
Book Review: Wellmon, C. (2026). *After the University: Higher Education and the Future of Intellectual Work*. United States: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Sampling crucial moments in his life that defined the concept of a university, Chad Wellmon, the author of this comprehensive analysis of higher learning, sets out on a journey to clarify the relationship between a university and higher learning. While working on the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Virginia (UVA), the author realized that a university might be called “a space and time set aside and made free for higher learning,” (p. 2) but that proved to be a narrow understanding of what such an institution actually was. Organized in three sections and 13 chapters, an Introduction, an Interlude, and a Conclusion, *After the University* is a book that traces the evolution of the university from medieval times through Enlightenment and finally into the modern world.

After the University turns out to be not a memoir, but an autobiography of higher learning – a term used instead of higher education – “in order to differentiate the universal aspirations and potential of the former from the overdetermined and fixed horizon of the latter” (p. 5). What the author calls “institutional conditions of disciplined study and intellectual desire,” as he opines in the Introduction, have changed during the past two hundred years, but still shaped the lives of the world population. The relevance of the matter becomes obvious when questions are asked about the current situation: “How is it that colleges and universities, institutions so obviously about knowledge and learning, are also so obviously not about those same things? When and why did they become parodies of themselves, forsaking the goods of disciplined study in favor of competition for social standing and the endless pursuit of money and power?” (pp. 5-6) Such questions had to be viewed from the perspective of a student, and gave the author a chance to reminisce.

From his own life experience, Wellmon culled what he thought was pithy and worth mentioning: “At college, an English professor taught me to read repeatedly and slowly; a German professor taught me to read with a pencil; a political theory professor taught me to read suspiciously and between the lines. Collectively, they showed me that *how* and *why* you read depended on where and with whom you read. [...] Classroom discussions and dining hall conversations were opportunities to try out different personae, moral possibilities, and ideas. Sitting with other people, I found that the possibilities of reading became more real to me than they had when I read with just my dad” (pp. 9-10). Reading, therefore, comes into the foreground, and for a good reason.

According to the author, teaching books can also provide a paying job, and reading can be an individual and collective activity. His interest in such practices led him to believe in the power and the gift that reading can bring about. He further

explains that “College changed how I read. Graduate school changed why I read. I realized that reading was at once an individual and collective practice. It included a whole series of repeated actions and acquired dispositions: preparing for seminars at Café Milano by writing in a book’s margin; copying long passages and short phrases into a notebook; attending to a particular book with people who likewise valued it enough to attend to it and, even better, to listen to each other talk about it; imagining other people who had read and attended to it and recognizing their excellence as readers who had honestly sought not just to acquire power and status but to interact with this book; regarding all of these things not as mere acquisitions but as common and limitless goods. And most important, knowing that the stage had been set, and I, we, could read” (p. 10). The experience brought with itself the realization that this was a vocation, not a profession.

In graduate school and during his years on the tenure track, the author “approached teaching and writing the way a newly ordained priest might approach the liturgical calendar: dutifully following the schedule set by the academic year, giving daily service to the ritual of writing as I sipped my morning coffee, reading during the day and before retiring at night with pencil and notebook always close at hand. UVA provided material conditions that made such a vocation possible, including a research library, a salary, an office, and health insurance. Using the vocational ideal, I turned the vices of careerism and the limitations of professionalism into scholarly virtues” (p. 12). In this context, the reader finds the rationale behind writing a book like *After the University*: to develop “an alternative idiom for thinking about higher learning and our educational institutions, centered on three conceptual pairs: internal/external goods, disciplined study/the university, and deflection/value capture” (p. 13). Additionally, the current tome also features another characteristic of the modern university, namely “the gradual separation and eventual estrangement of disciplined study from the university and each one’s respective goods – that it, the internal goods of the former and the external goods of the latter” (p. 14). By internal goods, paraphrasing Stout (1988), Wellmon implies those accomplished “through active participation in a practice in accordance with its standards of excellence,” (p. 14) while external goods would suffice to be money or prestige.

