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Open Letter to the Powers-That-Be At Western

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Western Michigan University

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Open Letter to the Powers-That-Be
At Western

I am starting my fifth and final semester at your institution. I have paid my tuition out of my own paycheck, attended most of my classes regularly, and intend to accept my diploma without the slightest twinge of conscience; without any delusions to its value or its meaning that I will then be an “educated person.”

I have not been a college student to avoid work; I have been working sixty hours or more every week that I have attended Western. I am not involved in all the extra-curricular nonsense that campus residents enjoy; I commute 30 miles each way to school. I do not have pipedreams of the dollars that my diploma will rain down on me; my average yearly income exceeds that of an Associate Professor with a doctorate by more than two thousand dollars. And I am not avoiding the draft; they have made it clear that they don’t want me.

If nothing else, all this allows me to stand back and take a look at Western Michigan University with a detachment and objectivity that you people are apparently unable to attain.

The most immediate and obnoxious feature of your university is the flavorless architecture of the West Campus. The buildings are like giant ventilated match-boxes pressed by their edges into the hillsides. I could point out countless factories, hospitals, prisons and even hamburger stands erected in the last decade that enjoy a more beautiful and pleasing architectural design. We taxpayers and students should tar and feather the tasteless scoundrels responsible for deliberately sticking such eyesores on such beautiful hills. We have been cheated and defrauded. The landscape of this campus could provide an architect gifted with imagination and daring the opportunity to make Western Michigan University one of the most beautiful campuses in America.

You now claim a grand total of twelve thousand students, and are apparently waiting to wet your pants with joy when you can boast of possessing an enrollment of twenty thousand. You are obviously looking ahead; I detect more tasteless construction devouring parking lots and woodlands alike. (Parking lots are my only weakness when trying to be objective here—I know how you react in fear to cars, the students who drive them, park them and make love in them.) When I see my parking space being moved further and further from my classes, I complain like all hell. But I wouldn’t mind parking my
auto on the outer edge of the campus, IF—you would provide me with wide graveled or paved sidewalks, leaving an occasional tree standing here and there, allowing me shade in the summer and a windbreak in the winter while I stop to lean and rest. And leave your damned wire fencing and "Keep Off Grass" signs off my walkways. Even President Miller's residence wouldn't be such a cold chunk of real estate if it weren't for such uninviting junk. But everyone expects the Administration to be a bunch of unfriendly knotheads. You I give a sound cursing every Registration, once or twice during the semester for good measure, and then try to keep out of your clumsy way for the duration.

The faculty I face every day. Sad people; underpaid, but without enough guts and brains to do anything significant about it; having to administer tests, give grades, conduct worthless departmental courses and follow the orders of the ignorant bureaucracy that is constantly peering over their hunched shoulders. But I have seen so few of the faculty talking with students over coffee or a glass of beer, holding open house for seminars and discussions. Is the teaching-learning process like that of a parasite sucking the blood from the host, where the host must guard against contact with any lesser creature that might desire what he possesses? Is this aloofness I observe a result of fear of destruction from the anger of that creature when it tastes not rich, juicy, red blood, but a thin gruel of plasma with artificial red coloring that can be bought cheaply at any teacher's college? If I were an instructor, I wouldn't work for an institution known for the number of football victories, or the number of students enrolled, or the number of buildings (ugly or otherwise); but for a school known for the quality of its faculty. I wouldn't list my "office hours" on my office door; I would post in the library and student union a list of the times that I could be reached in the coffee bar, my favorite taverns, or at home. In fireproof buildings, I would smoke if I felt like it. I would fire all the secretaries. I would arrive promptly at the advertised times of my lectures and dismiss them when I finished what I had to say.

If I couldn't make the grade, or exist on the salary, I would leave—to make my living laying bricks or working on the railroad.

Respectfully,
Tom Brown
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