

The Liberal Arts Bubble

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I'm not certain the general higher education bubble will burst anytime soon. Yes, costs have exceeded all reason, not only in tuition but also in student housing and books. And, yes, the economic value of a university degree is less evident and alternative forms of credentialing regularly sprout up. But there's still the probability that the federal government will continue to pour billions into higher education—not because it's rational, but because the American people have been persuaded that it's somehow disgraceful not to give all a society can to the education industry. Anything less is to shortchange the next generation and consign America to permanent international second-class status.

Not only have we convinced ourselves as a nation that there is no substitute for an American college degree, we have convinced the rest of the world as well. We have, it is said, the best educational system and product in the world. To be fair, there is some truth to this. Not because ours is excellent, but because the rest of the world is, for now and for the foreseeable future, less than adequate. I've been in the Middle East working in education for the better part of the last decade, and I can attest that education abroad, even in those fields most prized such as engineering, medicine, and computer science, is seriously flawed and they know it. Part of the reason why the bubble in America will be a while in bursting is the influx of paying foreign students to our collegiate and graduate programs in all the professional and technical fields where America, by comparison, excels.

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As has been the case for some time now, however, very few of these students from abroad are here to study the liberal arts, especially the humanities. In this they're not far different from American students who long ago started to abandon the liberal arts for other fields. What was once normative—that Jake or Suzie would go off to college and study some history, some literature, learn a second language, and perhaps major in philosophy or classics—has not been the case for years. In the liberal arts the bubble burst—or more exactly started fizzling out—long ago. But what exactly was it that caused this long and painful collapse?

Let's start by looking at some numbers. In 1970–1971, American colleges and universities awarded just about 840,000 bachelor's degrees. While the number of bachelor's degrees in English language and literature had already declined to 64,000, that figure still represented almost 8 percent of all graduates. Business programs accounted for 115,000 degrees, or just under 14 percent. By 2008, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded rose to 1,563,069—virtually double—but the number of English and literature graduates fell to 55,038, or just 3.5 percent of all graduates. Meanwhile, business majors now accounted for almost 22 percent of all graduates. Indeed, business, health professions, and education now account for over 35 percent of all majors. By comparison, history accounts for only 2.2 percent of all graduates.

I could go on, and will: more students now major in something styled “family and consumer science” than in foreign languages, foreign literature, and linguistics combined. Well over twice as many students major in “parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies” as major in both philosophy and religious studies in our four-year colleges and universities. In 2008, mathematics and statistics accounted for all of 15,000 degrees; yet, degrees in “security and protective services” rose to over 40,000.¹

Now, I have nothing against parks and recreation or protective services. My only point is that what once was the collegiate norm or close thereto—the study of liberal arts—is today barely a sad little blip on the radar of higher education.

By the 1990s, a number of problems with the liberal arts—some long-standing, some recently self-generated—combined to overthrow whatever pride of place the liberal arts may have had in American higher education.

¹See the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reports (<http://nces.ed.gov/annuals/>) and, for 2000 through 2009, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System documents (<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>). The situation in graduate education is even bleaker for the humanities and indeed for all the liberal arts. Of the 656,800 master's degrees awarded in 2008–2009, over 50 percent were concentrated in two fields: education (27 percent) and business (26 percent). Master's degrees in English accounted for a mere 1.9 percent!

Of the long-standing problems with the liberal arts, everyone knows something. Especially in America, the land of work, invention, and continual progress, these seemingly antique and elite studies have always had their difficulties. The liberal arts were historically conceived as a form of study for the children of the leisured classes, young men who could learn important scientific, philosophic, and cultural matters for their own sake and not for the sake of making a living. Over the years our civilization offered these studies not simply to the rich and well-born, but to all who would come to them with curiosity and good will, young women as well as young men. Still, the mark of a liberal education seemed to be study not for employment or utility, nor for training or technical knowledge, but study for the sake of knowing more about the world and our place within it.

It was still called “liberal” education, not because it was in the domain of those who were born “free” from the pressures of having to learn a trade or enter a profession, but because it liberated the mind from the narrower confines of highly directed studies. These liberal studies freed the mind to think broadly and comprehensively. The pursuit of the liberal arts gave us a wider and more complex picture of ourselves, the world, and the universe. We were now free to follow our curiosity about the deepest and most important matters of life, while infusing that study with the accumulated art, music, and literature of civilization that were part of the great treasury of the liberal arts.