Drawing from exhaustive research, *After the University* poses pertinent questions, which are answered within the project: “Which kinds of knowledge are esteemed in a given epistemic culture and its hierarchies? Which forms of knowledge are deemed socially valuable and worthy of support?” (p. 15) Epistemic cultures, hierarchies, and systems “crystallize in institutions and livelihoods” – they all constitute the starting point of the project; a historical appraisal reveals that, at least for the past two hundred years, the modern university has managed and controlled what we now call “authoritative knowledge and organized knowledge” (p. 15). Therefore, in Wellmon’s opinion, the main purpose of a university has been to conduct research.

As the author expounds his rationale, a distinction between knowledge practices and institutions is also presented. While the university strives to deal with disciplined study, institutions target the provision of external goods and, in the process, “pursue money, prestige, and social utility.” The caveat, as the author avers, is that salient details show that the pursuit of goals and interests may sometimes “conflict with the values of the practices they support” (p. 16). The redistribution of money and power provides rewards for reshaping institutional conditions and external expectations.

To fully grasp the relationship between disciplined study and the university, two distinct points are identified: first, “practices like letter copying, translating, annotating, and cataloguing have shaped intellectual life,” (p. 18) and universities have focused mainly on letter writing, rhetoric, and bibliographic work; second, higher education institutions have changed and lessened the reality of disciplined study. The corollary of this distinction is that the practice and goods of disciplined study are worth preserving. A quick look at the historical perspective leads the author to acknowledge that “over the past two centuries, especially in the United States, the university came to monopolize the resources – financial, cultural, social, intellectual, political – necessary for intellectual work” (p. 19). For better words, the university has redefined education and knowledge.

Theory, disputation, and research have also underscored the fact that, as this book asserts, now that we pay more attention to external goods, the university and disciplined study have gone separate ways. Since external goods are easier to recognize, the whole view of higher education has switched to an argument whether having a college degree has any economic and social effects. The separation of disciplined study, the university, and their assets has brought new psychological and subjective views, and as such, has reshaped the way people tend to perceive the university experience.

The historical shift in the general perception of a college education prompted the author to resort to two related concepts: *deflection* and *value capture*. The reader is then presented the opinion of philosopher Cora Diamond, who affirms that, when difficult situations arise, the people’s attention is somehow diverted to another issue, one that is easier to comprehend. Instead of apprehending that initial difficulty, people strive to find the best ways they can formulate arguments and anticipate counter-arguments. Furthermore, their attention is now concentrated on something that is adjacent to the original problem.

In order to clarify the second concept, the author propounds philosopher C. Thi Nguyen’s point of view, which renders the deflection as an illustration of substitutes, also called “value capture.” What is communicated in social media can be the best illustration. “Social media platforms create, Nguyen points out, an environment in which the simplest of value forms predominates: numeric and quantified values. They convert complex and idiosyncratic judgements into simple scores – likes, shares, clicks” (p. 24). These metrics, displayed as immediate feedback, have the power to distract our attention, and in the act, shape our behavior.

A clarification becomes then necessary for the author to be more specific when dealing with *deflection* and *value capture*. As they are used in this approach, “they describe ethically, institutionally, and socially enervating phenomena that have become structural features of the modern university” (p. 26). Moreover, they point to shifts in attention, diversions of concern, and the change of values into inferior substitutes. The result is that our attention is redirected from internal goods of disciplined study to external goods that are easier to understand. The presentation culminates with a personal confession regarding the modern university mentioning that Freud warned us that “the things we humans create to protect us from ourselves provide us with meaning and make us miserable” (p. 28). Additionally, higher learning has been found to be simply a device that validates the goods and values of disciplined study – all the time doing so under the umbrella of higher education.

Chapter One is entitled *Knowledge Institutions: Guild, Factory, Social System*, and castigates the inadequacies of *universitas*, described as a guild, properly embodying “an age that lacked strong governments and centralized state power” (p. 33). Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), a Biblical scholar and teacher at the University of Göttingen revealed its nepotism, its ecclesiastic authority, and its corporate identity. While praising Göttingen for its institutional innovations – faculty salaries, strict nonsectarian reforms, as well as the first research library – Michaelis also warned against learning wrong lessons from such a “knowledge factory.” The ensuing obvious conclusion was that such institutions of higher learning did not produce material that could be exchanged or substituted.

