

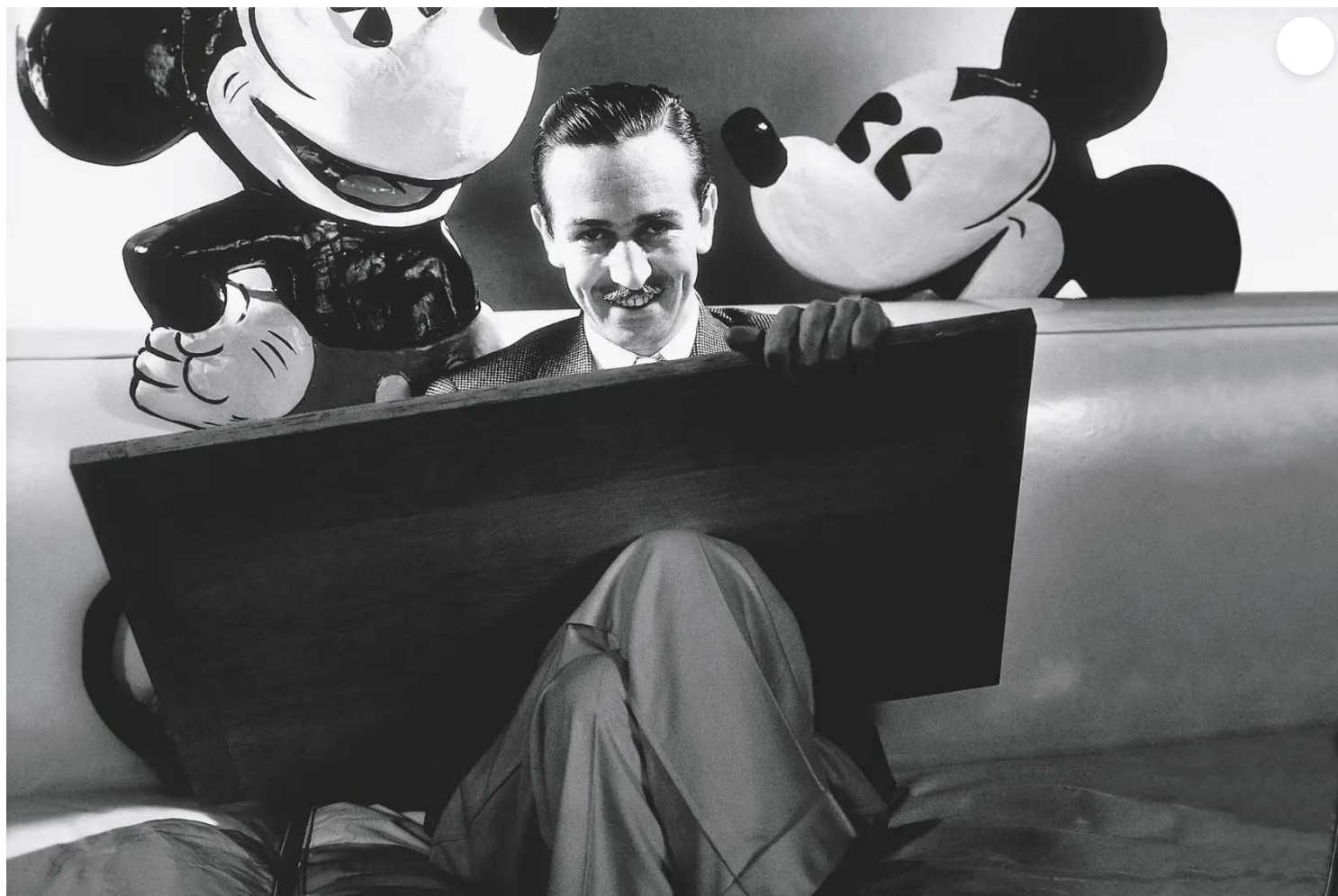
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Walt Disney, Reanimated

By Randy Malamud

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FROM THE CONDE NAST ARCHIVE, CORBIS

Walt Disney, circa 1933

The Walt Disney Family Museum's opening in October, in San Francisco's Presidio complex, invites a fresh look at animation in American culture and at the man who orchestrated its golden age. Apart from its heady nostalgic appeal, audiences interested in film, cultural studies, and American studies should welcome this enterprise as an opportunity to reconsider Disney's reputation.