Appealing as that surely sounds, we Americans have always been a little skeptical of the value of the liberal as opposed to the more useful and productive arts. On the one hand, by the time we established ourselves as a nation, we had colleges of learning in almost every state. These were generally founded as religious institutions, to be sure, but each was devoted to improving the life of the mind as well as the salvation of souls. Nor can anyone today look at the lives so many of the great Founders of this nation and not be impressed by the sweep and depth of their learning. We cannot read even a page of the Federalist Papers without being struck by the breadth of classical and historical knowledge not only of the Founders, but of those who were reading what they were writing in the newspapers of the day.

On the other hand, we knew we were an agricultural and commercial people, a nation of progress and production, and in any contest between the liberal and the productive arts, the liberal arts were very often found on the

short end. In his first Thanksgiving proclamation, for example, Washington noted the acquisition and diffusion of useful knowledge as a particularly worthy blessing of the Almighty. He made no mention of any particular gifts of liberal learning. In this Washington was echoing something of the words of the Constitution itself, which singles out the importance of “Science and useful Arts” as entitled to particular national protection.²

Even Jefferson—no slouch he in terms of being liberally educated—when the time came to establish various schools at the University of Virginia, urged that a college be set up to offer instruction to such artisans as “machinists, metallurgists, distillers, [and] soapmakers.” These various useful, mechanical, and manual trades would, by Jefferson, have their studies graced with the title “philosophy.” To be exact, they would be called colleges of “technical philosophy.”³

Remember, moreover, the American Philosophical Society, which Benjamin Franklin founded in 1769, was a society established specifically for the promotion of “useful Knowledge,” that is, for the promotion of science understood as the mastery of nature and improvement of the human condition and not simply its comprehension. Thus, Franklin would write for the society essays on such “philosophical” matters as the cause and cure of smoky chimneys and on stoves that could consume all their own gasses.⁴ Worthy topics without doubt, but hardly what we today would recognize as “liberal.”⁵

²This phrase comes from article I, section 8, clause 8 of the United States Constitution—known as the Copyright Clause or the Intellectual Property Clause—which empowers the United States Congress: “To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.”

³See Eugene F. Miller, “On the American Founders’ Defense of Liberal Education in a Republic,” *The Review of Politics* 46, no. 1 (January 1984): 78–79. See also Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Here’s where I would like to call upon the readers of *Academic Questions* for help. I remember reading, years and years ago (where I have no idea), of a university committee sometime in the nineteenth century critical of the establishment of a department of Greek and Latin classics at their university. What this country needed, the committee argued, was hardly the “classics.” It needed young men instructed in the agricultural, mechanical, and navigational arts. It needed forward-, not backward-looking intellects; it needed an education productive of citizens not nostalgics. But it wasn’t simply that a classically trained scholar was useless. The committee’s position was that such an individual was a positive *opponent* of American prosperity and progress. Like the Indians (the account read), who in their backwardness would not do anything if their fathers had not done it and who would not think any new idea true or good if it went counter to their fathers’ beliefs, those who had a liberal education that encouraged them to look to the past for truth and guidance were also the enemies of America and of progress. If anyone knows where this story might have been recounted, please let me know: Jagresto@newmexico.com.

Lest such a view seem wildly out of step with our history, I would only ask you to go back and read John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1944 and 1966), esp. 223–26. With the coming of modern science, Dewey admonishes us against looking backward for any real or valuable knowledge, though, happily, without any references to the retrograde nature of Native Americans.

Critiques of liberal education along these lines are hardly rare. Even John Locke, a man of the broadest and most philosophical of educations, could write, again regarding classical languages:

Can there be any thing more ridiculous than that a father should waste his own money and his son's time in setting him to learn the *Roman language*, when at the same time he designs him for a trade, wherein he having no use of *Latin*, fails not to forget that little which he [studied], and which 'tis ten to one he abhors for the ill usage it procured him? [Why should a child] be forced to learn the rudiments of a language which he is never to use in the course of [his] life, and neglect all the while the writing a good hand and casting accounts, which are of great advantage in all conditions of life, and to most trades indispensably necessary?⁶

Moving ahead to the years after the Founding, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that everything that is particularly American—our religious beliefs, our habits, our commercial nature, everything—seems to conspire “to divert [our] minds from the pursuit of science, literature and the arts...and to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects. His passions, his wants, his education, and everything about him seem to unite in drawing the native of the United States earthward.”⁷ To be certain, literacy is universal in society, and so the life of the mind is opened to all. But we soon learn that “the labors of the mind,” can be turned from learning for its own sake towards practicality, and that learning can be “a powerful means of acquiring fame, power, or wealth” (39).