As viewed from a historical perspective, the *universitas* of the European Middle Ages functioned as a particular and universal social institution. What distinguished it from other higher schools of the same period were its “cathedral schools, private law schools, Latin schools, and schools linked to monastic order” (p. 35). Being both a local and universal body, it had a local sovereign with a legal authority who granted professors permission to teach at any of their universities. As far as funding was concerned, until the nineteenth century, local municipalities did not provide any financial support; instead, funds came from local patrons and sovereigns. In the same context, the *universitas* acquired the role of an intermediary, “mediating the goods particular to its internal scholarly bodies and the external demands of the Church and local sovereigns who provided the material goods necessary to sustain those scholars” (p. 36). The institution of higher learning, supported by the Church, also developed a certain tension between disciplined study and its pursuit of external goods.

As the chapter progresses, the reader is informed that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) proposed a major reform in 1798 in his work entitled *Conflict of the Faculties*, which discussed the visible tensions between the philosophy faculty and the other “higher” faculties, while placing the university right at the core of the new social order. Although criticized by his contemporaries, Kant was the one who identified three social spheres within the university: “the intelligentsia or literati, the general public, and the university-based scholars. He also emphasized the fact that ‘the authority of the philosophy faculty was not self-given. The state ‘left’ the teaching of philosophy faculty to the ‘reason of scholars,’ granting the philosophy faculty is relative autonomy” (p. 45). Using reason itself and the idea of “constant progress,” Kant argued that the university would prevail against all odds. Over time, the university did not become a mediating force, but led to the basis of an entire social process and social order. The author finalizes this chapter by declaring that the *universitas* as an institution disappeared, but it still remained an ideal and a fantasy.

Through time and social transformation, as the project develops, we see how universities in the first half of the 19th century turned into individual institutions. Signs of a revolution emerged and liberal reformers acknowledged that the values they associated with disciplined study had been captured by narrowed and unimportant values. However, the same reformers started the idea of a public system of education, serving an education system (intellectual and moral) and a public system (aiming private and public interests. The reality was somehow different, however, and created a gap between ideals and realities. A glimmer of hope came from personalities like Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), who wrote that “the academy, like the *universitas*, was a ‘beautiful and beneficial’ idea. He went even further and said that “the academy must be thought as the ‘last and highest sanctuary of scholarship’” (Quoted on p. 61). Specifically, disciplined study would contain external structures and material conditions the universities could support and supply. Within the institutions of higher learning, the general system of credentials and examinations is thoroughly examined as well. The transformation had begun and the *universitas* became the *university*, with unprecedented conditions for teaching and disciplined study.

Chapter three, entitled *The University Factory*, encapsulates the values of the transformation of the *universitas*, with reformers aiming to change the arts or philosophy faculty into a stepping stone towards the study in the faculties of law, medicine, and theology. The entailed growth saw a considerable increase in the student enrollments, and new generations were looking for different ways of leading a meaningful life within the university. Nevertheless, “the institution’s ideals and values no longer fit the experiences of the people who constitute it” (p. 85). Using Germany as the best example, the author contends that the students became aware of the many contradictions that emerged from this transition.

Replete with salient facts and relevant examples, the analysis now segues to the surging student enrollments that, according to Conrad (1884) redefined the university not only as an individual institution but as “a system in which any one institution was a ‘gear in a giant machine.’” (Quoted on p. 90) The same context is used to theorize that “as universities transformed into large-scale industrial enterprises, another element contributed to knowledge of and to a belief in Germany’s institutions of higher learning and, especially, their systematic and social character” (p. 90). Statistics were used as a system of collecting data regarding all students, and what made these forms of statistical reasons so special was the “early integration of concepts and techniques from developments in mathematics related to probability” (p. 95). As such, statistics also changed the university

into a “system of institutions through which ideals, people, and things moved and could be counted” (p. 100). This incomparable asset, together with many other recently earned values, the German universities of the 19th century claimed a certain sense of order, discipline, academic freedom, and of course, research advantage. As researchers and political economists assert, the university “was a mechanism for controlling ‘class antagonisms’ by distributing knowledge, power, and status among the ‘social classes’” (p. 113). Simultaneously, the new developments prepared the grounds for real social reforms.

