

IX

“Toothpaste back in the tube!?” is an excerpt from a forthcoming novel, tentatively entitled **IX** and set in the sometimes silly, sometimes serious, sometimes tragic world of higher education. Young adults pay fortunes to learn Zinn-Alinsky principles of Progressive Social Justice Warriors while administrators and their ally faculty live the high life. Peek inside for a quick look. This chapter features academic accreditation. It’s supposed to signal the quality of colleges and universities. So, how in God’s name did accreditation morph into toothpaste?

We’ll alert readers when the novel is published.

“Toothpaste back in the tube!?”

by
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Dean Tyrone C. Overstreet, PhD, CPA, bounded from his Cadillac Escalade at the side of the John J. Astor College of Business. He stopped dead in his tracks. Students were screaming,

“KILL COPS! KILL COPS! BURN ‘EM! BURN ‘EM! ...

KILL CAPITALISTS! KILL CAPITALIST! BURN ‘EM! BURN ‘EM! ...”

“Oops,” he mumbled to himself as he scurried around to the back door. Two bored firemen were stationed there and were out of sight. Their orders were unequivocal: Don’t upset the protesting students. Overstreet smiled, pointed at his watch and said, “Lib profs will soon herd ‘em to the cafeteria. Time for their midday feeding.”

They laughed and gave a thumbs up.

Okay kiddies, he snickered to himself as he rode the elevator to the top floor, *back to safe spaces, graham crackers and milk, coloring books and Play-Doh*. The exotic scent of perfume redirected his attention to the décolletage of a fellow passenger. The doors purred open. She glared at him until he looked up.

No sense of humor, he thought.

“Please,” the Dean gestured her to go first. It took him a second to place the face with a name and her College activity. She was the new Title IX Coordinator of Investigations and Adjudications housed in the office of the Assistant Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Black Lives Matter. He felt like wishing her good luck and thanking her for the show but merely smiled and said, “Have a nice day.”

Screaming students, threats of firebombs, and the deeply cut décolletage revealing huge breasts slipped from his thoughts as he bounded into his palatial office singing to himself:

Oh what a beautiful mornin’,

Oh what a beautiful day,

I’ve got a wonderful feelin’,

Everything’s going my way.

After months of attending seminars and preparing tons of documents, Dean Overstreet and a dozen associate and assistant deans, along with a small army of department chairs were poised to celebrate accreditation. For the past year, tensions in the administrative suites had run high. Now, everyone could relax. Hands down, it is the

most significant requirement in administrators' lives. Unsuccessful accreditation would end their ambitions.

In the bag, Dean Overstreet thought. Time to relax. The i's dotted, the t's crossed, everything spellchecked, a vacation seems about right.

He could handle anything that might now arise. After all, accreditation was a mere formality given the preliminary reports from the Accreditor Visitation Team, better known as "The Team." They were deans from other regional universities who showed up for a few days, looked solemn, and shuffled through a mountain of curated papers all in the name of assessing the quality-of-education at the John J. Astor College of Business.

No expense had been spared entertaining The Team at lunches, happy hours, and dinners. The best part, The John J. Astor College of Business Foundation, the Dean's "booze account," paid for them. Among the most expensive outings was a final private meeting in the Louis XIV Room at The Ritz Restaurant. Dean Overstreet and members of The Team relaxed, overindulged in foie gras, filet mignon, and the finest Bordeaux wine. Ties were now loosened and snifters of Remy Martin were served. The most important accreditation discussion was about to happen.

Dean Overstreet knew the Team members well. They had graduated from the same schools, attended the same professional meetings, and were deans at peer colleges in the tri-state region. He stood and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it's been an immense pleasure to work with you." A few looked a bit sleepy, so he decided to shorten his chat but make it impactful. "Let me assure you, one good turn deserves another." Their ears perked up. "I'll help shepherd your colleges through accreditation when it's my turn to

evaluate you.” He was simultaneously guaranteeing an excellent report from The Team. Logrolling at its academic best. “Working together,” Overstreet promised in well-understood bureaucratese, “we can accomplish continuous improvements at our business colleges.” He raised his glass and concluded, “To peer review.”

