Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology

The Value of the Useless: Erin Manning, Impact, Higher Education Research, Progress

Laura Elizabeth Smithers, Old Dominion University, USA, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5706-3649, lsmither@odu.edu

Abstract

This article brings the work of Erin Manning to bear on common sense practices and conversations of the value of a college education. Manning's work provides a productive alternative to the neoliberal discourse of college impact that has dominated higher education research for the past half century. Neoliberalism produces the common sense of the value of education as privatized, datafied (or dividuated), and measurable outcomes. This common sense reduces American higher education to the sum of its parts. To produce worlds to which campus marketing departments on occasion gesture, worlds where college produces spaces of community transformation, we must come to re/value progress in excess of measurable outcomes. In a rotating series of revaluations, this paper puts Manning's concepts to work in both substance and form in four refrains: redefining value in higher education, revaluing the infrathin and the imperceptible, reconceptualizing liberal education, and valuing the useless.

Keywords: college impact, assessment, neoliberalism, student success, value of college.

Introduction

Higher education is mired in acts of quantification that define our age. For many practitioners, administrators, and researchers, asking questions of the value of higher education not answerable by measurements of impact is, if even thinkable, deeply irresponsible (Dwyer et al., 2015; cf. Zembylas, 2021). The moral imperative at the heart of the cultures of measurement movement is one of the most insidious forces in higher education, as it rewrites our knowledge-being practices through rewriting the value of higher education. In this paper, I engage Erin Manning's writings on value to incite different practices of the value of higher education. Value must not be captured by metrics and inaccessible to other languages of value. Academics can and should rage against the

neoliberalism of our institutions and administrative classes (Bozalek & Winberg, 2018; Burnett, 2020; Giroux, 2014), the casualization of our labor (Kezar et al., 2019), and the hollowing out of our degree programs into credential factories or their shuttering when various calculations deem them unworthy (Ellis, 2020; cf. Macgilchrist, 2019). However, if this rage does not result in revaluations, this will be our permanent present (Smithers, 2020). Revaluations of the university are needed in every corner of university practice and in research in the discipline of higher education. We university denizens know the route our future takes; we live it every day. The value of higher education that creates the conditions for a university in research and practice shaped by an assemblage other than neoliberalism or control (Deleuze, 1986/1988, 1992) is produced through habits of affirmation (Manning, 2016). Affirmation transforms a higher education attuned to impact to one attuned to progress.

In a collection of short sections, this paper affirms alternative valuations of higher education with Manning's writings, empirical sites within higher education, dominant concepts in higher education research, and various pop culture reference points from music, television, and even an audio guided run from the Nike Run Club app (*a la* Halberstam, 2011). In this menagerie, four refrains return: Manning helps us redefine value in higher education, revalue the infrathin and the imperceptible, reconceptualize liberal education, and value the useless. These refrains traverse the territory between the value of impact in higher education research and the value of something I will imperfectly call progress. College impact is the calculation of the value a college environment adds to student outcomes (Astin, 1970a; 1970b; Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016). Here, progress gestures to Nike (2020) Running Coach Chris Bennett's definition: gradual, often imperceptible betterment. Progress is the value generated by a process of valuing the useless. Through this flow of topics and radical empiricisms (James, 1897/1956; Manning, 2016; St. Pierre, 2016), we—you dear reader and I, entangled on this journey—discover or solve absolutely nothing. We do not reverse the centuries of racist, sexist, gendered, capitalist inscriptions on university life. Even in this sea of uselessness, especially in this sea of uselessness, we here take the work of Manning to help spark a revaluation of higher education away from measurable outcomes and toward liberal education, away from impact and toward progress, away from the neoliberal hollowing out—and our responsibilities as good actors to participate in this—and toward an infrathin, useless higher education.

In thinking with Fiona Apple (2020), here we "move with the trees, in the breeze / [we] know that time is elastic / and [we] know when [we] go / all [our] particles disband and disperse / and [we'll] be back in the pulse" (1:18). Higher education's focus on impact research, outcomes measurement, and the quantification and optimization of university life takes the *ends* of education and rewrites the *means* of education in their image in every instant. Such movement denies elasticity and pulses and all of the ambiguity and radical substance of Apple's words and instead, in a desire to impart substance and value in higher education, removes it. A higher education so oriented might be the only way to faithfully achieve the outcomes and impacts the hollowing out has so long promised and never delivered. In its doing, we might finally realize that those outcomes and impacts were never the end of an education to begin with.

Figure 1

Progress Bar

Program Progress

Requirements	65%

Re/Defining Value

How do we come to value college and university environments? How might we be able to account for the impact of college on students in excess of countable behaviors or actions? Questions of value in higher education have redounded to the countable for decades. To be accountable to outcomes requires countability—nothing else is enough. If we are "serious" (American Association of Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2017, p. 17) about providing students value, if we "owe it to students" (Musoba et al., 2018, p. 730) to make sure that their college education finishes quickly and results in a job, then to place any other formulation of values higher than metrics in the decisions that shape day-to-day practice would be grossly irresponsible. To value the useless would be malpractice. The concept of high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) rests on this very notion. Colleges and universities should provide high-impact practices for students because these are the environments that count the most. They count the most to metrics of student engagement, and student engagement counts the most towards metrics of on-time graduation. When colleges think about what opportunities to offer students, it is not just smart but responsible to offer these first.