In Interlude 1, *The University, Technology, and the Magic of Credentials*, the author transposes the frame of higher learning in general and its meaning today, declaring that the university is still a repository of knowledge cultivating intellectual practices, epistemic values, and intellectual community. Defending the university relevance, we are led to believe that the relationship between the institutions of higher learning and the creation of jobs, status, and stability was reciprocal and was beneficial to both parties. Such belief might easily be explained when the book refers to another relationship, the one between money and higher learning. As the author sustains, “the power of modern higher education derives, in large part, from its credentialing authority” (p. 119). The ensuing credential prowess is recognized across social domains, but the caveat remains that it transforms internal goods into inexhaustible currency, and it creates wealth for a section of the elite.

Chapter Five circles back to the concept of statistics (and statistical information) with its function in keeping public education systems and the divisions of labor running smoothly. Specific examples from Max Weber and Johannes Conrad are brought into the discussion, introducing goods and values that might threaten to diminish the overwhelming economic and technological change, while at the same time helping universities to make disciplined study useful. What we learn from this exposition is the fact that the university in America turned into a democratic project, by exposing institutions of higher learning to different values and goods. In doing so, “democracy did not resolve conflicts over the relationship between the internal goods of disciplined study and the external goods universities pursued any better than other ideas of the university, such as the *universitas*, the knowledge factory, and the social system” (p. 129). The process of democratization, however, made higher learning more accessible for everyone.

In a similar vein, social reform, with its new requirements and liberalities, also produced the need for a novel class of people to serve as moral examples of social progress. The idea of college – as the author expounds – legitimized a framework that included conceptual oppositions: “the classical course versus the scientific course, the fixed curriculum versus the elective curriculum, liberal education versus professional training” (p. 149). Furthermore, the demand for higher learning can have an immediate use, whereas other things can become useful in time. The pedagogical approach involved openness, free inquiry, maturity, and responsibility. The institutions of higher learning had to be re-invented and re-defined.

The dual purpose of an American university was epitomized by William Rainey Harper in a speech delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1899 and entitled “The University and Democracy.”

He envisioned that the American university can be identified as the search for truth and the provision of enlightened leadership and special knowledge for the people. His rhetoric also mentioned that in terms of public attention and administrative concern, the business side had eclipsed the educational side. “The task of a university president was to find the balance between cultivating the internal goods of disciplined study and securing the external goods that disciplined study required” (p. 154). These comments cemented the American university and its democratic aspirations.

Along the same lines discussing democratic social reform, Wellmon poses a significant question disputing whether “the purpose that the division of labor, efficiency, and bureaucracy were to serve in the university: the institutionalized accumulation of external goods (e.g., money, utility, prestige) or the fullest development of human capacity throughout disciplined study” (p. 163). Striving to give both these aims institutional form, as the author illustrates, several people proposed Progressive ideas, based on the idea that the university is “a means to other ends (social reform, professionalism, efficiency).” Through the changes that followed, the universities promulgated not only an expansion outward but also internal transformations, mainly by promoting scholarship. According to Progressives, scholarship and formal education had to be instruments of political reform and social change.

Relying on Nicholas Butler (1921), the author takes a quick detour and brings Columbia University into the discussion. Columbia University is, therefore, considered a good example of an institution where the scale and variety of operations required professional administrators to deal with internal and external communications, buildings and grounds, construction projects, curriculum scheduling, and similar tasks. In Butler’s view, a modern university needed administrative experts directly accountable to the president. Other analysts counter-argued and blamed Butler’s pursuit of efficiency to the detriment of faculty and scholarly values. By modernizing the collegiate structure, Butler was accused of adopting an antidemocratic governance model that diminished the faculty creativity. However, in the end, what he did turned Columbia into an example to follow by similar higher learning institutions.

To fully grasp the real situation, the author tried and eventually managed to keep a balance “between the acquisitiveness and intellectual desires, their pursuit of external goods and their devotion to disciplined study” (p. 194). As such, the American university, through the elevation of expertise, scientific management, and supplanting human capital, had no equal, but at the same time was a threat to higher education.

At the heart of Interlude II, as the author describes general education, identified as a solution, “the problem being a cultural one: how to answer questions about the ends of education and knowledge in a modern age” (p. 197). The orientation and the negative effects of the research university were supposedly reformed by revamping the entire general education. By the

beginning of the twentieth century, the institutionalized general education programs attempted to establish a real objective system, whereby financial support was distributed, dedicated faculty time was allotted, and curricula was offered. Everything turned to be, in the author's view, proof that the aims of education include a curriculum requiring teachers to plan and prepare, but also learners to trust their educators.