All stood and vigorously repeated, “To peer review!”

Although peer review is just like students grading each other’s exams, the deans would never allow them that privilege. Students weren’t mature enough to be trusted. Honesty was a well-honed adult skill.

Accounting Professor Dwight Conlin stepped into the Dean’s office and interrupted his thoughts, “Hey, Ty. Cold beer this afternoon at the Faculty Club?”

“Busy, my friend,” the Dean sang in response.

“You know where to find us.”

“Oooo-kay.” He’d get together with his accounting buddies when he returned from vacation. Today, he was preoccupied with the what to say at the Executive Meeting. Foremost was review and vote on the public announcement of accreditation. It had to be ready for publication. Delay was not an option. It wasn’t merely a matter of bragging. Positive news reports are statistically associated with increases in donations to the Dean’s “booze account.”

The meeting took priority over other long-delayed pleasures like a much-deserved vacation. It should, nevertheless, be wonderful. He wouldn’t miss it for the world.

Dean Overstreet tapped his coffee cup with a spoon: clink, clink, clink. “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s get started.”

With a copy of the “good news” in hand, Senior Associate Dean Ronald Griswald immediately stepped forward. “A most *excellent* public announcement, Dean Overstreet.” He turned to his colleagues and firmly said, “I propose we accept, by acclamation, the Dean’s announcement of our renewed accreditation.”

Several assistant deans simultaneously cheered, “I’ll second that.” The vote was quick, loud, and affirmative.

Dean Overstreet smiled, did a head nod toward the table of donuts, and said, “Before we get to the goodies, I’d like to take a minute to give a shoutout to Assistant Dean Sylvia Grey. The Team made special note of our new Code of Conduct. In today’s worldwide business, integrity is *sine que non*.” Confused looks prompted the Dean to say, “Essential, integrity is essential. Anyway, well done, Dr. Grey.” He began clapping and everyone quickly joined in.

Sylvia had fretted over writing the Code. A marketing professor, she had no background in Ethics, had never even taken an undergraduate course in Philosophy. The Dean quickly put her at ease. “Why reinvent the wheel?” She knew exactly what he meant. It took a few minutes surfing the net to find a Code that looked pretty good. She copied it word for word but, not recognizing any of the contributors, excluded its extensive list of citations. It was quite easy. She didn’t even have to read the whole thing. A few clicks of her word processor and she was done.

As clapping subsided, Dean Overstreet paused until he had everyone’s undivided attention. “You—everyone of you—made The Team feel at home at our *world-class* college. Thank you.”

The Booze Account also paid for the coffee and donuts at this morning's celebration. Dean Overstreet lead the way to the goodies. He never had eaten so much or drunk so much before becoming Dean. And it showed. His waistline had expanded several inches. Chocolate frosted donuts stuffed with cream filling were his favorite, but he helped himself to the gooey cinnamon kind, too. With every bite, he nonchalantly glanced from one subordinate colleague to another, expecting someone to chastise him with that all-too-familiar stare: *a fat man eating donuts?* No one dared even *that* subtle a criticism.

The celebration was physical—lots of handshakes and slaps on backs. Spills were bound to occur. The Dean dribbled a little coffee and goo on his tie. A young assistant dean had accidentally bumped him. Wide-eyed, he blurted, “Oops.” It was a good-natured “oops,” and the Dean's familiar smile almost put the underling at ease. His panic slipped to an uncomfortable, nervous smile, then downright happiness when the University photographer redirected the Dean's attention.

The photographer had taken many impromptu pictures and was ready to get one of the group. He grabbed the Dean by the elbow and moved him in front of a huge picture of University President Martha Bloomly. She would share credit even if she didn't lift a finger to help accomplish accreditation.

“Okay, let's close it up,” the photographer ordered. “Best I can tell, you don't have cooties.” Nobody laughed. “Close it up. Close it up.”

The Dean was jostled again and again.

“Move closer together. Come on. Remember, pictures add feeling to the good news.” All were in excellent spirits and the picture would certainly reflect it.

