College Leadership Crisis: The Philip Dolly Affair—a satire of contemporary American community colleges

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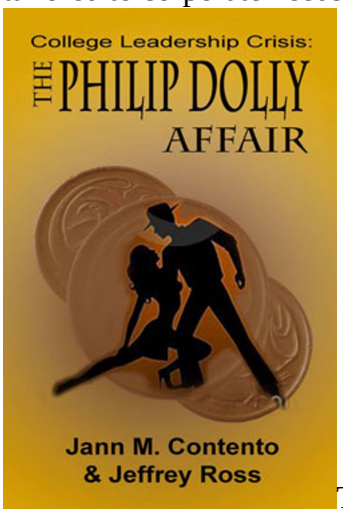
By Jann M. Contento and Jeffrey Ross, *Rogue Phoenix Press: Salem, Oregon, 2011, 263 pages*

The Obama administration, building on the education policies of the second Bush administration, has changed the community college mission, with disastrous consequences. The original mission of providing a quality higher education for students who either could not afford a four-year college or university, or meet the requirements, or both, has largely been scrapped in favor of a competitive funding model that turns community colleges into little more than training centers tailored to corporate needs.



The novel *College Leadership Crisis: the Philip Dolly Affair*, by Jann M. Contento and Jeffrey Ross, is largely successful in satirizing this corporate model. The broadly drawn administration and faculty characters in the book accurately represent the "types" to be found on community college campuses. The novel also exposes the infiltration of corporate thinking and language into the community college culture. It uses a flashback to Argentina in the 1960s to contrast the political awareness of an earlier time and place with that of a contemporary American community college.

The novel's first part, largely devoted to satirizing people and events in contemporary community colleges, introduces Dr. Phillip Dolly, who has just been hired as president of Copperfield Community College (CCC), New Mexico. Contento and Ross portray the conflict between Dolly's vision of turning Copperfield into a four-year college and selling it to a proprietary online institution and a local movement to turn CCC into a vocational training institution.

On a more serious note, the middle section traces Dolly's thinking back to his father, Michael Staten, who did contract work for a US oil company in Argentina in the early 1960s. Staten meets and falls in love with an Argentine woman named Celeste, who, along with her college friends, introduces him to "socialist" ideas, including free college education and the nationalization of the oil industry.

That nationalization leads to Mike's company recalling him to America, but not before he has a child with Celeste. A Minnesota couple (the Dollys) eventually adopt unmarried Celeste's two-year-old and name him Phillip. Within a month of his son being hired by Copperfield Community College years later, Mike Staten bequeaths $5 million to the school, creating suspicion about the real reason for Philip Dolly's hiring.

The final section depicts Dolly's dismissal from Copperfield due to the local movement's pressure to turn CCC into a vocational training, post-secondary institution. The conclusion offers three alternative ways of interpreting the novel.

The co-authors draw the administrators and faculty

members true to life. The title character is self-centered and corporate to the bone. Dolly drives a Cadillac to work, wants to privatize Copperfield and worries about "stakeholder satisfaction" and "future market penetration," as well as "brand recognition and sustainability." Hyperbole is a staple of satire, but in this case, using the business jargon that has polluted academia is effective.

Bringing the commercial model to academia has also attracted many figures from the corporate world. Having lost her position in business, Professor Julia Flowers, like many of her ilk, feels interacting with community college students is beneath her and teaches online courses whenever possible. She asks a colleague at one point, "What's wrong with these people? They're half asleep. They can't follow instructions, can't read, can't write, can't come to class.... When I teach regular old classes [i.e., non-online courses] I have to interact directly with the, the, the students."

The novel's middle section uses the example of Argentina under president and dictator Juan Peron (1946-1955 and 1972-1974) to highlight the lack of informed political discussion and activity on contemporary American campuses.

The Peron "myth" is retold by another American contractor who tells Mike Staten that the dictator had good intentions, but his effort to establish an economically independent Argentina by subsidizing its growth was undone when the bill for the subsidies came due. This is the self-serving, "free enterprise" view of Peron.

Populist illusions about Peron are later dispelled when Celeste and a group of her friends tell Mike that while the Argentine leader made "some progress," this progress was achieved at the expense of the rights for the majority of the population and enforced by dictatorial policies and actions.

The authors also satirize the promotion of turning community colleges into four-year colleges, the "retention of students at all costs" policy and the "student as customer" mantra by likening Dolly (and similar community college CEOs) to "fatigue-wearing dictators [e.g., Peron] who vowed love for the people, but grew rich and powerful at their expense." One should add that the corporate interests behind the CEOs are growing richer and more powerful as well.

It must be said that the three students presented in the novel reproduce the worst stereotypes. One can't read and "is basically lazy"; the second is a middle-aged male who has been on campus for as long as anyone can remember, but doesn't seem to be taking classes; and the third is a middle-age single mother of four, who made bad decisions and has spent nearly eight years trying to complete a massage therapy program. The authors fail to consider the social forces that might have driven her to make those decisions.

These types can be found on community college campuses, but the majority of students, while perhaps not as academically or financially prepared as their four-year college peers, are taking full course loads (at least 12 hours of credit per semester), working wherever they can find a job and sometimes trying to raise children.

The authors have chosen a trite and tired postmodernist trick for their ending—I.e., three alternate endings are offered. Not only has this type of conclusion been done to death, it simply doesn't follow from the rest of the novel.

There has not been an abundance of social satire in the US in recent years, so it is refreshing to see the authors bring this literary genre to the subject of higher education and its perversion. This isn't an entirely satisfying effort, but it is a step in the right direction.