

Symposium

Science, the Humanities, and the University

Commentaries on the role of science in the university usually bemoan the supposed scarcity of American scientists and engineers, especially in comparison to the numbers graduating from schools in China and India. Whatever the merits of those concerns, far less attention is paid to the ways science has transformed—and continues to transform—higher education, especially the humanities. In the essays that follow, five non-scientists remark on the state of the modern university. First, Patrick J. Deneen argues that science and global competition have hollowed out the liberal arts. Ivan Kenneally connects the contradictions of today's university to America's unique relationship to modernity. Peter Augustine Lawler explores the tension between freedom and dignity on campus and beyond. Shilo Brooks brings us Nietzsche's account of the different characters of scientists and philosophers. And Rita Koganzon picks apart the meritocracy lament in recent memoirs of Ivy League education.

Science and the Decline of the Liberal Arts

Patrick J. Deneen

The scandalous state of the modern university can be attributed to various corruptions that have taken root in the disciplines of the humanities. The university was once the locus of humanistic education in the great books; today, one is more likely to find there indoctrination in multiculturalism, disability studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, a host of other victimization studies, and the usual insistence on the centrality of the categories of race, gender, and class. The humanities today seem to be waning in presence and power in the modern university in large part because of their solipsistic irrelevance, which has predictably increased students' uninterest in them.

Although critics of the hijacking of the humanities might be inclined to see their new irrelevance as a cause for celebration, it should be a deep source of concern and the impetus for renewed efforts to insist upon their

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central place in the liberal arts, rightly understood. However, to reclaim the rightful place of the humanities, it is necessary first to diagnose the origins of their descent. Those origins must be seen on a wide canvas, not merely starting in the liberationist climate of the 1960s, but having a pedigree that goes back centuries rather than decades. The crisis of the humanities in fact began in the early modern period with the argument that a new science was needed to replace the “old science” of the liberal arts, a new science that no longer sought merely to *understand* the world and its creatures, but to *transform* them. This impulse gave rise first to a scientific revolution in theory, and eventually a scientific, industrial, and technological revolution in fact. Importantly, it afforded theories of rationalization and standardization in method, while rejecting older claims of tradition and culture, of cult and creed, of myth and story. It has given rise to unprecedented prosperity, opportunity, openness, discovery, and technology—contributing greatly to what Francis Bacon called “the relief of man’s estate.” But at the same time, in displacing the humanities, it has made modern humanity increasingly subject to a kind of ungovernable hubris. Ultimately, modern science aspires to reach beyond the mastery of nature to the mastery of *human* nature, the last frontier for its dominion. The displacement of the humanities has led inevitably to a Gnostic disdain for the human.

A different conception of knowledge formerly lay at the heart of liberal education. It was pre-modern in origins, mostly religious and cultural, deriving its authority from the faith traditions and cultural practices that one generation sought to pass on to the next. It still exists on many campuses as a palimpsest that a discerning eye can yet read—the Gothic buildings; the titles “professor,” “dean,” and “provost”; the flowing robes donned once or twice a year for ceremonial occasions—these and other holdover presences and practices are fragments of an older tradition all but dead on most college campuses, but reminders, nonetheless, of what had once been the animating spirit of these institutions.

For centuries, the humanistic disciplines were at the heart of the university; while the sciences were an integral part of the original liberal arts education, they were considered the main avenue toward understanding the natural and created order of which mankind was the crown. Recognizing man as the most deserving object of study but, by the same token, the most challenging, this older tradition sought to foster an ethic of humility: to seek to understand while admitting to the insufficiency of the human capacity ever to fully understand.