As the focus of the book is re-directed towards the belief in higher education and its human capital, the intellectual vitality and the fast pace of progress engendered the so-called "golden age" of American higher education – meant to address all classes, via the mass approach. According to figures and statistics, over the decades following the second World War, a large percentage of students accessed higher education by attending public institutions. Quoting information gathered from Thelin, J. and Olivas, M. (2021), the author contends that "By 1960, sixty universities had enrollments of more than 10,000, and several public universities had more than 20,000 enrolled, including the University of North Carolina, the University of Texas, Ohio State University, UC Berkeley, and the University of Michigan" (p. 215). Specifically, the intrinsic values of higher learning pointed to a social fact: "Universities were worth valuing because they fit students to labor markets, produced economic value, and reproduced a social order in the form of credentialed workers and commodifiable technology" (p. 217). The internal and external goods also offered "raw material for the human capital machine", and collaterally promoted knowledge, science, and markets.

Human capital is further analyzed and debated in the next chapters, with references to economists like Gary Becker, Milton Friedman, Robert Solow, and Theodore W. Schultz. With all the conflicting conclusions and policy implications, the concept of higher education was deemed to be a form of capital. While "theorizing about human capital acknowledged social and public benefits of investing in education to varying degrees, they also emphasized the private pecuniary effects that followed from the increase in an individual's productive capacity, as well as increases in aggregate (not collective) economic growth" (p. 231). What that meant for those economists was that the skills acquired through education really proliferated as "capital in a person," and, as such, the individuals should bear the cost of acquiring it.

Besides human capital, the conversation about higher education introduces another idea, "the knowledge industry," a framework that "deflected intellectual desire and aspirations for intellectual and moral reform onto a radically truncated substitute – the efficient production, distribution, and management of capital for the sake of economic growth" (p. 237). The shift was obviously meant to "emphasize a direct causal relationship between universities and economic productivity" (p. 237). By overseeing the development of data sets, analytic tools, management techniques, epistemological and ethical frameworks, university leaders combined organizational techniques and technologies from private industry and federal government alike. This new development brought about a "science" of administration that paved the way for the best and most efficient paths for decision-making and similar effective actions. Such entrepreneurial ventures eventually led to quantifiable achievements: Nobel Prizes and National Academy memberships.

As the author explains, such successful enterprises needed a systematic plan. Direct interest coming from the California Board of Education and the Regents of the University of California materialized in "a master plan for the development, expansion, and integration of the facilities, curriculum, and standards of higher education, in junior colleges, state colleges, and the University of California, and other institutions of higher education in the State, to meet the needs of the State during the next ten years and thereafter" (p. 248). Touting zero tuition and suggesting increased state investment in colleges and universities across California, the Master Plan led to unprecedented enrollment growth and empowered a system of publicly funded research universities. Mass higher education, however, led to movements within the student body to protest against the system of human capital, because universities had changed into instruments of industry.

The students' push to reform the whole higher education system was explained by the fact that the value of higher learning was reduced to a dollar-dominate principle, which, in turn was further analyzed in books: Riesman, 1950, *The Lonely Crowd*; C. Wright Mills, 1956, *The Power Elite*; Whyte, 1956, *The Organization Man*. Such books "urged readers to recognize the potential that greater access to higher learning and more leisure posed for the development of intellectual and social capacities" (p. 266). The counter-revolution was evaluated through the eyes of businesses, government, and universities themselves. The new wave of reforms envisioned a multi-university, "a more flexible institution that accommodated both 'the amateur seeking a lifestyle' and 'the scholar seeking authoritativeness'" (p. 271). The ripple effect of such reforms reverberated within the realm of academic professional. The faculty extolled the same academic norms and values of higher education. As predicted by analysts like Jenks and Riesman, by the year 2000, "over 50 percent of American men and women would have BAs and therefore their place in the professional order" (pp. 289-281). In order for such ideals to be accomplished, the system of higher education would have to grow.

