dr. Francis Collins, esteemed scientist and Christian, provides us with a model of someone who occupies both worlds fully. In *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, Collins opined that scientific discoveries were an opportunity to worship; he rejected both Young Earth creationism and intelligent design.

Even when awakened to his disruptive influence on students, Laden accepts that inevitably education will cause change and reorientation, or even disorientation. A goal of *Networks of Trust* is to illustrate how schools and colleges can mitigate the

dangerous aspects of such dissonance. In the book's closing chapters, Laden discusses "What Colleges Could Do" as an effort in this regard. Central among these suggestions regarding information networks is the idea of "charitable thinking." By this the author means asking "how someone who is smart, careful, thoughtful, and sincerely concerned with finding the correct answer could hold that view or come to that conclusion" (p. 87). The author goes on to explore a number of other techniques that could make the classroom more humane and learners not only better supported, but better able to communicate their insights to the broadest audiences. One of the distinctions he posits is between scientific and open-minded networks of trust:

> The difference between broadly scientific and open-minded networks is subtle, and they are often taken to be the same thing. … A broadly scientific trust network evaluates the trustworthiness of sources based on whether they rely on broadly scientific methods of discovery and investigation. In contrast, an open-minded network evaluates sources for trustworthiness by looking at whether they remain always open to all sorts of challenges and criticism, even those that come from sources that do not rely on broadly scientific methods. (p. 82)

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Social trust is the second of the networks of trust that Laden analyzes. In the context of *Networks of Trust*, this relates to the entire enterprise of the school or university being consistent in its pursuit of espoused goals. Specifically, for example, social trust implies that an institution that recruits a diverse student body must then provide the means necessary for their success—from classroom to residence halls to counselling centers. Think of the consequence on an individual or an institution that is supportive in some ways and abusive in others. The betrayal of such institutional trust had a dramatic incarnation in the 1993 death of Vince Foster, Esq. Here is a précis: *The Wall Street Journal* is famously respected by corporate and business people of the type who were Foster's clients and peers. The *WSJ* has earned this readership by the quality and scope of its news writing, regarded as a trusted source of information on which to base investment decisions. Famously, however, the editorial pages of the *Journal* have a reputation for demonstrating a partisan point of view hostile to the political party Foster served as Deputy White House Counsel. Early in his service, the *Journal* led the media charge against Foster, scapegoating him for a series of putative Clinton administration missteps. The flow of editorials was intense and personal. Foster likely held the *Journal* in esteem as it would have been a part of his informational network of trust. Being repeatedly vilified by its editorial page, combined with the pressures of White House work, he ended this most stressful episode of his life with suicide. In a note torn up but found after his death, he wrote, "The *WSJ* editors lie without consequence" (Deparle, 1993). Foster's death, it can be argued, was a public example of a breakdown in his social trust of an institution that is useful in some manifestations and problematic in others.

Some would say that Vince Foster was naïve to allow himself to be so affected by a for-profit media enterprise, and this same point of view can be brought to bear on *Networks of Trust*. One could see Laden's view of students as defenseless and

vulnerable, unable to assert agency in the face of classroom authority. This viewpoint is in keeping with the "fragility" dimension of the DEI climate present today in higher education and some other significant institutions, particularly those from non-market sectors such as government and non-profits. Students do push back effectively more often than *Networks of Trust* might imply. The book's main thesis—that students should be treated with more awareness that faculty may disrupt their lives—is good advice on several grounds. One worth mentioning is "enlightened self interest" on the part of faculty. Aggrieved students can resist, justifiably, and they are not all as passive as some may surmise. For evidence, make a visit to the website, http://ratemyprofessors.com.

"Entrusting of care" is Laden's third category of trust and is reminiscent of the standard we associate with true professionals. *Networks of Trust* looks deeply into some possible, endemic university betrayals of this trust. Examples of this would be programs for which there is little chance of appropriate employment e.g., early childhood education, some multi-disciplinary and undefined majors, or that are longer than is necessary, e.g., teacher education, beyond four years; lawyer training at seven years. Colleges may admit persons who are marginally qualified and allow them to remain in place, failing, for too long while they accumulate significant debt. Effective advising and career counselling are underemphasized. It is well-known that higher education has risen in price at more than double the rate of inflation since the 1960s. Have the interests of students been accounted for in this process? My alma mater sold campus parking to a for-profit provider which, we can be sure, will extract the maximum amount of dollars students can provide for this necessary service. The list could be extended greatly.