The “older science” recognized that a unique feature of man was his capacity for liberty: not driven by mere instinct, man was singular among

the creatures for his ability to choose, to consciously direct and order his life. This liberty, as understood by the ancients and Biblical religions, was subject to misuse and excess: some of the oldest stories in our tradition, including the story of the fall from Eden, told of the human propensity to use freedom badly. To understand ourselves was to understand how to use our liberty well, especially how to govern appetites that seemed insatiable. The liberal arts recognized that submission to these limitless appetites would result in the loss of our liberty and reflect our enslavement to desire. They sought to encourage that hard task of negotiating what was permitted and what was forbidden, what constituted the highest and best use of our freedom and what actions were hubristic, immoral, wrong. To be free—*liberal*—was itself an *art*, something that was learned not by nature or instinct, but by refinement and education. At the center of the liberal arts were the humanities, the education of how to be a human being. Each new generation was encouraged to consult the great works of our tradition, the vast epics, the classic tragedies and comedies, the reflections of philosophers and theologians, the revealed Word of God, those countless books that sought to teach us what it was to be human—above all, how to use our liberty well.

The Rise of the Multiversity

In the nineteenth century, U.S. institutions of higher learning began to emulate the German universities, dividing themselves into specialized disciplines and placing stress on expertise and the discovery of new knowledge. The religious underpinnings of the university dissolved; the comprehensive vision that religion had afforded the humanities was no longer a guide. What had been the organizing principle for the efforts of the university—the tradition from which the faculty received their calling—was systematically disassembled. In the middle part of the twentieth century, renewed emphasis upon scientific training and technological innovation—spurred especially by massive government investment in the “useful arts and sciences”—further reoriented many of the priorities of the university system.

When conservative critics of our universities nowadays lament the decline of liberal education, they usually decry its replacement by a left-leaning politicized agenda. But the deeper truth is that liberal education has been more fundamentally displaced by scientific education buttressed by the demands of global competition. While conservatives might wish to apportion blame to those increasingly irrelevant faculty whose post-

modernism has become a form of stale institutional orthodoxy, the truth is that the rise of this sort of faculty was a response to conditions that were already making liberal education irrelevant, a self-destructive effort to make the humanities “up to date.” These purported radicals—mostly bourgeois former children of the 1960s—were not agents of liberation, but rather symptoms of the neglect of the liberal arts in a dawning new age of science reinforced by global competition.

Declaring the idea of the *university* to be passing into archaism, the president of the University of California, Clark Kerr, hailed in his 1963 Godkin Lectures (eventually expanded and published as the hugely influential *The Uses of the University*) the rise of a new system, the *multi-versity*, an entity “central to the further industrialization of the nation, to spectacular increases in productivity with affluence following, to the substantial extension of human life, and to worldwide military and scientific supremacy.” The incentives and motivations of the faculty would be brought increasingly into accord with the new science’s imperative to create new knowledge: faculty training would emphasize the creation of *original work*, and tenure would be achieved through the publication of a corpus of such work and the approval of far-flung experts in the field. A market in faculty hiring and recruitment was born.

The university was to be restructured to stress innovation and progress. Educational reformers followed the lead of John Dewey in striving to replace “book learning” with *doing*. The past was understood to offer little guidance in a world oriented toward future progress. Dewey argued that

that which is taught [today] is thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to the changes that will certainly occur in the future. It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception.

At the heart of the old university was the library, normally a beautiful building and almost always occupying a central place on campus, in keeping with its central place in the transmission of culture and tradition. In Dewey’s formulation, the library’s place of preeminence was instead occupied by the laboratory. (Indeed, John Dewey began the “Lab School” in Chicago, replacing a curriculum based on books with “experiential learning.”) Core curricula—formed originally out of an understanding of what older generations had come to believe necessary for the formation of fully human

beings—were displaced increasingly by either “distribution requirements” or no requirements whatsoever, in the belief that young students should be free to establish their course of study according to their own lights.

In response to these tectonic shifts, the humanities began to question their place within the university. Their practitioners still studied the great texts, but if the practice remained the same, the purpose was increasingly unclear. Did it make sense any longer to teach young people the challenging lessons of how to use freedom well, when increasingly the scientific world seemed to make those lessons unnecessary? Could an approach based on culture and tradition remain relevant in an age that valued, above all, innovation and progress? How could the humanities prove their worth, in the eyes of administrators and the broader world?