As soon as the photographer announced, “Done,” everybody rushed to get one of the few remaining donuts. All in all, eight-dozen had disappeared which signaled an end of the celebration.

Time for his final benediction, Dean Overstreet grabbed a nearby empty cup and tapped it with a spoon: clink, clink, clink. Chatter slowly subsided. Everybody grabbed their coffee cups knowing what was coming.

“Let’s recall our shared history. Some of our younger colleagues may not remember why we are so well-paid, more than most academics. Several decades ago, the Accreditor required business faculty to have a Ph.D. That standard immediately created significant demand for a product in short supply. Us.” They all nodded enthusiastically.

Coffee cups at the ready, he toasted, “Peer review is simply a wonderful way assess the quality of higher education. And, it’s worth every penny.” He paused to highlight his efficiency: “I might add, re-accreditation was done at just a little more than the two-and-a-half million it cost five years ago.” He uplifted his voice and concluded, “To peer review!”

In unison the crowd of administrators toasted, “To peer review.” But none drank the dregs of cold coffee remaining in their cups.

Assistant and associate deans and department chairs sat their coffee cups down and gave Dean Overstreet a rousing ovation. A real bonding experience. It brought tears to his eyes. A crumb clinging to his tie broke loose and fell to the floor. Everyone suddenly smiled. Each silently vowed never to dribble pastry crumbs from their clothes when they become dean.

They genuinely like me, thought the Dean. He was no better reading faces than anyone else.

As pleasant as the gathering was, he didn't linger with his bonding-mates. Vacation was calling.

"Sorry, I've gotta run," Overstreet announced while simultaneously slapping Senior Associate Dean Griswald on the back.

This is turning out to be a great day, he thought as he hurried back to his office.

Comfortably tucked in behind his ornately carved, oversized mahogany desk, Overstreet moseyed through one website after another, looking for just the right tropical paradise. It took a while to find his kind of vacation. There he was, drooling over an exotic five star hotel and spa on Waikiki Beach, Honolulu, Hawaii. It wasn't the hotel that was drool-worthy, however. A bikini-clad curvaceous beauty lounged on white sand inviting him with a come-hither allure. He could almost feel the warm breeze against his skin.

He reached across his desk and grabbed a brochure. The Academic Accounting Association was holding its annual meeting in Honolulu. He could easily justify dipping into the Foundation. All he needed to do was set up a few interviews with prospective administrators and faculty. He wouldn't even need to hire any of them. All that remained was approval from the provost and president. As long as they signed off on the request, and they did 100% of the time, he was home free.

If I don't spend it, somebody else will . . . I deserve this. I've earned this.

A knock startled Overstreet. Ms. Anderson rushed toward him as he belatedly said, “Come in.” She never waited for permission. His fingers fidgeted nervously for the key to close the full-color picture of the bikini-clad curvaceous beauty lounging on white sand. She sniggered at his effort to conceal what he’d been looking at, sat a bundle of envelops in front of him, and immediately left. The most important letter was on top. The return address included “Accreditor” and displayed a new rainbow logo with the caption “Observe Diversity #ImBlackToo.”

Dean Overstreet expected the letter’s bottom line: “Your College is hereby recognized for its excellence as a re-accredited college.”

“Congratulations to me,” Overstreet softly chanted to himself.

He lifted the envelope. It seemed a bit light. One page at most. His heart skipped a beat. A positive notice normally included several pages of recommendations for program improvements, making the envelope bulge a little bit. The Accreditor’s habit was to tip-its-hat to the latest buzzwords and requirements for courses like Black-Queer-Indigenous Business Studies, which, at this time in its history, is organized around its singular philosophy of Continuous International Progressivism.

Why’s the envelope not thicker? Tyrone wondered. Normally, he would grab his pearl-handled letter opener and nonchalantly slit the top of the envelope. Not this time. Overstreet tore open the envelope, slightly ripping the enclosed single-page.

Oops!