It's unusual to dedicate a museum to a single person. Presidential research centers and writers' homes celebrate their legacies, but not many individuals have full-blown museums about their lives. Liberace has one in Las Vegas, and P.T. Barnum in Fairfield, Conn.: apt companions for Disney, with their outsized characters and flashy self-promotion.

Once upon a time (as Disney himself might begin a story), a museum was a neoclassical temple for traditional "high cultural" disciplines: art, science, history, anthropology. Today museums have become sleeker in mood and design; and in content, too, they compete head-on with other media and entertainment.

Their integrity can be sustained at the same time that the canon of museum-worthy subjects is expanded, as Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum demonstrates; but it is also possible to fall into the postmodern rabbit hole of relativism. In Atlanta, the World of Coca-Cola, which acts like a museum, presents a subject which, while popular and ubiquitous, is not, in my humble opinion, worthy of such institutional attention. I'd prefer that museums dedicate themselves to (in Matthew Arnold's phrase) "the best that has been thought and said," which probably disqualifies fizzy sugar water. Sure, Coke has figured in American culture, but it's really just a product.

Walt Disney and his eponymous company are commodities, too, and lucrative ones, which may inflect the museological account of his life. So, from a curatorial point of view, does he rank above a soft drink?

The Disney Museum doesn't fit the mold of, say, Philadelphia's Rodin Museum or the Norman Rockwell Museum, in Stockbridge, Mass., spotlighting a single figure's artistic output. The works of Rodin and Rockwell were, in their own ways, brand-name commodities. But the Disney Museum is not just about his art. It's also very much about his business, his personality, and the technology of animation he fostered in his path-blazing career. While he had a hand in many of his studio's creations, especially in its earlier days, he delegated most of the animation to teams of highly specialized artists. His keenest gift was not the hands-on drawing so much as the conception, the inspiration, the perfectionist drive that generated so many memorable films and characters.

Why do we need a Disney Museum? According to its founding executive director, Richard Benefield, the Walt Disney Family Foundation decided that this undertaking was urgently warranted when a survey revealed that a whole generation of modern audiences thought Walt Disney was an invented character. Spearheaded by his daughter, Diane Disney Miller, the museum displays a trove of papers, artifacts, and mementos from the family's own collection. There are a few odd items (the buttons from Walt's mother's 1887 wedding dress; his leather-tooled bowling bag; his luggage tags; boxes of Jell-O and cans of Hormel chili—the unpretentious magnate's favorite foods, to illustrate his folksy palate—but by and large the galleries are highly illuminating.

A relatively small ground-floor exhibit covers Disney's early years. There's a deed of sale for the family farm in Marceline, Mo.—Walt was only 9, in 1911, when the family left this rural outpost for Kansas City, Mo., but biographers find the roots of Disney's idealistic small-town American vision in his Marceline years, and Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A. seems like an attempt to recapture that world. The museum displays some simple but promising cartoons Disney drew for his high-school newspaper, *The Voice*, and a Model T ambulance like the one he drove in France in World War I. We see clips from his first animated productions—modernized fairy tales with a Jazz Age twist that he called “Lafflets”—made at his Laugh-O-Gram Films studio.

This first floor, serviceable but not captivating, is perhaps intentionally understated to make the second floor, which highlights the many brilliant achievements that would come later, seem all the more spectacular. Disney would have loved how the elevator that brings visitors upstairs is decked out like the railroad car that brought him from his humdrum Midwestern life to the promised land of California in 1923. All aboard!

The museum foregrounds the organizational and technological complexities behind the production of Disney's seemingly light and breezy films. There are scripts, scene drafts, musical scores, rough sketches, layout drawings, color-key drawings, concept art, story sketches, cel setups, 3D character models, dozens of iterations of model sheets.