Value as impact exists in a time where the failures of metrics have accrued for decades. Colleges and universities need to look no further than to their own use of standardized testing in undergraduate and graduate admissions (Hoover, 2020). Similar features can be found across a generation of accountability to testing and value-added measurements in K12 education. Failures of metrics were evident in the gaming of metrics in the market crash of 2008 (McKay, 2015). Failures of metrics are also found in pop culture representations of this problem, such as the 2000's TV series *The Wire* (Simon et al., 2002-2008), frequently hailed as one of the best television shows of all time (Jones, 2018; Saraiya, 2017; Sheffield, 2016). Its plot revolved around the problems that came to bear when the (fictional) Baltimore police were held accountable to metrics. We can even look to Robert McNamara's spectacular failure in Vietnam, where the business sense for metrics he brought to war planning devastated the Vietnamese as well as the American soldiers commanded to carry out orders linked to no value but an accounting (Cukier & Mayer-Schönberger, 2013). This list is but a snapshot. The failures of metrics applied to human behavior are the air we breathe, and yet these are the values one must hold to be a serious educator, administrator, and/or researcher in higher education. We must redefine value in higher education in order to be able to chart a different course forward for our students and our institutions.

This redefinition requires a continued refusal to impose structuring devices such as impact upon the infrathin (Manning, 2017). These moments are "beyond capture, the infrathin is a grasping at

the the singularity of an interval too thin to define as such and yet thick with the texture of lived relation" (Manning, 2017, p. 99). The infrathin is the unquantifiable within college and university communities; it sparks a revaluation of these communities beyond categorization, or metrics. Higher education is so thoroughly immersed in metricized values that it can be impossible to imagine any other system of values organizing its work. And yet, these values exist already in this time, in colleges and universities. The question of revaluing is not one of creating new values from whole cloth, but rather attuning everywhere to the values beyond metrics that live in every moment all around us. Revaluing higher education does not mean that the practices currently labeled high-impact should cease to exist. To the contrary—these practices by definition predated their naming as high-impact. They all have histories of coming to value outside of this label. Revaluing higher education is a practice of attunement to value otherwise.

Figure 2
Impact Bar
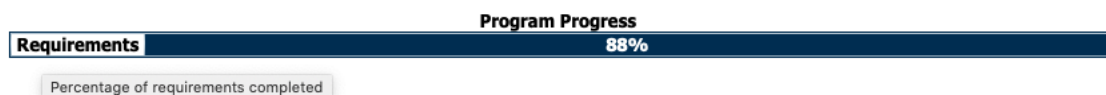
Revaluing as Attunement

One path to revalue college and university spaces is through re/valuing the infrathin, or what could also be called ordinary, practices of our universities. I talk of Manning's (2017) read of the infrathin here first through Kathleen Stewart's (2007) concept of the ordinary as a path to a later, fuller discussion of Manning. If the exceptional grabs our attention because of its deviation from expected norms, the ordinary conforms to our expectations. It does not grab our attention. It is the white noise of everyday life, the practices we take for granted, the unremarkable. Research that metricizes the value of college and university environments extracts otherwise ordinary moments of college life and converts them into discrete and recombinable units to create them as extra-ordinary. Even research on college and university environments that is qualitative in nature typically redounds to schemes of extracting meaningful information into codes, creating themes, and presenting the details of the ordinary via this extraction (Kuntz, 2015). The ordinary here does not stand alone. It is impossible to escape the fact that research in its currently valued form (including in these words) is written, and thus representational. Even research that centers the ordinary in college and university environments renders it representationally (Smithers et al., 2021). The ordinary here does stand as singular. The singular is that which escapes categorization (Deleuze, 1968/1994). The singular is not unique. Ordinary moments are singular combinations of what our social world can make at any moment, with the chance of something new emerging included. These moments did not exist in the past and will not exist again. When printed, they exist as artifacts; higher education research is a graveyard of artifacts. To revalue them is not to reprint them differently. Rather, it is to attune to them in the moments of their existence such that our time and energy in every moment is attuned to ordinary moments instead of spending that time and energy rendering the here and now into metrics (e.g., Wells et al., 2015). To the

extent higher education can attune to the ordinary in every moment, a path exists to re/value college and university environments beyond their value through metrics.

Revaluations of the ordinary are "attempts at touching what remains elusive. A quality in the between, an interval that cannot quite be articulated… the [quality] of an experience that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts" (Manning, 2017, p. 99). These moments seem inconsequential, but how could they be? Consequence—in one form, the outcomes that higher education values—cannot be anything outside of an accumulation of these moments. We overlook the ordinary in search of meaningful information through mathematical aggregations of these moments. The ordinary is not unique, and it is also not general. It is incapable of being quantitatively or qualitatively aggregated. The ordinary, like Manning's (2017) discussion of the infrathin, "cannot be generalized across experience: it is what makes experience singularly what it is, *here, now…* [it] is a grasping at the singularity of an interval too thin to define as such and yet thick with the texture of lived relation" (p. 99). The yet-to-come for research on college impact and higher education research is this: to enact a values system of the ordinary that spins its webs in everyday educational lives.