Demands for equality – according to Wellmon – also brought the idea of meritocracy, with its focus on outcomes and outputs. By justifying the university with a novel concept of meritocracy, analysts capitulated to the idea of higher education and simultaneously apologized for their own professional place. "They dressed up human capital production as self-development" (p. 287). Unfortunately, conflicts over moral and political values switched to narrow values, easier to administer and manage. In the same context, the idealization of the university crystalized into a feeling of frustration with the false promises of higher education. The legacy of the students' demonstrations of the 1960s pointed not to an attack on the universities themselves, but to a revolt against a system that simplified the values of disciplined study.

The Chapters in the second half of the book tackle the historical evolution of higher education through its political and economic prism. As we follow the author's thoughts, we realize that, towards the end of the 20th century, higher education was facing serious problems related to organizational inefficiencies, uncertain finances, and inadequate data. It was necessary, as analysts suggested, to take the anarchy out of the American education system, sustain the goods of disciplined study, and make sure higher education is "an object of study and professional concern." As such, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) came up with the idea that colleges and universities, as a self-governing sector of the economy, should be organized in to a national system. Although severely debated and criticized, belief in higher education was to be restored "by aligning the fledgling system more closely to the values of competitive markets" (p. 297). Likewise, such reforms would eliminate the distinction between practices and institutions, disciplined study and the university, and eventually internal and external goods.

From the United States, the focus is then moving to other parts of the world, such as India and South Africa, where student demonstrations signaled the university's failure as an "academic community." The history of higher education in Africa claims a triple heritage: "indigenous African cultures and traditions as well as Islamic and Western ones" (p. 316). The example of East Africa included commissions and reports supported by the British Colonial Office suggested the American model mentioned by sociologist Thomas Jesse Jones in *Education in Africa* (1922) and adapted by the Asquith Commission (1943-1944). The best solution – according to Kenneth Mellanby of the University College Ibadan in Nigeria – was to combine the Western ideas with indigenous culture and traditions. As a result, the accomplishments of higher learning in those places produced intellectual and political leaders.

The success of the African university – as the author continues – "emphasized institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and universal academic standards" (p. 329). The pursuit of an African university coincided with the golden age of American capitalism and its global expansion. In both cases, the same conflicts developed over the internal goods of disciplined study and the external goods of the university.

As the author asserts in Interlude III, the reforms that brought the new system of higher education also helped develop the Other University, with its regulations, bureaucracy, and requirements that affect the students' lives and has nothing to do with the daily routine in the labs and the classrooms. The "magical moments" within the institutions of higher learning "also produced that distinctly American character, the *convivial capitalist*," which granted the cultural elite a valuable place within the university, where curriculum reform introduced tutorial programs and general education curricula. Nonetheless, a wall was at the same time built between undergraduate and graduate course, between the college and the research university.

Observation is the key to understanding what really happened because of student demonstrations and demands. The equally important events addressed the need to build new dormitories, to construct new gyms, to establish job placement and career counseling services, to establish vocational and career counseling, to initiate orientation programs for first-year students, to design learning support programs and professional academic advisement, and to develop an administrative bureaucracy and professionalized institutional structures. Consequently, all these changes affected the relationship between students and the university, mainly because "the Other University was designed to manage the alienation, anxiety, aspiration, and striving of students in the age of higher education" (p. 350). By the same token, the new intellectual and moral ideas cultivated an overwhelming interest in the efficiency of the institution.

What needs to be done in our institutions of higher learning is best explained in the words the authors used for his Conclusion: *University is not enough*. The modern university treated in this project as a factory, with its rules and bureaucracy designed to regulate efficiency, while accumulating resources and capital, has evolved from the concept of *universitas* to what we now call *the university* – serving teaching staff, administration and above all, the students and the community. Several suggestions are made, but we are encouraged to focus on the university, on the one hand, and disciplined study and intellectual work, on the other hand. Not always the same, the university and its attributes pursuing "money, prestige, and power" will – in the author's view – still provide "credentials, jobs, social status and more." For all of us who share the same imagination and intellectual aspirations, everything in higher learning has been created and preserved in the name of knowledge. In conclusion, although the university is not enough, we still need to defend the academic sanctuary and protect the goods and practices of disciplined study. Being a scholar, researcher, administrator, and teacher, Wellmon has accomplished a very challenging task.

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