

Is the University Really a Community?

As the season of goodwill comes around again, warm words about collegiality and fellowship have been dutifully corralled into all-staff missives from university leaders. But in an era of management, metrics, and industrial unrest, does the image of the academy as a commonwealth of scholars still bear scrutiny? Seven academics have their say.

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Closing the Book

For Christmas this year, my university is closing the campus bookstore.

Astoundingly, given the significance of the event and the impending arrival of the festive season, this is not general knowledge among academic staff. Most of my colleagues, still stuck under an avalanche of marking, have not yet learned that by the time they emerge, Omnia Books will only exist in the archive.

Indeed, I only found out by accident, when, last month, I purchased a tin of body glitter and a permanent marker (which is another story).

"This marker is half price," the cashier said. "We're shutting down." The woman, Dot, according to her name tag, was sixty-something, with oversized glasses and silver-white hair pulled back in a tight, no-nonsense bun.

Before I could respond, she corrected herself. "We're *being* shut down by management." She scanned the marker. "No money, apparently." Dot adjusted her glasses. "Did you know the university just purchased a A\$1 million flight simulator?"

In hindsight, news of the bookstore's closure should not have surprised me. The University Co-op Bookshop chain went into voluntary administration in 2019, and though it was eventually bought by Booktopia, Australia's leading online book retailer, during last February's peak in Covid infections, the sale did not include the Co-op's physical stores.

The Co-op initially operated from the garage of the two University of Sydney students who founded it in 1958, but failed ultimately to uphold its promise of affordable access to textbooks. In the mid-2000s, when membership maxed in the millions and the company managed over 50 stores, the Co-op's chief marketing officer smugly reflected on the brand's durability: "Our heritage has been, and will always be, universities."

Of course, he could not have known that two decades later a global pandemic would empoison an already deadly concoction of high-price commodities, low in-store sales, and soaring shipping costs and delays. In the US, according to the American Booksellers Association, one independent bookstore has closed each week since the pandemic began.

The university bookstore is one of the last remaining cultural hubs that genuinely supports the core business of the academy: knowledge production and transmission. It is not just a shared space for students and academics, but also the general public.

Bookshops, as community centres, are gathering places that have long been allied with cafes and libraries – informal and inclusive spaces that embody the community’s heart and vitality. As public venues that foster creative interaction and civic debate, bookstores welcome locals and strangers alike. And books themselves are magical objects that can forge bonds, bridge divides, and mediate the sometimes acrimonious relations between town and gown.

Indeed, in regional areas, the university bookstore is often just as important to the township as the institution itself. As the author Neil Gaiman writes in *American Gods* “A town isn’t a town without a bookstore.”

Certainly, in Toowoomba, a regional city in west Queensland, Omnia Books is the only retailer of affordable art supplies and specialty stock, and one of the few suppliers of dissecting kits, lab coats, and sphygmomanometers (blood pressure monitors, since you ask). STEM students and art students, often separated by an epistemological gulf, will be united by grief when the bookshop closes its doors.

Even less forgivable is the neglect of hard-working staff, who are losing their jobs at Christmas. Dot has worked at the bookshop for 15 years; she has called in sick twice: once when her dog died, and once when she fell down the stairs and broke her wrist. “It was just a hairline fracture,” she says. “Nothing major.”

Of course, there will be consequences for the plutocracy too. Those who find the coffee on campus too weak or too strong will be down in the dumps, since the bookstore, as Dot reminds me, is the only shop on-site that sells sugar and milk.

“That’s all management really care about,” she says. “You know, that’s what someone said to me: ‘Where will I buy my milk?’”

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