At the top was the rainbow logo with the caption “Observe Diversity #ImBlackToo.” As expected, the first paragraph—single-spaced, 10-pica—was pure rah-rah admin-blather. He skimmed it:

Greetings. As a reaffirmation applicant you would have been expected to improve faculty attendance at Accreditor conferences increase administrative staff, including hiring a Tzar of Diversity ...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he mumbled to himself. Suddenly, he darted back to “... you *would have been* expected to...”

“Oh my God!” Terror struck deep in his heart. His eyes quickly located the bottom line:

We have determined that your documents have not been submitted. In accordance with our standards, your application for re-accreditation continues under review.

PROBATION!? screamed through the Dean’s mind. “Continues under review” is bureaucratese for probation. That’s how every dean, provost, and president would read the otherwise benign words, “continues under review.”

We recommend that you submit all required documents at your earliest convenience.

Cordially yours,
Jerry Ditznel
Executive Director, Accreditor

Overstreet’s eyes darted to a credenza in a dark corner of his office. There sat several thick manila envelopes.

“OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD!”

Ms. Anderson rushed into the office without knocking. Pale as a ghost, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, the Dean looked like a heart attack victim. “Are you okay! Should I call an ambu—”

“Out! Out! Out!” he barked.

She turned and scurried out of the office. Frightened. She’d never seen him lose it like that. *Something’s really wrong.*

Overstreet hollered at Ms. Anderson, “Close the door!”

She scurried back—tripping but not falling—and closed the door.

In a blind panic, Overstreet scanned Ditznel’s letter for a telephone number.

“Damn!” he mumbled to himself. He turned quickly to his computer, found the Accreditor’s webpage and typed “Ditzel.” The response was just as quick: “no results.”

“It’s gotta be there!” He paused, took a deep breath, and began typing, again.

“Ditz—” Suddenly, pressure and tightening within his chest forced him to stop. Sharp pain radiated down both arms. He pulled open the top drawer, found a bottle of aspirin, and fumbled with the top until it popped off. He spilled out several pills onto his palm, tossed them in his mouth, and swallowed hard. They stuck in his throat. He grabbed his cup and drank the dregs of cold coffee. “Jesus, is this it? Am I dying?” He closed his eyes and began to hum a yoga chant: “Aummmmmmmmmmmmm...”

Soon, his pain subsided. *False alarm*, he thought. He took a deep breath and began the search, again. “Oh my!” Overstreet noticed he had misspelled “Ditznel.” He corrected his mistake and instantly got the number.

Overstreet didn’t ask his secretary to make the call. No one should “accidentally” overhear the conversation. It took several tense minutes to get through to the Executive Director. Ditznel had as many buffers running interference for him as Dean Overstreet did. On rare occasions when students caught him in the hallway, they never told him anything pleasant much less constructive. *I’d never get anything done if I had to talk to disgruntled students all day!* It was frustrating to be on the receiving end of buffers. A whisper from a time almost lost to memory fleetingly gnawed at his conscience, *Their problems may be important, too . . .*

“Hello!” Jerry Ditznel confidently bellowed, annoyed someone got through his defenses.

Overstreet began with a quivering voice: “Hey, how goes it, Jer?” Addressing Dr. Ditznel as “Jer” would hopefully remind of him of their personal history.

“I’m busy. Call ba—.”

Overstreet quickly continued before Ditznel hung up. “All documents are on the way. They’re on the way. I—”

Ditznel would have none of it: “You have verification and tracking numbers?”

“Ah, I’m sure we have them. Probably.”

“Of course, you have.” Ditznel didn’t believe him. “Refer to our procedures. In particular, Standard 6.A.13.B51.”

Overstreet decided to throw himself on the mercy of the Great Accrerator.

“Jer, you got the preliminary field report from the Accrerator Visitation Team. We’ve done everything we were supposed to do. Since South West Central State University just passed accreditation, we have to be affirmed, too. Our reports are exactly—” Overstreet abruptly stopped. He couldn’t say he copied the documents from South West Central, although everybody copies other recently accredited schools’ documents.

Accrerator rules are explicit and unambiguous: “Every college is unique and it should be reflected in the documentation.” In other words, each school must write their own story. Odd as it may sound and just as frustrating, nobody at Accrerator ever reads the thousands of pages anyway, much less audits whether the college actually does what

it says it does. Regardless, the last thing Overstreet could confess was another blatant violation of an Accreditor rule.