Figure 3
Ellucian DegreeWorks Product

Value as Affirmation

In current American higher education spacetimes, value returns the world through measurement. Value is a calculation; higher education research and practice values student success algorithms, cost-benefit analyses of time to degree, the cost of an additional major or minor, the human capital persons and countries gain through higher education, and so on (McMahon, 2017). When the value of higher education is understood through calculation, the work of education at the university becomes the work of *earning credits*, and the responsibility of the university is to *minimize wasted credits*. In such a system of values, to be recognized as a good student is to be recognizable as a proper combination of dividuals (Deleuze, 1992; Raunig, 2016), to be properly spreadsheetable, databased, computable, and algorithmitized.

Researchers and practitioners can and must come to value higher education in excess of measurement. There is no future beyond neoliberalism that is not also beyond our equation of measurement with knowledge and calculation with value. Value as and through affirmation provides a path for thinking of value beyond measurement. For Deleuze (1968/1994), affirmation is a dice throw that contains all enumerable possibilities as well as pure chance, and each repeated result is a singularity. Value as affirmation does not answer questions of value, it is a continual experimentation with the limits and expressions of value. For Manning (2016), this continual experimentation

> *creates value in the moving. It proceduralizes. It evaluates from the perspective of the event's necessity, activated by the pulse of affirmation that opens the event to its qualitative difference. Affirmation is a qualitative valuation that alters the field. Because its will to power is active and not reactive, it never works against.* (p. 217, emphasis added[1])

Value as affirmation does not seek to bound and make discrete, it seeks relentless experimentation and attunement to the imperceptible, the unexpected and unrecognizable singularities emitted from repetition. This is the spirit of *The L Word* theme song: "talking, laughing, loving, breathing / fighting, fucking, crying, drinking / riding, winning, losing, cheating / kissing, thinking, dreaming" (Betty, 2005, 0:59).[2] This is an affirmation of lesbians–an active valuation of lesbian that does not rely on defining lesbians by enumerating attributes and thus bounding an inside and an outside. These are not attributes, these are expressions, each its own throw of the dice, each singular. An affirmation of the value of higher education takes on this dice throw—a repetition of attempts at gradual betterment that expresses itself differently each time, with the chance of the world tucked in each throw, each next moment open to difference.

Figure 4
The Dividuated Student of the Neoliberal University

Impact Bar

A simple example of value in higher education is legible to anyone who uses DegreeWorks, a product distributed by longtime higher education database vendor Ellucian to be seamlessly integrated with its legacy student information system Banner. Figures 1 through 11 show the progress bar that DegreeWorks displays above its rendering of a student's academic record not by term but against the degree requirements of their declared major or program. This progress bar, currently labeled "Program Progress" in Old Dominion University's DegreeWorks production environment, gives a numerical percentage representing the percent of that degree a student has completed, as well as a bar spanning the frame from left to right depicting that percentage by the amount of the bar that is shaded in—in school colors.

What is the logic of percentage of degree completion? I am very familiar with this calculation, as are all who currently (or formerly, like myself) work in athletic academic support at American universities where their students' continuing eligibility to compete athletically depends on them earning a certain percentage of their degree each year. From this vantage point, the flaws in the logic of rendering progress through a percentage are obvious. First and foremost, a degree

---

[1] Emphasis added here via Fiona Apple (2020).

[2] This is surely a gay rights anthem for us normcore dykes of a certain age.

percentage calculation assumes all degree requirements come in the form of scalable credit hours and thus cannot adequately account for requirements such as a required grade point average, a comprehensive examination that takes place outside of coursework, residency requirements, and the like. It also visibilizes a premium on majors or programs with minimal required credits, as this maximizes the number of electives a student can take that counts toward their percentage of degree. Relatedly, the concept of degree percentage shifts the required format of knowledge at an institution to the specific digital platform in which the calculation occurs. Course substitutions made outside of this system do not exist. This was a good innovation in many ways. In my experience as a practitioner at a school that moved from no such digital system to DegreeWorks, this system cleared up some confusion around the time of graduation audits about past course substitutions given to students but lost in paper files and the like. Even when DegreeWorks does this task well, such systems cannot adequately account for student progress towards multiple credentials at once, e.g., a major and a minor. This problem inherent to the quantification of progress tracks with the current focus of American universities on four-year graduation in one major, with additional credentials acceptable so long as they do not delay graduation. Tracking the computed and received value of higher education through percentage of degree completed calculations displays for everyone with an educational need-to-know at the university the expressed values of the institution—the values of college impact, or machine-computable progress.