The creation of Disney's best-loved characters was intensely meticulous. The exhibit for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* shows obsessively detailed composition: animation notes specifying that Sleepy has the longest beard of his cohort, while Bashful is pigeon-toed with high and prominent shoulders; for Grumpy, various sketches represent body poses that are "characteristic of a grumpy attitude." Designs show how Doc's cheeks react to his mouth when his face emotes, and how Sneezy sneezes in four stages. Five of the dwarfs (all but Dopey and Sneezy) have no necks.

Letters, memos, and telegrams trace Disney's day-to-day challenges and ambitions. And, of course, there's no stinting on Disneyana: From the very beginning, capitalizing on Mickey Mouse's popularity in the early 1930s, Disney mastered the art of the franchised tie-in. Museum displays feature clocks, watches, stuffed Mickeys, telephones, tricycles, toothbrushes, cut-out books, piggy banks, playing cards, records, sheet music, and figurines.

Engaging exhibitions like a big, eye-catching shelf of paint jars and a station where visitors can synchronize sound effects demonstrate how Disney broke new ground in terms of color, music, motion, and aesthetics—it's like being in the workshop as the art emerges. Increasingly sophisticated cameras mirror the films' technical advances.

The famous multiplane camera, a massive machine invented for *Snow White*, takes up two floors: Five different levels, each with a separate lighting system, move independently up and down on a crane so that as the camera moves through the shot, it approaches and passes some scenic elements while others remain in the background, producing an impression of depth that was impossible with a flat camera table. An underwater camera, designed for *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, contains a miniature air tank to equalize the pressure inside and outside of the housing so it wouldn't leak.

The entrance hall presents 26 of Disney's 32 Oscar trophies (the one for *Snow White* includes seven little statuettes on a staircase) and a passel of other awards, including the Cannes Film Festival Grand Prize (for *Dumbo*), the Presidential Medal of Freedom, honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale, and a commendation from the American Automobile Association in appreciation of Disney's contributions to traffic safety (for the 1965 short *Freewayphobia: The Art of Driving the Super Highway*, in which Goofy demonstrates the right and wrong ways to navigate the expressway).

A curatorial evenhandedness informs the account, brief but accurate, of the studio's bitter 1941 animators' strike, and Disney's unfortunate testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, in 1947. Some aspects of Disney's life story are underplayed, such as the continual anxieties and pressures from bankers that Walt and his brother Roy, the company's co-founder, suffered as they expanded their business; that material is detailed in Neal Gabler's masterly biography, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (Knopf, 2006). And I didn't notice any photos of Disney with a cigarette, though he was a constant smoker.

The museum overall does not challenge Disney's own self-creation narrative, in which he appears as "an American genius, a born tinkerer and inventor, like Henry Ford or Thomas Edison," with a dash of "the qualities of Horatio Alger (entrepreneurial determination) and Abraham Lincoln (humble origins and hard work)," writes

Nicholas Sammond in *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960* (Duke University Press, 2005).

Speaking of Lincoln, one of Disney's most dedicated projects was an "audio-animatronic" model of Honest Abe—a moving, speaking robot—developed for the 1964 World's Fair, schemes for which are on display here. It's not hard to imagine why Disney wanted to reanimate President Lincoln, to voice him for the present age. And while it was Royal Dano (a lanky actor often cast as Lincoln in films) whose words came out of the simultaneously futuristic and nostalgic mechanical figure, still, it must have seemed to Disney that he had himself (via his "imagineering") infused the 19th-century American icon with speech. Disney had actually voiced early versions of Mickey Mouse; he inscribed himself at the core of all the characters that were closest to his heart. In fact, Disney himself actually guides visitors through the museum, posthumously: On his television shows, he often discussed how he made his movies, and those clips are recycled here as first-person curation. (But that's as far as Walt's enduring presence goes. "He's not frozen," Benefield assured me.)