In America, Tocqueville noticed, “everyone is in motion, some in quest of power, others of gain. In the midst of this universal tumult, this incessant conflict of jarring interests, this continual striving of men after fortune, where is that calm to be found which is necessary for the deeper combinations of the intellect?” (42). To us, “every machine that spares labor, every instrument

⁶John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), sec. 164. The “ill usage” the study of Latin procured for our hapless student is the abuse, the whippings he was forced to suffer to learn a grammar both foreign to his situation and useless for his future. How worthless this and other like studies are to the everyday conduct of real life Locke underscores with sarcasm—“Would not a Chinese who took notice of this way of breeding, be apt to imagine that all our young gentlemen were designed to be teachers and professors of the dead languages of foreign countries, and not to be men of business in their own?” (sec. 168).

⁷Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (1835; New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 37. Further references to this work will be cited within the text.

that diminishes the cost of production, every discovery that facilitates pleasures or augments them, seems to be the grandest effort of the human intellect” (45). In brief, unlike science and the arts in more aristocratic societies, Americans “will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require that the beautiful should be useful” (48).

Still, despite all this skepticism regarding liberal education, by far the overwhelming number of colleges and universities in America before the mid-nineteenth century were liberal arts institutions. Even the curricula of the majority of colleges established for the newly liberated freeman after the Civil War were fairly exact copies of liberal colleges. This, in part, is what made Booker Washington and the vocational emphasis of Tuskegee so singular an institution in its day.

But what kept Americans from tossing liberal education and liberal institutions aside, given our deep utilitarian and practical bent? A few things, I think. First, despite admiration for the work of Booker T. Washington, many Americans understood that DuBois was correct in seeing that the liberal arts had something to offer that was fitting for man as man. We are, as a species, a curious and inquisitive bunch, full of wonder and full of questions. It seems fitting that at least some of our youth should be allowed—nay, encouraged—to pursue inquiry into serious and perennial questions.

Second, the liberal arts, especially the humanities, were the Keepers of the Culture. There was Shakespeare and Milton and Mozart and Rembrandt and...well, the list is long and rich. The same impulse that led Americans to make fun of high culture, yet still build an opera house in every frontier village, the same impulse that led us to attend serious Shakespearean productions while we snickered at and enjoyed all the parodies of Shakespeare around—this was indicative of both our admiration for and our anxiety about the liberal arts.

Third, in our more serious moments we knew that the books comprising the liberal arts unquestionably helped make us who we were. To be sure, George Washington lacked a liberal education, and we would not have been a nation without him. But Jefferson and Madison, Hamilton and Adams—indeed, so many of the Fathers—were exquisitely educated in all the arts and sciences of their day. Without their readings in Livy, Locke, and Montesquieu, without the human models and warnings in Plutarch, without Blackstone and Addison and Steele, without the majesty of the King James Bible, there would have been no America as we know it.

What is it that kept Americans from thoroughly rejecting this elitist, backward-looking, nonproductive type of education from the start? Perhaps it was that, while seemingly of no use, *it was of immense use!* The liberal arts served a great and lasting *public function*. From the history, literature, and philosophy they acquired in their educations, the Founders shaped this nation.

Now move ahead two hundred years. What of all this is left? First, since the liberal arts were never designed to be of “use” in any narrow sense—that is, to prepare us for a trade or help us get a high-paying job—they were always at a disadvantage when measured by that yardstick. But we had always managed, more or less, to show that such was the wrong yardstick to measure this type of education. It was no more correct to ask philosophy to help us become better cooks and chefs than it was to ask a culinary arts program to offer classes on Aristotle. Yet, somewhere we lost the ability to say that while our studies were of no immediate or vocational use, they were really and truly useful in the grandest sense—in the sense the Founders might have understood.