Impact logic also structures higher education research. Impact makes possible the common sense of equations of student retention from year to year and degree completion as measurable with student success. Within impact, student success can be tracked on a dashboard of measurable indicators: "*Data informed decisions for student success –now that's a good idea*" (Morris, 2016, p. 185, emphasis in original)*!* In our terms here, the progress bar and the dashboard logic that fuels it is less a progress bar and more an impact bar. If impact is a measurable gain in student outcomes, dashboards can achieve nothing greater than their rendering. If progress is instead Coach Bennett's formulation of gradual, often imperceptible betterment (Nike, 2020), there could be no such thing as a progress bar feature re/presenting student information system data on a given student. If progress names the value of Manning's (2017) focus on process, it names not this bar, or "the share of experience that is affirmed… because of what it is," but rather progress as "affirmed… because of how it affects experience in the making" (p. 103). A progress bar can never capture Coach Bennett's flavor of progress or Erin Manning's flavor of process. A progress bar is to a college education what a smartwatch is to an outdoor run: in attuning to the metrics, you miss not just the world around you but the myriad forms that progress takes otherwise.

Figure 5
The Value of Higher Education

Program Progress

Requirements — 83%

Progress

How can we come to value progress over a progress [impact] bar? For Manning (2016), "the unquantifiable within experience can only be taken into account if we begin with a mode of inquiry that refutes initial categorization" (p. 134). To develop value questions unanswerable by impact measurements and in excess of the assemblage of control, we must attune to the most insignificant practices around us. This is what Manning (2017) names "a pragmatics of the useless: the value does not reside in the form, but in the infrathin of form's incompletion" (p. 113). In higher education, this attunement incites research-creation and speculative futures through valuing ordinary, infrathin affects and practices that escape the capture of measurement.

Figure 6
Anxiety Machine

Program Progress

Requirements
55%
Percentage of requirements completed

To Value the Infrathin

The infrathin is within taken-for-granted structuring devices like high-impact practices. To value the infrathin is to explore the everyday flows of affect that later form the student data points and survey responses that adjudicate these structures—or not (cf. National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2007; 2020). For Manning (2017), a "politics of the infrathin" is

> *a quest, in registers more-than-human, for the most minor of variations. A commitment to the creation of modes of existence that practice a pragmatics of the useless. A care for ecologies of practice that value the effects of what can but barely be perceived, if it can be perceived at all. (p. 98)*

To approach the infrathin is to experiment with all of the fragments combined to form a college impact calculation. The infrathin are the moments that are embedded in and that escape the gaze of data-driven high-impact practice adjudicators (e.g. NSSE, 2020). Structures like high-impact practices drive change through higher education with the research-based promise of their scalability and portability (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). The infrathin presents an alternative to scale. Impact happens in a million everyday moments that tend to escape our attention, moments that we otherwise attempt to make linear and scale. Infrathin moments include the feeling of catching onto a concept you have been reading about for months, the completion of the first draft of a graded assignment, the heaviness of your eyelids as you try and stay awake during class, a fleeting realization that your studies are causing you to rethink your career path, the sound of a classroom before anyone else arrives, and so on. The infrathin privileges the impasse, the time in which linearity crumbles, and progress is relegated to a holding pattern (Berlant, 2011). The impasse "is a space of time lived without a narrative genre" (Berlant, 2011, p. 199); impasses within college and university communities are spaces of time lived without concepts like high-impact practices as structuring devices. To engage in experimentation with the infrathin moments of college and

university life is to explore their value in excess of their currency within an impact calculation.

Figure 7
Value as Negation

Liberal Education as Fabulation

If radical pedagogy is "the commitment to the creation of practices that foreground how learning creates its own value" (Manning, 2019, p. 48), liberal education is learning that "creates its own value" (p. 48). In higher education, the value of liberal education has been captured by various national initiatives and reconstituted through standardization and rubrics (e.g. AAC&U, 2020), even though college and university actors are always more than the sum of their rubric parts. To engage in liberal education is to be speculative and open to transformation (Smithers, 2019), or to be artful and thus "actively engaged in the differential of experience in the making—art must never seek to define in advance its value" (Manning, 2017, p. 105). To re/conceptualize higher education can be to re/invest in liberal education as artful practice.

The concept of liberal education looms large over discussions of value in higher education. It is the concept in wide circulation that hovers around the languages and the moments of Manning's implications for higher education. What would it look like to reconceptualize liberal education in Manning's terms, and set it loose to create new everydays? First, liberal education should not be seen as liberatory. Liberal education as an institutional practice has been, with slight variation with the times, considered a luxury for those with social and economic status since its modern provenance in the 19th century (Roth, 2013). In a precarious time where most Americans are forced to view education through a use-value calculation of how it will help put food on the table (in the least amount of time, for the lowest cost), liberal education is again still rendered as a luxury for those with a social status that places them outside of the precariat (Berlant, 2011). It is also not quite unique to wish to reconceptualize liberal education. In a time where the value of liberal education is set against the precarity of life in the United States, calls abound to rethink it (Farnham & Yarmolinsky, 1996), defend it (Zakaria, 2015), and to develop a new paradigm for it (Mulcahy, 2008). In this environment, it seems anachronistic to cling to liberal education for its *je ne sais quoi*. Liberal education is a concept from a world that no longer exists and to which no progressive educator wishes to return. And yet I am committed to re/conceptualizing liberal education precisely because it is a term in wide circulation and widely valued for this *je ne sais quoi* that, as I argue, is a shared value of imperceptible progress.