This breakdown in a professional ethic of care is also seen when what were professional practices like dentistry, veterinary medicine, and medicine are increasingly bought up by private equity and other corporate entities. The practices are, in turn, redesigned in order to ruthlessly extract maximum profit for shareholders (Hannay, 2022). The cost to consumers is of little concern. In fact, some of these entities are also in the business of providing in-house credit cards so that any interest payments accumulated stay with them. The breakdown of integrity in media is an aggravated example of a betrayal of trust and the ethic of care by respected people and institutions, one that is similar but perhaps more advanced than that of education. The Alex Jones/Sandy Hook and Fox News/Dominion civil suits illustrate media culpability and the fact that "victims" can sometimes push back effectively. These phenomena are mentioned here to illustrate the generalizability of Laden's thesis on the entrusting of care. Universities are not alone as institutions that drift toward an insensitivity to the economic interests of others. There are larger, societal implications to the messages of *Networks of Trust*. Education may be caught up in new ways of compromising professional trust on behalf of capitalist interests.

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Laden goes further in his questioning of the motives and effects of education practice when he claims that higher education engages in the reproduction of social class and the creation of obstacles to social mobility for those it marginalizes. In turn, universities "perpetuate social and economic inequality" (p. 51). The author goes on

to point out that it is a small step from these effects to the resentment that excluded groups feel. Implicit in Laden's argument is the idea of a pervasive and ineluctable lack of critical self-awareness on the part of higher education. Like the discipline of philosophy itself, we turn away from effective analyses of our social impact, occupying ourselves with formal and rote scripts instead of incisive self critique. In *What's the Use of Philosophy,* Philip Kitcher (2023, p. 151) writes:

> Do the efforts at synthesis [in philosophy] generate resources that prove useful, whether for some systematic field of inquiry, or for collective efforts to resolve difficult questions, or for people's attempts to make sense of their lives? I see the long history of Western philosophy as providing a resoundingly positive answer to this question. A century's worth of work in which Anglophone philosophers have largely turned away from synthetic ambitions makes that answer far less convincing today. Indeed, the unconvinced are everywhere…

This call to educators for greater self-awareness and incisive self-critique is a valid and valuable claim that comes through powerfully in *Networks of Trust.* We are caught in the dilemma Upton Sinclair once pointed out, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it" (Quote Origin, 2017). Even the self-interested may, however, wish to be attentive given the societal trend to distrust higher education and seek alternative pathways to careers. A visible and practical consequence of this change in popular attitudes is the movement away from requiring job candidates to have earned a college degree, including for civil service positions (Crist, 2023). To add salt to the wound, one reason given for this reduction in credentials is to create a more diverse workforce.

"Wokeism" has compounded these shortcomings. Irony abounds as we find our educational institutions challenged by critics up to and including Congress for a DEI movement that is seen as demonstrating "identitarian moralism" (Henley, 2022) and has served to alienate many who considered themselves traditional humanists and Leftists. While universities identify with progressivism, they are perceived as peddling an ideology that abandons human universalism, the distinction between power and justice, and the possibility of progress (Nieman, 2023, p. 142). Not only is higher education vulnerable to charges that it is gate-keeping for society's elites, but the curriculum used to stratify people in classes is one that abandons the cardinal humanist values of hope and unity. The overdue critique of modernism that we call post-modernism has undone one worldview without providing another. When combined with the economic and class impact of universities, this *de facto* curriculum creates a particularly fraught moment. As Susan Nieman (2023) wrote:

> You may argue that theory is secondary: of course, woke activists seek solidarity, justice, and progress. Their struggles against discrimination are animated by those ideas. But they fail to see that the theories they embrace subvert their own goals. Without universalism there *is* no argument against racism, merely a bunch of tribes jockeying for power. And if that's what political history comes to, there's no way to maintain a robust idea of justice. But without commitments to increasing universal justice, we cannot coherently strive for progress. (p. 108)

What we are given in place of the liberal consensus is an "identity synthesis," described this way by Yascha Mounk (2023):