“We’ve done everything we’re supposed to do. Trust me. I wouldn’t lie.” After a short pause, Overstreet asked, “You there, Jer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Jesus, Jer, the documentation is compete.”

Silence, again. Overstreet was sweating and it peeked through the underarms of his shirt. His voice broke as he said, “We’ve been friends for years.”

Their history went back to their days in graduate school. They had been close friends, even sharing crib notes during the written portion of the comprehensive doctoral exams. Now, Ditznel was a very important person and Overstreet was on his knees.

“The documents are on the way, Jer. They’ll arrive any minute, tomorrow for sure.”

“You know that’s not the way we do things. Read Standard 6.A.13.B51.”

Okay, yeah, I know. But I thought we might make an exception this time.”

“Standard 6.A.13.B51 is clear. You’re asking me to violate the standard, too.”

“Okay, okay. But all the documents should have been there by now and are on the way for sure.” Overstreet couldn’t imagine anything more embarrassing than not being able to get important documents to their destination. If he can’t get this mess straightened out, he’ll be a joke. His name will become synonymous with bureaucratic incompetence. He had to figure a way out of this awful predicament.

“Then they should arrive, soon. Good. But you have to appreciate, because of your late submission, you’re status is continuing review, probation, until we get them *and* review them.”

The “review them” part was most worrisome. “For God’s sake, Jer, don’t do that!” The documents could sit on a bureaucrat’s desk for weeks. All the while, The John J. Astor College of Business would be on probation.

“It’s reported on our website here at Accreditor.”

“What?!”

“We’re following procedures.”

“Oh no! Jesus, Jer, take it down! Please!” Overstreet breathed deeply, gathering his thoughts, fixing his mind on what he had to do. “I’ll owe you. Big time. Name it.”

Ditznel paused for a second. He might be able once again to use Overstreet’s “crib notes,” so to speak. “I’ve got something you can help me with. My son, Jerry, Jr. is about to complete a PhD from Renaissance Tech University and needs a good job.”

Overstreet gulped hard. Tech was an online “education” program—a degree mill. The credential wasn’t worth the paper it was written on. Bringing his kid on board could prove awkward. He had announced far and wide that The John J. Astor College of Business was only hiring faculty who would take the school to the “next level.” And take him to the next level, too: President at North East State University. He’d never get there without successful accreditation. Feigning positive energy, he said, “Jerry, Jr. is our new faculty member!”

“You know what to expect from Jer Junior,” Ditznel said proudly. “Dependable. Loyal.”

A sigh of relief passed through Overstreet's mind like the tropical breeze he'd imagined for his vacation. The quid-pro-quo would work. He'd worry about details later. At this moment, nothing was more important to the school, and his job, than successful accreditation. No administrator ever survived accreditation failure.

There remained a not so minor problem: "So, you'll take it down?"

"Take it down?" Ditznel echoed.

"Probation. From your website. We gotta keep this confidential."

"I'm sure you can manage an acceptance letter to Jer, Jr. by the time your accreditation documents arrive here. Make the salary \$170k. Start date, beginning next semester."

"Done. I won't forget this, Jer." Overstreet's shirt was now sweat-soaked through and through.

"Okay, then," said Accreditor Executive Director Jerry Ditznel, as he abruptly ended the call.

The phone still in Overstreet's hand, its dial-tone buzzing softly, he rested back in his chair and whispered, "Thank ya' Jesus."

A knock on the door disturbed the quiet moment, just as his chest pain had begun to fade.

"Yeah."

His secretary was already in the room. "President Bloomly on line two."

No sooner had Overstreet pressed line two than a loud, shrieking voice yelled, "Have you seen *The City Ledger*?!"

That banshee could wake the dead, Overstreet thought. He held the phone a foot from his head. “No ma’am,” he answered, respectfully.