This move to re/conceptualize liberal education is not unique, it is singular. And perhaps amidst all the singular texts that take up this expression, something sparks. In fact, this is the work of affect. All affect means or does is spark this potential; it is "a body's *capacity* to affect and be affected" (Siegworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). Reconceptualizing liberal education in the terms of the infrathin

attunes us not to high-impact practices or other calculable values of higher education, but to the impact of infrathin practices. These are sparks that we sense in the moment and that linger with us after. Infrathin practices are always more than the sum of their parts. They produce outcomes insofar as they produce the world. They are sparks that open and close paths not previously considered. Liberal education does not flow from environments reverse-engineered to produce outcomes but rather from infrathin practices. The question of liberal education is not how to build a future transformation, but what is the transformation in the here and now? This is an unanswerable question. To be experimental, speculative, open to transformation—this is liberal education. Liberal education is not a search for the proper credits that sum to create it, it is affirmative through and through. For Manning (2016),

> *the affirmative path is rocky and unsteady. No well-trodden ruts here. This path doesn't know where it's headed. It promises nothing. It gives no credit, and repays no debt. This is what affirmation knows: credit is what keeps us indebted. (p. 205)*

Liberal education as affirmation is incompatible with regimes of accountability to outcomes, and yet paradoxically it lives in the fissures of these regimes. Manning (2016) describes just this quality of affirmation: "it is always wholly new, and always already present, for all time" (p. 225). Liberal education is not a function of particular academic programs in just the same way it is not best represented by any particular set of research procedures. *Liberal education* is not a statement in search of a countable, representable, scalable identity, but a question to be asked repeatedly without end, an affirmative question that of *what's next* with no *end* in attunement (Manning, 2016; Smithers, 2020). The pursuit of this affirmative question produces outcomes as a byproduct but does not seek them. It seeks the value of higher education, and unsatisfied, it seeks this without end.

If high-impact practices are a science of producing value(s) in higher education, a science that routinizes and affixes values to the limits of our past imaginations, infrathin practices are the art of producing values. The value of liberal education cannot be tied to outcomes; it must only be tied to infrathin experimentations. *Liberal education is* an artful student experience. Outcomes happen. Liberal education as fabulation is nothing more than this: "a dramatization born of joy that composes at the limits of experience in the making" (Manning, 2016, p. 227). Liberal education is a student, faculty, staff, constituent higher education experience as fabulation. There is no satisfying an algorithm of liberal education, adding up all the right credit in all the right places. There is only more, only the *what next*, only "…fighting, fucking, crying, drinking…" (Betty, 2005, 1:00).

Figure 8
Completion

Program Progress

| Requirements | 96% |

Liberal Education Progress Fabulations, or, Imperceptible Impacts

Most everyone at colleges and universities is interested in the college experience being a positive one for students. This desire gets expressed in many ways. The concept of college impact as quantifiable and machine computable has been around since at least the late 1960's and the early work of Alexander Astin (e.g. Panos & Astin, 1968). The idea of college as a place for the general progress of students, and relatedly communities, long predates this (e.g. Newman, 1852/1873). The concept of impact gestures to progress. Impact is movement, difference, a shift from inertia, value-added. But progress and impact, as a machine computable thing, have only become interchangeable in higher education research in the last 50 years. To what effect?

Machine-computable impact is the making-perceptible of progress. Measurement is the making perceptible of progress. This is how researchers and practitioners in higher education now feel comfortable making statements about what we know about higher education. Data is the standard of truth; all other forms of knowledge become anecdote. Impact attunes progress to perceptibility.

Progress is never fully perceptible. This is evident across domains and theoretical traditions, from student progress in college classrooms to faculty progress in college classrooms, staff progress through professional development, even to student progress on athletic fields.[3] Measurements like grades, student evaluation scores, and RBIs say something about a person's progress, sure. However, in very important ways, progress is imperceptible.[4] We are generally unaware of the point when concepts click within ourselves or in others. We cannot perceive the effect of reading one more chapter of a book. Others cannot measure the impact of being late to class just that one time in the seventh week, because the night was long and that class starts way too early. If progress at some point can be measured, these ordinary, infrathin points must too be part of this. And yet on their own, the imperceptibility of an occurrence like walking into class late with coffee in hand, or the ordinariness of murmurs of student buzz that emerge when a particular student starts speaking, renders them insignificant. Their imperceptibility devalues them in a world of outcomes and analytics. When this happens, two dangers emerge.

