ACS Readers Guide for Bryan Alexander’s *Universities on Fire*

*Composed by Brandon Inabinet, based on the book group representing Centenary College, University of Richmond, Spellman College, and Furman University.*

In this book, Alexander will cover what seems to be nearly all possible responses of higher education to all the various scenarios of global warming up to 2100, with special emphasis on weather disasters (floods, hurricanes, and fires). Alexander tries to speak to all 30,000 institutions of higher education globally (220 million students, 6 million faculty).

Chapter 1 discusses displacement by climate refugees, both of students and of institutions.

* Would a liberal arts college play any significant role of taking in students, when large, public institutions seem better poised to serve transfer credits and students (like Tulane after Katrina) who only need temporary and online transfer?
* If liberal arts colleges like Eckerd College, close to sea level, need to move, what is their most likely plan of action? Can we think of other examples of total displacement/crisis and how our own universities might respond?

Chapter 2 discusses research, especially different areas of campus will respond. Alexander leads with the sciences, then humanities and social sciences, and finally fine arts and emergent fields specifically attuned to addressing climate (like environmental communication).

* Alexander mentions how the profile of these programs within the higher education landscape will change, and likely grow as they are responsive to the growing crisis. Is your field of research well positioned to serve this growing role? Is it open to innovation, or does it tend to prioritize tradition?
* Should academics still engage in conference travel, contributing to emissions? Even if these are a small percentage of overall emissions, do faculty lose moral authority when we fly globally to share research perhaps only with a small audience in our field? What does an “un-conference” research agenda look like, reflecting on the lessons of COVID? Should we make an argument for these pathways to our tenure and promotion committees?

Chapter 3 centers teaching, chapter 4 centers town gown relationships, and chapter 5 addresses the global stakes. These chapters were less provocative, especially given how Alexander could have discussed liberal arts faculty, and how community and place-based learning was a model that could “scale up” from our institutions to others. Given his global audience, Alexander probably stayed away from centering the elite possibilities in American higher education. Still, certain significant questions arise.

* Climate disaster response simulations, alongside data dashboards and data simulations dashboards, seem especially important. Do consortiums like ACS have a role in helping put together these connections between the metrics people, the human needs people, and the pedagogy leaders who could prototype and test these?
* Alexander digs into local, state, and national politics in this section. With some precision, he explains how persons outside higher education, whether local to our campus, or politicians and voters, might view our institutions negatively, especially for our elitism: high resource usage, as well as our moralizing about the issue as things get worse. How can higher education both point a way forward through the climate crisis to come AND make ourselves indispensable against these political attacks on our budgets and resources?

Chapters 6 and 7 form a conclusion. Chapter 6 presents the best and worst scenarios given available science regarding our climate future up to 2100, while Chapter 7 empowers action along these lines. These chapters could be assigned alone to stimulate good discussion.

* Was Alexander naïve in terms of how governments may or may not act? Will politicians still be able to dismiss climate change and treat separate disasters as expensive happenstance, instead of being forced to act significantly and globally (for better or worse)?
* Will higher education be generous and overcome the competitive model we’ve encouraged so far? Especially in terms of climate displacement, can we imagine small liberal arts schools having “the budget” (the will) to take in and temporarily house without tuition gains?
* Most importantly and conclusively, will higher education come out of the next 75 years looking like heroes (for helping cope and proposing major solutions), as survivors (who made it through a tough era), or as villains (for continuing to overuse resources, for promising students careers premised on a GDP growth mindset in a world that does not reflect this, and/or hypocrisy in our moralizing and finger-pointing while the world burns)?