“The headline says, ‘Astor Business College Placed on Probation.’ What’s going on over there? I thought you had it all wrapped up. ‘No problem,’ you said. ‘In the bag,’ you said. Now I read this crap in the newspaper? In the damn newspaper!” President Bloomly stopped a mere second to catch her breath then quickly continued. “Along with thousands and thousands of readers!” The second “thousands” was mega-decibels louder than the first. “And most of those morons actually believe what’s printed in newspapers! Jesus, Overstreet, what in hell’s going on over th—”

“It’s all a terrible mistake,” Overstreet squeezed the words in edgewise as calmly as he could while respectfully insisting on her attention. “I’ve already taken care of it.”

“You have?” Martha’s sarcasm soaked through each word as she repeated, “You have?”

“Yes.” Overstreet said confidently.

“Then how are you going to expunge this *mistake* from the minds of all those readers? The thousands and thousands of readers of our local rag? And then there are the morons who listen to the readers repeat the damn story. ‘Did ya’ hear? Astor Business College is on probation.’ It’ll take on a life of its own. A total disgrace. To students. To faculty. To the citizens of our great state. *TO ME!*” She paused in an effort to sound calm, even presidential. She had to deliver her most important question with composure: “How are you going to put the toothpaste back in the tube?”

Overstreet wondered, *Did I hear her right?* All he could think to say was, “Toothpaste back in the tube?”

“Yes, toothpaste back in the tube! How!?”

“Toothpaste back in the tube?”

“Yes! Toothpaste back in the tube! How!?”

“I...I don't know. Can't we tell the newspaper that it was a mistake, that there was a simple glitch with the paperwork? That we're not really on probation.”

“Yes. Yes, we can. And that's exactly what's in process. But I didn't need you for that brilliant insight. My PR staff has already started that routine. The idiots at the newspaper are not the problem. They do what they're told. The simple truth: that won't put the toothpaste back in the tube!”

Overstreet genuinely wondered, *How do you put toothpaste back in the tube? Physically?*

President Bloomly sneered, “I think it's time for you to return to your first love, *Professor Overstreet.*” With that salutation, President Bloomly abruptly slammed down the phone.

“ ‘Professor’? Why call me—?” *My God, I was just fired!*

No one could see the sudden spanked-on-the-butt look on Professor Tyrone Overstreet's face. *I'm not the Dean anymore!* His ascension to administration—the deference, the recognition, the genuflections—had been exhilarating. He was never wrong. Then there was the money. *My salary. My expense accounts. My booze account! No more funds flowing freely from The John J. Astor College of Business Foundation to do with as I damn well please with no accountability.*

Stunned, he stared at nothing in particular, seemingly pinned to his seat, sitting perfectly still for what seemed like forever. Slowly, a kaleidoscope of memories appeared

from his heady days of teaching and research. Ancient history. Thoughts he hadn't had for years. *It was Bryan, that was his name, I think, and Lydia and Janice...* It had been forever since he thought of them and many more like them. His kids—students.

Return to my first love? Teaching?

Bloomly meant to ridicule and punishment Overstreet. Administrators generally hate teaching and research, the meat and potatoes of being a professor. Returning an admin-type back to his “first love” was public censure. Shameful failure. Not so for this dean.

I can remember a time when I couldn't wait to get to school. And always through the front door. The kids were great fun! I taught them to control capitalists for the good of us all. Informed by Critical Race Theory, Generally Accepted Environmental Social Governance Accounting Principles are beauty and justice. I delighted in the all-consuming hours playing with ideas, writing, making a contribution, and enforcing proper business behavior. It was worthwhile. Why in hell would I want to be University President? Well...besides the money?

Professor Overstreet bounded from his seat, tore off his coffee and goo-stained tie, and headed to the Faculty Club.

Screw you, Ditznel!

Hey Dwight, get a cold one ready for me!

I've got a wonderful feelin',

Everything's goin' my way.

Future events in Tyrone's life include,

1. He heard through the grapevine that some sort of “charges” were brought against him.
2. Weeks later, he received official notice from the University Diversity Coordinator. He was accused of “micro-rape” during an encounter in an elevator. No specifics were provided. No accuser was named. No trial date was set.
3. He was astounded when a total stranger spat in his face and screamed, “Micro-
rapist!”