First, when we do not value imperceptible progress, our colorful worlds recede to black and white. Imperceptible progress is the texture of student experience. Losing some of the opportunities for these moments of imperceptible progress is part of the loss campus denizens feel in the extended national nightmare of the COVID-19 pandemic. These moments are not just anecdotes or insignificant infrathin moments. *They are progress; they are impact.*

---

[3] On this last point, athletic progress, I highly recommend Nike's (2020) *Next Long Run* guided run. Over the 42 minutes of this run, Coach Chris Bennett speaks convincingly to the point of this section - progress is many times imperceptible, and to hold yourself to a vision of progress defined only by measures like distance run or pace is to flatten experience. This section is as indebted to Coach Bennett's words in this run as they are to any other source.

[4] With Coach Bennett's thoughts as a starting line, there is a long tradition of the importance of the imperceptible in poststructural thought and works taking up this thought in education research (e.g., Braidotti, 2013; de Freitas, 2016; Deleuze, 1968/1994; Manning, 2017; St. Pierre, 2016).

Second, if we cannot attune to these moments as impact in all of their imperceptibility, we do as we do now. We engage in a decades-long assessment, then completion movement now under the banner of student success wherein we empty the contents of progress by reverse-engineering the student experience for perceptible progress. We focus on the making-perceptible instead of progress; we conflate making-perceptible with impact.

To take the affective dimensions of college impact seriously is to experience impact as potential that becomes reality as well as potential that hangs in the balance, waiting for its time to come—and not knowing the difference between the two. It is an impasse, a space where one outcome might become another—or become nothing at all (Berlant, 2011). Affect constitutes the spacetime prior to which students become individualized and measurable. Affect provides a means of valuing college and university spaces in excess of impact, high, low, or otherwise (Kuh, 2008; Manning, 2010; Massumi, 2018). Affect is the infrathin necessary for dashboard fabulations, or finally a *progress* bar.

Figure 9
What Else?

Program Progress

| Requirements | 75% |

Research-Creation, Affirmation, Higher Education

For Manning (2017), a pragmatics of the useless must, in part, activate value "each time anew" (p. 105). To value the useless in higher education is to dislodge value from static concepts like earnings-potential-by-declared-major and time-to-degree and develop new questions of value that radiate from each other without end. When the value of higher education is in the useless, measurements of value are not just undesirable, but now transformed into the unthinkable.

Practices of research-creation take seriously the inescapable ontogenetic power of research and an understanding of research as engaged in values creation and worldmaking. Research-creation "asks us to engage directly with a process which, in many cases, will or cannot be articulated in language" (Manning, 2016, p. 41). Research-creation is an artful practice, artful in this sense describing a way of thinking-being and neither a person (an artist) nor an object (a work of art; cf. Manning, 2016, p. 28). As such, research-creation in higher education is a way available to all actors, and involves a radical commitment to experimentation. It is neither theory nor practice, it is a practice that transcends boundaries of researcher, practitioner, and administrator. It does not seek to categorize, and in doing so, negate. Research-creation is a practice of affirmation.

Manning (2016) details affirmation through the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Affirmation as assembled "…does not yet know what the field can do, and so it neither predicts nor (de)values it in advance of its coming to be. Affirmation does not position: it experiments" (Manning, 2016, p. 201). Affirmation is an experimentation without

hypothesis and without preset conditions. It does not predict, it acts. Research-creation as affirmation does not negate practice through an emphasis on theory, and does not negate theory through an emphasis on practice, as it does not negate. It affirms. In this affirmation, research-creation "…does not see negation as its other. It operates in a completely different logic. Affirmation creates the trajectory, and from there the potential of the *what else* emerges" (Manning, 2016, p. 203). A theory-practice binary operates on negation – practice is *not theory*, and theory is *not practice*. Research that emphasizes its use to either side of this binary does so with an implicit *not the other side* attached. Affirmation asks research instead to simply experiment, and in doing so, create. Research in the theory-practice binary produces new worlds within this binary. Research-creation produces new worlds. In the work of research-creation as affirmation, these new worlds are transmutations, or transvaluations (Manning, 2016). Research-creation thus "creates new values, values that exceed use-value, values that have not yet invented their use. They don't yet know what they owe" (Manning, 2016, p. 218). Research-creation is a practice of the infrathin, the not-yet, the useless. Research-creation creates worlds in excess of the valuations that create our current dystopia wherein higher education is being vultured by capitalist administrators, vendors, policymakers, foundations, agenda-setting organizations, and faculty (Lorenz, 2012; Miller & Morphew, 2017)—and in which critics too act as vulture capitalists in supporting the very actions they (we) denounce.

Figure 10
What's This Progress?

To Value the Useless

Infrathin moments strung together ad infinitum might seem like a useless project to pursue—and if this were truly useless, that would be a complement. Valuing the infrathin, or more precisely attuning to the value of the infrathin, is to attune to practices and moments that otherwise escape our notice. It is to attune to practices and moments that we might otherwise label useless. If the infrathin is the location of liberal education, we must come to value the infrathin, and we must come to value the useless.

