

# Activists at Play for \$52,000 a Year as Woke School Goes Broke



by Bruce Bawer

Until I saw the new documentary *The Unmaking of a College: The Story of a Movement*, I wasn't aware of the record set at Hampshire College in 2019 for the longest college sit-in in American history. In fact, I wasn't more than vaguely aware of Hampshire, a liberal-arts college that's located in Amherst, Massachusetts, and that currently has about 750 students. After having seen the film, which was directed by Amy Goldstein and will premiere in New York on February 11, I'm sure my ignorance of Hampshire would come as a surprise to a great many of the people there – because the prevailing view on campus, if this movie is to be believed, is that Hampshire is the center of the universe.

One thing that purportedly makes it so special is its history of robust activism. Salman Hameed, a professor of integrated science and humanities, declares with a big grin, "Hampshire is designed for protest!" One student reflects, "The history of activism at Hampshire is, I think, integral to the school." Another student agrees: "We at Hampshire are different than other schools because we expect a say at the table." The filmmaker Ken Burns, a Hampshire alum, recalls occupying the university president's office back when he was a student. "I

don't remember why," he laughs. And, after all, why *should* he remember? At places like Hampshire – which was founded in 1970, at the height of the student-protest era – it's not the specific issue that matters. It's the protest itself. *I protest, therefore I am.*

To be sure, no one at Hampshire will soon forget the issue that led to the record-breaking 2019 sit-in. It was existential: Hampshire was going broke. And this, note well, is a place that in the 1970s, as Burns recalls, was "the most expensive college on Earth." Today, average tuition is \$52,000 a year – just \$2,000 less than Harvard. And yet by 2019, it had been plain for years that Hampshire was headed for financial disaster. On several occasions, trustees had to write big checks at the last minute to keep the place going. Now, with the most generous of these trustees about to leave the board, the new college president, Miriam "Mim" Nelson, suddenly spoke of looking for a "strategic partner" to guarantee Hampshire's long-term existence and suggested that she might not enroll a fall 2019 class. The announcement caused shock and outrage – which intensified when it emerged that she'd been working for months behind the scenes on a deal to fold Hampshire into the nearby University of Massachusetts.

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At some colleges, a merger like this wouldn't be such a big deal. At Hampshire it was. Not just because of its proud history of protest, but also because of its status as an "experimental" institution – read: playground for underachieving rich kids – with no faculty departments, no required courses, no grades, and (since 2014) no standardized tests required of applicants. In a speech delivered shortly after her appointment, Mim reassured students of her determination to preserve Hampshire's "experimental" profile: "What drew me to Hampshire was really the history of your

experimentation.” As an example of this kind of education in action, the documentary introduces us to a student whose thesis is entitled “Theater for Social Change with an Emphasis on Agricultural Politics.” (We get a glimpse of her choreography: a dance by people wearing cow heads.) In the film, several students admit that they just wouldn’t feel comfortable in a more traditional academic setting; one of them, a girl with pink hair, says that she loves Hampshire because she can be around “other weird kids like me.”

To save their college, the students – or, at least, some of them (the participation rate is never made clear) – begin a sit-in in Mim’s office. “I don’t think she understands what Hampshire stands for,” one of them complains. They demand “shared governance” and “overall equity” and applaud themselves for creating “beautiful moments of community building” within the sit-in’s “non-hierarchical structure” while “re-envisioning the college” and being engaged in the “pursuit of self-knowledge.” They chant: “Hampshire united / will never be divided!” They hang a banner reading “Community is revolution!” Hampshire students, they brag, “practice seeking the change they hope to see.” (One thing they’ve definitely learned at Hampshire, obviously, is to parrot leftist clichés.) At one decisive point during the sit-in, a boy in a wig who calls himself Annie – and who, clad in a ravishing, skin-tight strapless white gown, looks as if he’s on his way to the Oscars – brutally tells Mim that her office is no longer hers: “We have no confidence in your leadership of the school, so I don’t think we consider that your space anymore!”

The documentary doesn’t mention it, but the 2019 sit-in wasn’t the first large-scale protest at Hampshire in recent years. On April 19, 2016, [according](#) to the *Washington Post*, classes were canceled so that students could foregather at the gym and “share personal and graphic stories of racism and sexual assault they’d experienced on campus.” One student recalled,

“People were laying [sic] on the floor, sobbing.” After the election of Donald Trump, college administrators, in response to student demands, lowered the American flag to half-mast; when somebody pulled it down and burned it up, it was decided not to fly the flag at all pending “dialogue” about the subject. In 2017, a pro-Second Amendment speech was canceled at the last minute because the subject was “very controversial.”

But the sheer length of the 2019 sit-in put it in a class by itself. It lasted 79 days, until Mim finally resigned. Hampshire acquired a new president, Ed Wingenbach, formerly of Wisconsin’s Ripon College, who identifies himself as a specialist in “radical democracy.” The documentary invites us to celebrate the student protesters for having won a magnificent victory over a malevolent administrator who – for reasons that aren’t entirely clear but that, we’re meant to conclude, were undoubtedly nefarious – sought to destroy a legendary and beloved temple of experimental pedagogy. Hampshire, we learn, admitted only 13 freshmen in the fall of 2019 but was able to take in a full freshman class in 2020 – a turnaround made possible by an intensive fundraising campaign that has so far brought in \$33 million. Since this is slightly less than Hampshire’s annual budget, the best that can be said about the college’s current finances is that it’s treading water.

But for the time being, anyway, experimental education remains alive and well at Hampshire. And under Wingenbach, it’s become super-woke. “The four challenges that our curriculum is built around right now,” Wingenbach [proclaimed](#) last month after a major curricular overhaul, “are disrupting and dismantling white supremacy, how to understand truth in a post-truth era, how do we act on our responsibilities in the face of a changing climate, and how might creative work address trauma, collective and individual trauma.” In short, Hampshire would appear to be doing a better job than ever of not preparing

young people for profitable and productive careers. No wonder “education expert” Andrew Delbanco is seen wringing his hands in this film over the likely disappearance of colleges like Hampshire in the years to come. Bottom line: if you want to waste a whole lot of money and be supporting your kids well into their 50s, ship them off to Hampshire while it’s still there.

First published in the [\*American Spectator\*](#).