> This new ideology was defined by seven major themes: a rejection of the existence of objective truth; the use of a form of discourse analysis for explicitly political ends; an embrace of strategic essentialism; a deep pessimism about the possibility of overcoming racism or other forms of bigotry; a preference for public policies that explicitly distinguish between citizens on the basis of the group to which they belong; an embrace of intersectionality as a strategy for political organizing; and a deep scepticism about the ability of members of different groups to communicate with each other. (p. 76)

This point of view has not contributed to an atmosphere of trust and unity among the disparate groups forming today's democracies. Post-modernism can be seen as a useful and necessary critique of modernism, but it does not provide society with a new synthesis moving forward. The current state of our politics and institutional life calls out for alternatives to what has gone before as well as our current morass. Some have called the new synthesis post-postmodernism or metamodernism, which "engages with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we've learnt from postmodernism" (Metamodernism, n.d.). Our institutions, including higher education, will not recover popular trust without a unifying consensus that offers the mass of citizens a better life—materially and psychologically. Following a period during which both modernism and its critical nemesis, postmodernism, are discredited, neither right-wing populism nor "wokeism" offers real promise. Neither inspires trust of the whole enterprise of our society or the hope such trust would carry with it.

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The issues Laden presents in *Networks of Trust* may have less to do with faculty than appears at first glance. Along with the steep increase of university tuition has come a proliferation of non-faculty actors influencing campus life and relegating faculty to a minor role in the institution's mission:

> From 1976 to 2011, the number of students at American universities nearly doubled. The growth in the size of the faculty failed to keep pace, with the number of professors increasing by just 76 percent. But the size of nonteaching staff skyrocketed over the same time period, with the number of administrators on American campuses growing by 139 percent and the number of other professional employees, such as student affairs officers and mental health counsellors, growing by a staggering 366 percent. (Mounk, 2023, p. 99)

The popular concept of faculty dominance over life in universities has been superseded by professionals with a range of preparations controlling significant segments of university life and a cadre of former professors who, as permanent administrators, have a new identity growing out of their new occupation. Some faculty remain committed to having a strong voice in university affairs while many others minimize their involvement in such matters to focus their energy on research,

scholarship and, sometimes, teaching. Much of the identitarian moralist movement in higher education emerges from non-faculty offices and officials who are only tangentially influenced by professors. University staff and administrators occupy roles in higher education parallel to hospital and insurance administrators in health care. Ostensibly, they share a common overall purpose—the welfare of students and patients—but they are of different professions, answerable to differing peer communities with their own career trajectories and venues for discourse and reflection. I say all this as a career academic administrator who, while seeing himself as *primus inter pares* among faculty was accused at times by faculty and administrators of "thinking I was faculty."

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The democratization of communication has fostered an era of revolution in culture and politics. Change comes quickly. Ideas spread instantly. There are often no editors or "adults in the room." At the same time, as Yuval Harari (2018) claims, we are a "post-truth species" more interested in power than truth and living at the intersection of truth and myth. The metamodernists suggest that our new synthesis will involve guiding values which may be "true" only in the sense that we subscribe to them and may have power only because enough individuals consciously choose to live by them. Obama's 2008 campaign was an example of this type of cultural revolution and unexpectedly swept him into office. The change of perspective proved fragile as it was not pursued in propaganda—or communication, if you like—once the election was won. The rhetoric and mythmaking went away. Another less sanguine movement came along that does not neglect its marketing.

Michael Ignatieff (2025), former candidate for prime minister of Canada, describes how a revived liberalism could provide this guidance:

> It once was a synonym for generosity. …We'll want to discard these male, elitist associations by marrying generosity to the egalitarian individualism at the core of the liberal creed. The creed tells us we're no better than anybody else but also no worse. What liberals value should be within everyone's reach. A liberal person wants to be generous, open, alive to new possibility, willing to learn from anyone. …the largeness of spirit it calls us to does define our horizon of hope. …Liberalism's incorrigible vitality comes from the fact that it tells us who we most deeply want to be, provided that we are willing to fight for it and never surrender to the passing fashions of despair.

At the foundation of trust is its object, that which is trusted. People and ideas, for example, can be worthy of trust and thereby enrich our lives. Taking Laden's message to heart, those involved in higher education should consider whether the quality of their ideas and institutional performance merits the trust and attention we presume and whether we are reflective and humble enough to address questions such as these with purpose.

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