To be useless—this is not new. One can turn to Manning for contemporary thoughts on this, or instead to someone like Cardinal Newman (1852/1873), long cited on the value of a liberal education, who offered the following in the mid-19th century:

> *I am asked what is the end of University Education, and of the Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human*

mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward. (pp. 102-103)

For Manning, this is being useless. To be useless is to have no outside aim, or value defined in advance. In a pragmatics of the useless, "value must also be activated each time anew" (Manning, 2017, p. 105). To paraphrase NeNe Leakes, *its use is its use*.[5] For Arcade Fire (2010), to value the useless comes in part from valuing wasted time:

All those wasted hours we used to know / Spent the summer staring out the window / The wind it takes you where it wants to go… / Wasted hours, before we knew / Where to go, and what to do / Wasted hours that you make new / And turn into / A life that we can live. (0:08)

To value the useless is to value the now in all of its messy potential, in all of its waste—or—potential connection to our tangible aspirations. Valuing the useless produces "a life that we can live" (Arcade Fire, 2010, 1:31). Liberal education is attunement without end. To value the useless is to attune to imperceptible progress, and when it becomes perceptible, attuning again to the imperceptible. To think-act with Manning is to attune value to the useless and to live in affirmation. To research the useless is to live a liberal education and to revalue higher education one infrathin moment at a time. In these infrathin revaluations, we create spacetimes in excess of neoliberalism and control; we create the conditions for a different assemblage.

Figure 11
What Next?

Program Progress
Requirements | 89%

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their generative feedback. I would also like to thank the folks I have found myself in reading, writing, and feedback communities with these last few years. I depend on these spaces more than I can express, even as I have not been all that dependable myself recently. I hope to remain in queer debt to/with you all in the years to come.

References

American Association of Colleges and Universities. (2017). *On solid ground: VALUE report 2017.* http://aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/FINALFORPUBLICATIONRELEASEONSOLIDGROUND.pdf

---

[5] In the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* Season 6 reunion special, cast member NeNe Leakes dropped this knowledge that continues to circle the Internet: "I said what I said" (Leakes, 2019, 2:46).

Apple, F. (2020). I want you to love me [Song]. On *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*. Epic; Sony.

Arcade Fire. (2010). Wasted time [Song]. On *The Suburbs*. Merge; City Slang; Mercury.

Astin, A. W. (1970a). The methodology of research on college impact, part one. *Sociology of Education, 43*(3), 223–254. https://doi.org/10.2307/2112065

Astin, A. W. (1970b). The methodology of research on college impact, part two. *Sociology of Education, 43*(4), 437–450. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111842

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism.* Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394716

Betty. (2005). The L Word theme [Song]. On *The L Word: The Second Season, Music From the Showtime Original Series.* Tommy Boy.

Bozalek, V., & Winberg, C. (2018). The ethics of care and academic development. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 32*(6), 1-5. http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2764

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.

Burnett, L. D. (2020, October 15). Right-wing trolls attacked me. My administration buckled. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/right-wing-trolls-attacked-me-my-administration-buckled

Cukier, K., & Mayer-Schönberger, V. (2013, May 31). The dictatorship of data. *MIT Technology Review.* https://www.technologyreview.com/2013/05/31/178263/the-dictatorship-of-data/

de Freitas, E. (2016). Calculating matter and recombinant subjects: The infinitesimal and the fractal fold. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, 16*(5), 462–470. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616655764

Deleuze, G. (1988). *Foucault*. University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1986) https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350252004

Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the societies of control. *October, 59*: 3–7. https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828

Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition*. Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1968)

Dwyer, C. A., Millett, C. M., & Payne, D. G. (2015). *A culture of evidence: Postsecondary assessment and learning outcomes: Recommendations to policymakers and the higher education community*. Educational Testing Service. http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED500004

Ellis, L. (2020, December 9). 'A tremendous amount of fear': Will major cuts threaten research universities' work? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-tremendous-amount-of-fear-will-major-cuts-threaten-research-universities-work

Farnham, N. H., & Yarmolinsky, A. (Eds.) (1996). *Rethinking liberal education.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195097726.001.0001

Giroux, H. (2014). *Neoliberalism's war on higher education.* Haymarket Books.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure.* Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394358

Hoover, E. (2020, July 29). Our relationship with tests is unraveling. Why is everyone so conflicted about it? *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/crisis-is-changing-the-debate-over-standardized-exams-but-our-relationship-with-them-is-as-conflicted-as-ever

James, W. (1956). *The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy*. Dover. (Original work published 1897) https://doi.org/10.2307/2175898

Jones, E. (2018, April 13). How The Wire became the greatest TV show ever made. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180412-how-the-wire-became-the-greatest-tv-

show-ever-made

Kezar, A., DePaola, T., & Scott, D. T. (2019). *The gig academy: Mapping labor in the neoliberal university.* The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature.* National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/Kuh_Team_Report.pdf

Kuh, G. D., & O'Donnell, K. (2013). *Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Kuntz, A. M. (2015). *The responsible methodologist: Inquiry, truth-telling, and social justice.* Left Coast Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315417332