The museum is located in San Francisco because Disney's daughter lives there. But Benefield said it benefits from not being in the obvious location, Los Angeles, where it might become just a sideshow in the shadow of Hollywood and Disneyland. Indeed, the Bay Area has become the epicenter of animation: PDI/DreamWorks is in nearby Redwood City, along with many computer-animation studios throughout Silicon Valley. Right down the street from the museum, in the Presidio neighborhood, is the Letterman Digital Arts Center, home to the video-game developer LucasArts and the visual-effects studio Industrial Light & Magic. Pixar Studios, which is now part of the Walt Disney Company, is just across the bay. There's no mention of modern computer animation in the Disney Museum—not that there should be, of course, as it celebrates the era when Disney's characters were the unchallenged superstars of animation. Still, one wonders how the ever-competitive Disney might fight to win audiences back from *Avatar* and Wii if he were around today.

Scholars will welcome this museum's resources—if they can get to them. Before I went, every Disney specialist I spoke with expressed hope that researchers would have access to its collection. The Disney Company—unconnected to the Walt Disney Family Foundation, though Benefield said it greatly assisted in the museum's creation—has an enormous archive in Burbank, Calif., with rare films, comic books, company records, promotional materials, press clippings, still photographs, props and costumes, employee publications, memorabilia, and World War II insignias that Disney designed for military units. But scholarly access to that archive has been minimal. I asked its manager, Becky Cline, if scholars could consult the company's collection, and she said they could, subject to approval from the legal department. But she also said she couldn't tell me how many scholars, if any, had received such permission. Of the dozen I contacted, none had had access to the archive, nor knew anyone who had, in recent years.

But the San Francisco collection is outside Cline's purview, and Benefield promised that academics are welcome to visit his museum upon application to him and description of their research plans. He said he had already fielded some requests for access. Several scholars want to consult the "Schultheis notebook": Herman Schultheis, a technician in the camera-effects department, compiled this commonplace book (probably in 1938-39) detailing visual effects in *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, and other films. It contains, for example, pages of ostrich images used to help animate the "Dance of the Hours" in *Fantasia*: drawings and photographs from the Los Angeles Zoo and the Los Angeles Ostrich Farm, and pictures of ballerinas dancing like ostriches. Photographs of Virginia red deer (lying down, munching apples, grazing, drinking) serve as action studies for Bambi, along with shots of various locations and landscapes (rivers, trees, waterfalls, clouds, rocks, moss, grass, leaves). Disney always commissioned elaborate films and photographs of natural scenes and animals for the animators to use as models, to ensure a keen sense of realism.

Schultheis compiled mechanical information, too, that will appeal to technical specialists: formulas for film developers; details on apertures, lenses, film speeds; field-size charts (the area of the animated drawing photographed by the camera is “the field”) for close-ups and long shots; information on how to thread film in various cameras.

Beyond its permanent collection, the Disney Museum’s regular schedule of lectures, concerts, and film screenings makes it a rich cultural resource. Several special exhibitions are planned, beginning in 2012: one about the genesis of Disneyland and its imagineering models; one about the process of creating *Snow White*, timed for the film’s 75th anniversary, in 2013; and one showing the art produced (but never published) when *Life* commissioned Thomas Hart Benton and the photographer Jerome Zerbe, an early *paparazzo*, to document Hollywood. The museum has already begun a book series under its own imprint. Its first publication is *South of the Border With Disney: Walt Disney and the Good Neighbor Program, 1941-48*, by the acclaimed film historian J.B. Kaufman (Disney Editions, 2009). It’s a beautifully illustrated and comprehensive account of Disney’s extensive diplomacy through animation, in which Latin American-themed films like *The Three Caballeros* (1944) and *Saludos Amigos* (1942), along with lesser-known documentaries promoting literacy and public health, were featured “as part of an initiative to foster a spirit of friendly hemispheric unity by countering Nazi propaganda efforts in South America, so that all the Americas might stand together against the Axis powers.”

