There is a malaise creeping into the American tertiary education system. Shared governance of the academe is slowly becoming a dinosaur. Tuition costs are increasing at triple the general inflation rate. Tenure-track faculty are replaced by term teachers. Massive open online courses are mushrooming. And universities in the United States are no longer the envy of the world. Those interconnected vagaries will be raised in turn, but first the genesis, let there be light.

The modern autonomous university traces its roots to the University of Bologna (1088), University of Paris (1150), University of Oxford (1167), and University of Modena (1175). Those followed the sixth century Christian cathedral schools and the Islamic Al-Azhar University (975), which emphasized the scholarly studies of their respective religions.

Today’s universities are institutions of higher education and research that grant academic degrees in a variety of subjects and provide both undergraduate and graduate education. They can be public or private, with a handful of the latter type being for-profit institutes, a neo-circumstance.

The word “university” is derived from the Latin universitas magistrorum et scholarium, which means community of teachers and scholars. Not community of teachers, scholars, and countless vice presidents. Universities are self-regulating guilds that determine the qualifications of their members. The original secular universities were specialized associations of students and teachers with collective legal rights usually guaranteed by charters granted by princes, prelates, or the towns in which they were located.

To commemorate the 900th anniversary of founding the University of Bologna—which was the first to adapt an academic charter guaranteeing academic freedom, Constitutio
Habita—a 430 European university rectors signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum*. More universities have been added as signatories to the original 1988 document. In 2014, the new total reached 776 universities from 81 countries.

**Faculty involvement**

The American Association of University Professors issued its first statement on university governance in 1920. The statement emphasized the importance of faculty involvement in personnel decisions, selection of administrators, preparation of budgets, and determination of educational policies. Refinements were introduced in subsequent years, culminating in the development of the 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities.

The ideal of faculty participation in the academe’s affairs is becoming a distant memory. University budgets are decided solely by administrators. Hiring occasionally comes top-down with little or no regard to faculty input. Faculty senates are declawed and derided by some administrators as “debate clubs” or, worse, “sandboxes for faculty.” Instead of shared governance, a president with little academic experience and a governing board with none now mostly decide university affairs. In public universities, the state governor politically selects such boards. In a few states, the general public elects university board members. In either case, mostly businessmen and businesswomen—some of whom would like nothing more than to run each university as a successful business—constitute many boards. There are serious pitfalls with that sincere, albeit misguided, effort.

Following the 2012 debacle of the board’s firing of the University of Virginia president, a professor there, Siva Vaidhyanathan, articulated the situation best:

“In the 19th century, robber barons started their own private universities when they were not satisfied with those already available. But Leland Stanford never assumed his university should be run like his railroad empire. Andrew Carnegie did not design his institute in Pittsburgh to resemble his steel company. The University of Chicago, John D. Rockefeller’s dream come true, assumed neither his stern Baptist values nor his monopolistic strategies. That’s because for all their faults, Stanford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller knew what they didn’t know.

In the 21st century, robber barons try to usurp control of established public universities to impose their will via comical management jargon and massive application of ego and hubris. At least that’s what’s been happening at one of the oldest public universities in the United States—Thomas Jefferson’s dream come true, the University of Virginia.”

In another university, the provost decided to disband the faculty senate as a protest for their perceived slow pace, or perhaps as a revenge for choosing a senate VP who earlier pushed for a faculty vote of no confidence in the university’s president. In yet another, following a time-consuming and expensive search for a new provost, the president decided to form a new search committee instead of selecting one of the three selected as finalists by the original committee, and those three successfully completed campus visits. It appears that the president’s candidate didn’t pass the original committee’s scrutiny. Democracy is slow and messy, but as Winston Churchill once said, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”
Sky-high tuition
Related to the issue of governance is the rapid rise in tuition, which is currently running at least three times the general inflation. Add to that, few schools charge additional tuition for each credit a student attempts above an arbitrarily defined threshold, so-called market-based tuition pricing structure. This threshold is now 12-credit hours per semester, which hits particularly hard engineering students who typically have to take 15–18 credit hours per semester in order to graduate in four years.

Administrators blame the rising cost of faculty salary and benefits. But in the meantime, universities are replacing tenure-track faculty with adjunct or term faculty. Those earn near minimum wages and for part timers no benefits such as pension and health insurance. A recent study from the University of California Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education indicated that nearly a quarter of the 400,000 part-time college faculty in the U.S. need some government help to get by. In some institutes, the number of contingent (non-tenure-track, term, adjunct, and part-time) faculty approaches 76% of the total. Faculty, on the other hand, blame the inflated tuition cost on the increasing number of administrators (as a percentage of faculty or students) and their generous compensation packages.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are also seen as future cost-cutting tools. In 2012, Sebastian Thrun, a former Stanford computer scientist and founder of the MOOC company Udacity, predicted, with a bit of hyperbole, that within half a century the world will have just ten traditional universities left. On the other hand, Donald Verene argued that online education rests on a mistake, which confuses information for education and training for teaching. A forum organized by the editor of Academic Questions presented the pros and cons of MOOCs, but the cons gained the upper hand.

Regardless of the culprit for high tuition cost, are the students at least getting their money’s worth? The answer is a resounding no. In an influential book, Allan Bloom described how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students. Twenty-four years after Bloom’s bombshell, Richard Arum pointed out that 36% of the student population shows no discernible change in cognitive skills after four years in college. Most recently, Kevin Carey deflated the myth that the United States has the world’s best colleges. He argued that while it is true that some of the best universities in the world are in the U.S., our universities on average are no longer producing the best graduates. For example, in a standardized math test, the United States along with Hungary and Lithuania battle it out for last place among developed countries.

The issues discussed herein have been researched elsewhere even outside of the Americas. The last reference features an author from Norway and a second from England. They analyze “how the dominant ideals about the actual organizational patterns of university governance have changed over the past few decades away from the classical notion of the university as a republic of scholars towards the idea of the university as a stakeholder organization.” The issues are not unique to engineering or other academic disciplines, and apply, perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, to other parts of the world including the MENA region. The U.S. is merely a canary in a coalmine. The matter is broadly documented, and it is about time to have a dialogue between all ‘stakeholders’ to seek solutions.

Mary McCarthy prefaced her 1951 novel “The Groves of Academe” with a quote from Horace’s Epodes, Atque inter silvas academi quaerere verum (And Seek for Truth in the Garden of
Academus). What is the cure for the aforementioned malaise? I invite the reader to chip in elixirs that may bring back the groves of academe.

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Notes
1 This date is disputed at least in the West. The official web site for the university, http://www.azhar.edu.eg/pages/history2.htm and http://www.azhar.edu.eg/pages/history.htm (in Arabic), lists the following dates: construction begun 971 AD; mosque opened for prayer 973; beginning of theological instructions 975; chartered as an institute of higher education 988; expanded beyond religious studies 1961.
2 Carlo Malagola, Statuti delle Università e dei Collegi dello Studio Bolognese (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1888).
4 http://www.magna-charita.org/cms/cmspage.aspx?pageUid={8e9114fe-86db-4d26-b9d7-167c03d479a4}.