Liberalism and Liberation

These doubts within the humanities became the fertile seedbed for self-destructive tendencies. Informed by Heideggerian theories that placed primacy on the liberation of the will, first poststructuralism and then postmodernism took root. These and other approaches, while apparently hostile to the rationalist claims of the sciences, were embraced out of the need to conform to the academic demands being set by the natural sciences, especially for “progressive” knowledge. Faculty could demonstrate their progressiveness by showing the backwardness of the texts; they could “create knowledge” by showing their own superiority to the authors they studied; they could display their anti-traditionalism by attacking the very books that were the basis of their discipline. Philosophies that preached “the hermeneutics of mistrust,” that exulted in exposing the way texts were deeply informed by inegalitarian prejudices, and that even questioned the idea that texts contained a “teaching” at all, offered the humanities the possibility of proving themselves relevant in the terms set by the modern scientific approach. By adopting a jargon only comprehensible to a few “experts,” they could emulate the scientific priesthood—betraying the original mandate of the humanities to guide students through the cultural inheritance and teachings of the classic books. Professors in the humanities showed their worth by destroying the thing they studied.

Underlying this auto-immolation was an acceptance of the modern understanding of *liberty*. For the humanities, liberty had long been understood to be the achievement of hard discipline, a victory over appetite and desire. But in the twentieth century, the humanities adopted the modern, scientific understanding, which holds that liberty is constituted by the

removal of obstacles, by the overcoming of limits, by the transformation of the world—whether the world of nature or the nature of humanity itself. Education thus came to be seen as a process of liberation, not the cultivation of self-restraint. Postmodernism sought to expose all forms of power and control, implying that the ideal human condition was one of complete liberty—even the liberty from what was once understood to be human.

And so, in an effort to outdo their scientific competitors, the humanities became the most conspicuously liberative of the disciplines, even challenging (albeit fecklessly) the legitimacy of the scientific enterprise. Natural conditions—such as those inescapably linked to the biological facts of human sexuality—came to be regarded as “socially constructed,” including “gender” and “heteronormativity.” Nature was no longer a standard in any sense, since nature was now manipulable. Why accept any of the facts of biology when those “facts” could be altered? If man had any kind of “nature,” then the sole permanent feature that seemed acceptable was the centrality of will—the raw assertion of power over any restraints or limits that would otherwise define him, and the endless possibilities of self-creation.

Contemporary circumstances have only accelerated the demise of the humanities. In the absence of forceful defenses of their existence on today’s campuses, a combination of demands for “usefulness” and “relevance,” along with the reality of shrinking budgets, are likely to make the humanities an ever smaller part of the university. They will persist in some form as a “boutique” showcase, an ornament that indicates respect for high learning, but the trajectory of the humanities continues to be one of decline.

While few professors of the humanities are now able to articulate grounds for protest, I would think the humanities of old would be able to muster a powerful argument against this tendency. The warning would be simple: at the end of the path of liberation lies enslavement. Liberation from all obstacles is finally illusory, because human appetite is insatiable and the world is limited. Without mastery over our desires, we will be eternally driven by them, never satisfied by their attainment.

The response of the leadership of our nation and our institutions of higher learning to the recent economic crisis is not promising in this regard. Absent in the attempt to master the situation with quasi-scientific tools—the calls for regulation, for better technical knowledge of the financial markets—is a simple but forgotten moral truth: We cannot live beyond our means.

At colleges across the land, panel discussions organized on the economic crisis have bemoaned such things as the absence of oversight, a lax regulatory regime, failures of public and private entities to exercise diligence in dispensing credit or expanding complex financial products. But what university president or leader has admitted that there was some culpability on the part of his *own* institution for failing to well-educate its students? After all, it was the leading graduates of the elite institutions of the nation who occupied places of esteem in financial and political institutions throughout the land that helped to precipitate this crisis. Our universities readily take credit for their Rhodes scholars and Fulbright award winners. What of those graduates who helped foster an environment of avarice and get-rich-quick schemes? Are we so assured that they did not learn exceedingly well the lessons that were taught them in college?