Scholarship has tended to be critical of Disney ([“The Wonderful World of Disney Studies,”](#) *The Chronicle*, July 21, 2006) for perpetuating an elaborate set of financially lucrative myths. He was an omnivorous corporate control freak: Witness especially Disneyland and Disney World. He was a cheerleader for mainstream, conservative, anti-intellectual American ideologies. His aesthetic reinforced homogeneity, conformity, cultural imperialism, reductionist superficiality; it embodied a Pollyannish and whitewashed view of history. Detractors characterized “Disneyfication” as faux environments and manipulated experiences, Gabler writes—

the substitution of a synthetic world for a real one. Perhaps, on some level, the Disney Museum's resplendent homage to its subject's creativity, his commercial exuberance, and his impact on American culture and entertainment is a salvo to counter the copious academic tirades. (Or perhaps, as Nicholas Sammond suggested to me, the Disney people don't care about us nearly as much as we wish they did.)

In any event, if Walt Disney is a hugely overdetermined figure—and he himself bears considerable responsibility for that—it's a valuable corrective to have this museum return us to the actual flesh-and-blood man behind the curtain, and back to the work itself. As Michael Bérubé reminds us ([“What's the Matter With Cultural Studies?,” *The Chronicle*, September 14, 2009](#)), scholars should respect and engage with the mass appeal of popular cultural texts rather than dismiss ones deemed politically or aesthetically flawed as evidence of the audience's false consciousness. The subject of Disney is arguably Exhibit A in the cultural-studies canon, and scholarly response to this museum may serve as a barometer of the field's zeitgeist. Indeed, a swing of the pendulum seems to be under way. Recent books broach Disney through such lenses as childhood studies, feminism, and ecocriticism, letting go of contentious animus.

For example, Sammond's *Babes in Tomorrowland* explores the relationship between Disney discourse and the modern idea of childhood without the residual irony that characterizes many earlier scholarly studies. “His creations helped Americans come to terms with the unsettling transformations of the 20th century,” Sammond writes. Making a manageable child—well-behaved, socially appropriate, more conformist than rebellious—was like the “efficiently engineered entertainment” of the Disney studio's production line, which was cast as a big happy family under the father figure of Walt.

Amy M. Davis, in *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (John Libbey Publishing, 2006), finds a tradition of “strong female characters with strong, positive aspects to their depictions,” in films from the late 1980s and the 1990s—*The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*—but also going back

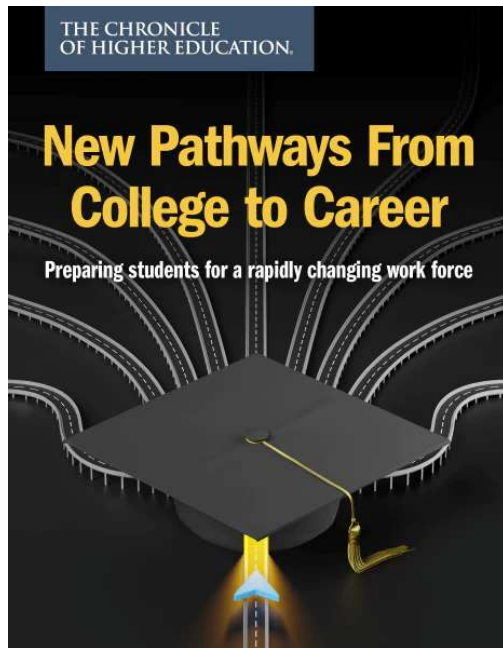
decades earlier. She rebuts the prevalent idea that Disney films are “full of weak, passive women,” writing that Disney “helped to create an important reflection of American society’s rapidly changing attitudes and beliefs about women, gender, and femininity”; the women characters often steal the show.

In *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* (Ashgate, 2008), David Whitley writes that the cartoon animals with exaggerated, stereotypical features are “often taken to be signs of the inauthentic in Disney’s aesthetic,” but that “it may be worth looking again, from a more open point of view, at some of the underlying assumptions” that have generated a “standard [i.e., hostile] response to Disney within academic writing.” In troubled ecological times, Disney animation offers a realm where “heightened emotions and humor, rather than operating as a barrier to thought and critical engagement, might even offer a relatively safe sphere within which crucial issues could be rehearsed.” In films like *Bambi*, a “saccharine-laced aesthetic” on the surface overlays more-profound aspects of wild nature lurking beneath, inviting empathy. (Sammond teaches at the University of Toronto; Davis at the University of Hull, in England; and Whitley at the University of Cambridge, suggesting that “outsiders” may be provoking this recent trend.)