Leakes, S. (2019, August 28). *RHOA: "I said what I said!" | Season 6* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-7Fvb_OsDg

Lorenz, C. (2012). If you're so smart, why are you under surveillance? Universities, neoliberalism, and new public management. *Critical Inquiry, 38*(3), 599–629. https://doi.org/10.1086/664553

Macgilchrist, F. (2019). Cruel optimism in edtech: When the digital data practices of educational technology providers inadvertently hinder educational equity. *Learning, Media and Technology, 44*(1), 77-86. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2018.1556217

Manning, E. (2010). Always more than one: The collectivity of *a life*. *Body & Society, 16*(1), 117-127. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09354128

Manning, E. (2016). *The minor gesture*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv111jhg1

Manning, E. (2017). For a pragmatics of the useless, or the value of the infrathin. *Political Theory, 45*(1), 97–115. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591715625877

Manning, E. (2019). Propositions for a radical pedagogy, or how to rethink value. In K. M. Leander & C. Ehret (Eds.), *Affect in Literacy Learning and Teaching: Pedagogies, Politics, and Coming to Know* (pp. 43–49). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351256766-4

Massumi, B. (2018). *99 theses on the revaluation of value: A postcapitalist manifesto.* University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452958484

Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

McKay, A. (Director). (2015). *The big short* [Film]. Regency Enterprises; Plan B Entertainment.

McMahon, W. W. (2017). *Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education.* The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Miller, G. N. S., & Morphew, C. C. (2017). Merchants of optimism: Agenda-setting organizations and the framing of performance-based funding for higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 88*(5), 754–784. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2017.1313084

Morris, L. V. (2016). Mining data for student success. *Innovative Higher Education, 41*(3), 185–185. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10755-016-9367-6

Mulcahy, D. G. (2008). *The educated person: Toward a new paradigm for liberal education.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Musoba, G. D., Jones, V. A., & Nicholas, T. (2018). From open door to limited access: Transfer students and the challenges of choosing a major. *Journal of College Student Development 59*(6), 716–733. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0067

Newman, J. H. (1873). *The idea of a university: Defined and illustrated.* Basil Montagu Pickering.

(Original work published 1852)

Nike. (2020). Next long run. In *Nike Run Club* (Version 7.0) [Mobile app]. App Store. https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/nike+-running/id387771637?mt=8

National Survey of Student Engagement. (2007). *Experiences that matter: Enhancing student learning and student success: Annual report 2007*. Center for Postsecondary Research. https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/23412/NSSE_2007_Annual_Report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

National Survey of Student Engagement. (2020). *Engagement Insights: Survey Findings on the Quality of Undergraduate Education– Annual Results 2019.* Center for Postsecondary Research. https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/25321/NSSE_2019_Annual_Results.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Panos, R. J., & Astin, A. W. (1968). Attrition among college students. *American Educational Research Journal, 5*(1), 57–72. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312005001057

Raunig, G. (2016). *Dividuum: Machinic capitalism and molecular revolution* (Vol. 1). Semiotext(e).

Roth, M. (2013). Pragmatic liberal education. *New Literary History, 44*(4), 521–538. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2013.0036

Saraiya, S. (2017, June 1). 15 years later, 2017 needs its own 'The Wire.' *Variety.* https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/the-wire-anniversary-15-years-1202450469/

Sheffield, R. (2016, September 21). 100 greatest TV shows of all time. *Rolling Stone.* https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/

Siegworth, G. J., & Gregg, M. (2010). An inventory of shimmers. In M. Gregg & G. J. Siegworth (Eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (pp. 1–25). Duke University Press.

Simon, D., Colesberry, R. F., & Kostroff Noble, N., (Executive Producers). (2002-2008). *The wire* [TV series]. Blown Deadline Productions; HBO.

Smithers, L. E. (2019). How should institutions of higher education define and measure student success? Student success as liberal education escapes definition and measurement. In P. Magolda, M. Baxter-Magolda, & R. Carducci (Eds.), *Contested Issues in Troubled Times: Student Affairs Dialogues About Equity, Civility, and Safety* (pp. 127-137). Stylus Publishing.

Smithers, L. (2020). Student success as preemption: Predictive constructions of futures-to-never-come. *Futures, 124,* 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2020.102639

Smithers, L., Fischer, H., & Stafford, L. K. (2021). Ordinary engagements: The everyday creation of a high-impact practice. *Journal of College Student Development, 62*(4), 405-421. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0044

St. Pierre, E. A. (2016). The empirical and the new empiricisms. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, 16*(2), 111–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616636147

Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822390404

Wells, R. S., Kolek, E. A., Williams, E. A., & Saunders, D. B. (2015). "How we know what we know": A systematic comparison of research methods employed in higher education journals, 1996-2000 v. 2006-2010. *Journal of Higher Education, 86*(2), 171–195. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2015.0006

Zakaria, F. (2015). *In defense of a liberal education*. W. W. Norton.

Zembylas, M. (2021). Affect, biopower, and 'the fascist inside you': The (un-)making of microfascism in schools and classrooms. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 53*(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2020.1810780