Reclaiming Liberal Education

If we are to avoid the excesses of modernity—the flattening of the soul, an ethic of consumption, the depletion of the world’s resources—we must seek to restore the liberal arts. While a great patchwork of liberal arts colleges remains, most liberal arts institutions have been deeply shaped by the presuppositions of the scientific outlook. Hiring and promotion are made increasingly in accordance with demands of research productivity. Liberal arts departments and colleges operate in the shadow of major research institutions at which scientific-seeming priorities dominate—and so they have internalized those priorities, even if they are not well suited to a liberal arts setting. As a result, many of these institutions incoherently aspire to elite status by aping the research universities.

Yet their reconstitution is not wholly out of reach. When we consider the history of the liberal arts, we rightly recognize a variety of different institutions, most (at least once) religiously-affiliated. Most were formed with some relationship to the communities in which they were built—whether their religious traditions, attentiveness to the sorts of career prospects that the local economy would sustain, a close connection to the “elders” of the locality, a strong identification with place, and the likelihood of a student body drawn from nearby. Most sought a liberal education not to fully liberate their students from place and the “ancestral,” but to steep them in the traditions whence they came, deepening their knowledge of the sources of their beliefs, seeking to return them to their communities where they would be expected to contribute to civic wellbeing and continuity.

Until the twentieth century, most classical liberal arts institutions founded within a religious tradition required not only knowledge of the great texts of the tradition—including and especially the Bible—but corresponding behavior that constituted a kind of “habituation” in the virtues learned in the classroom. Compulsory attendance at chapel or Mass, parietal rules, adult-supervised extracurricular activities, and required courses in moral philosophy (often taught by the president of the respective college) sought to integrate the humanistic and religious studies of the classroom with the daily lives of the students.

Based upon a classical or Christian understanding of liberty, this form of education was undertaken with an aim to pointing to our dependence—not our autonomy—and the need for self-governance. As the essayist and farmer Wendell Berry has written, constraint

is not the condemnation it may seem. On the contrary, it returns us to our real condition and to our human heritage, from which our self-definition as limitless animals has for too long cut us off. Every cultural and religious tradition that I know about, while fully acknowledging our animal nature, defines us specifically as *humans*—that is, as animals (if that word still applies) capable of living not only within natural limits but also within cultural limits, self-imposed. As earthly creatures, we live, because we must, within natural limits, which we may describe by such names as “earth” or “ecosystem” or “watershed” or “place.” But as humans, we may elect to respond to this necessary placement by the self-restraints implied in neighborliness, stewardship, thrift, temperance, generosity, care, kindness, friendship, loyalty, and love.

An education based in a set of cultural conditions would take its lead from nature and work alongside it, through such practices as agriculture, craftsmanship, worship, story, memory, and tradition; it would not seek nature’s capitulation. It would take as its fundamental responsibility the transmission of culture—not its rejection or transcendence. It would avoid the sort of deracinated philosophy recommended by an education in mere “critical thinking” and would not bend to the intellectual itinerancy demanded by our global economic system.

Finally, a restored liberal education would not be a liberation from “the ancestral” or from nature, but rather an education in the limits that culture and nature impose upon us—an education in living in ways that do not tempt us to Promethean forms of individual or generational self-aggrandizement. Particularly in an age in which we are becoming all too familiar with the consequences of living solely in and for the present,

when too many among us are failing to live within our means—whether financially or environmentally—we would be well served to restore the proper understanding of liberty: not as liberation from constraint, but rather, as a capacity to govern ourselves. Such self-governance, as commended by ancient and religious traditions alike, makes possible a truer form of liberty—liberty from enslavement to our appetites, and from those appetites’ destructive power.