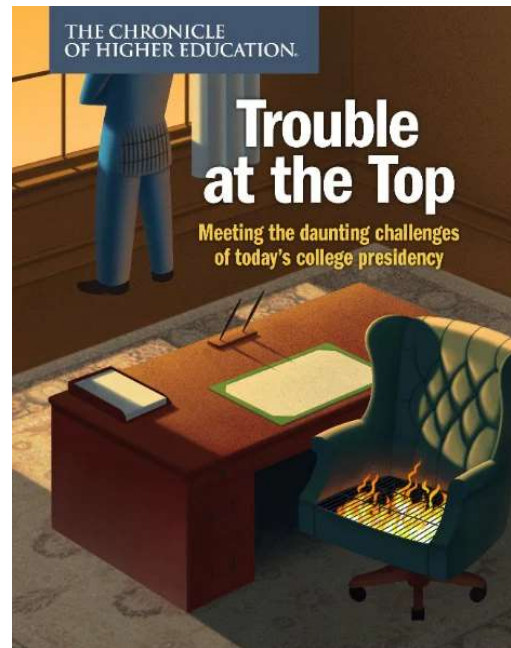
Before visiting, I had wondered if the Disney Museum would be a hagiography, or a glorified gift shop, or a propagandistic reification of the Disney empire. It isn’t any of those things. It’s a collection of ideas and documents, a diverse array of archival, filmic, and pop-cultural texts that historicizes Disney’s work and compels us to think twice about how we appraise it. The museum energizes the fascinatingly charged scholarly debate that the Disney phenomenon has provoked, shaking the worn, staid, sometimes cynical images we have of Disney and his empire, bringing to them renewed color and motion.

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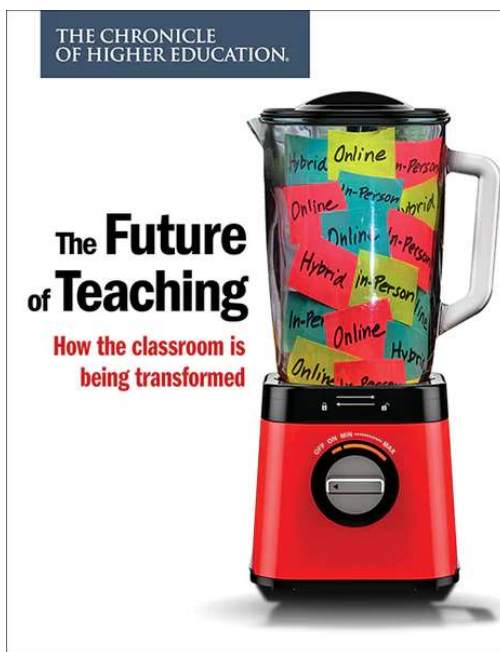
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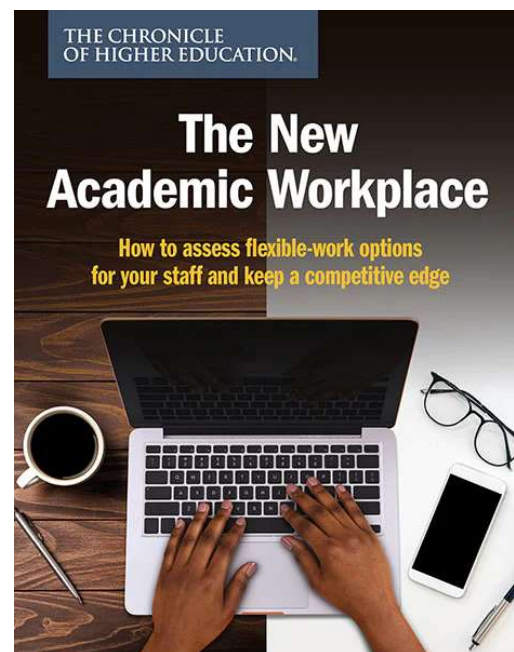
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