Actually, we may have done something worse. We pretended that we really were of use to the various trades, professions, and vocations. We convinced ourselves that everyone from nurses to electrical engineers would be better as people and as professionals if they took a few liberal arts offerings—perhaps one of our newer offerings in gender studies or on post-colonial literature and criticism. But nurses and electricians saw the silliness of that from the start, and only the pompous and somewhat arrogant liberal artist thought that this piece of inanity was true. (Yes, “arrogant” for at least two reasons. First, the thought that nurses might be better human beings—perhaps more sensitive or open to the human condition—by taking a few of our courses, is more than a bit presumptuous. Second, arrogant because we rarely if ever thought that we’d be better people and intellects if we in the humanities would deign to take a few nursing or engineering courses. Nope—the benefits always flowed from us to them.)

Because we seemed not to be able to articulate our value to America and Americans in the grandest sense, in the sense as I say the Founders would have understood, we often meekly tried to present ourselves as nicely instrumental. Sometimes we’d say that while we were not a preparation for any particular career, we were good for all careers. There’s a sense, of course, in which this has always been true: in all our studies from history to classical and modern languages to literature and mathematics we taught our students

to think more systematically, write more clearly, and see the world both in its complexity and unity. But all too often we over-stretched. Most careers need training in the customs, needs, and techniques of the field. Just because one knows plenty about, say, Molière or Old Norse grammar doesn't mean one will do well in the financial markets or the airlines industry. And, of course, the matter becomes worse when graduate school narrowness takes over what used to be the breadth of our undergraduate offerings, or when Molière is overturned and Old Norse grammar is jettisoned for today's newer offerings in modern criticism or tendentious social proselytizing masquerading as liberal education.

Still, the impetus to say that we, too, are practical, we too are utilitarian, is understandable in the America described so sharply by Tocqueville. What is not understandable is how, from the end of the 1960s forward, the liberal arts took the knife and committed public suicide. Or, to keep the metaphor of the bubble, how, with a thousand sharp pins, the denizens of the bubble kept poking the protective film around them till it simply deflated and fell.

The liberal arts did this in at least three ways, ways well enough known to regular readers of this journal. First, the liberal arts took a universe of study that had always attracted the best and most curious of students and turned tables on them. Our best students gravitated to our subjects—to the classical languages, to literature, to history, to literature, to philosophy—out of a desire to gain insight into humanity's largest and most important issues. They wanted to know all they could about who they were and what potential they might have; they wanted to see models of good and bad, noble and debased; they wanted to learn the heights of human artistry and read the most powerful literature; they wanted to know more about the most important human things. These students had, in sum, a curiosity about the world and their place in it, and a desire to gain some insight into the good, the just, and the beautiful.

Satisfaction of this desire is what the older liberal arts promised, and often delivered. Both the Philosopher and the Poet have this in common, Aristotle tells us, that they both begin in Wonder. It was this wonder, this curiosity about amazing things *out there* that animated the old liberal arts at their best. Students have not lost this desire, this ability to wonder. But now there's nothing for them to grab hold of. In place of wonder, we are told that the new liberal arts are the home of "criticism." "Critical thinking," not discovery and delight, is its mantra. In place of wonder, then understanding, we now pride ourselves on our skepticism.

Since I've mentioned the Founders more than once, let's look at how most courses in American history approach them. Is it to see what the Founders saw, to understand the difficulties they faced and the reasons why they took this path rather than that? Is it to understand why their views on democracy were so complex, or how they saw the relationship between liberty and equality, localism and nationalism, property and freedom, or freedom and slavery?

Or is it to see, rather, how far they fell short, especially given our contemporary ideologies? To see, perhaps, how they were really little more than hypocrites or racists or fat cats? The way that leads to wonder and learning and, to be sure, eventually to judgment, is abandoned, and in its place we have courses that teach us not to comprehend important insights and arguments, but to begin by assuming that all insights and arguments are covers for interests and desires, are rationalizations—never reasons.⁸

Beyond this, the broadest and most public reason for turning away from the liberal arts had to do with how all the finest aspects of liberal studies were strangled by the professoriate in the name of destroying the legacy of dead white males. The whole story is too long, too painful, and too familiar to recount here. But when the academy itself said that the core subjects of the liberal arts were not good, that they were the homes of oppressors rather than enlighteners, who would wish to pursue them? We knew they hardly helped one form a good career or land a good job; now we were told by our universities that the liberal arts were worse than useless—they were bad.

Finally, when our students and their parents were shown that in the place of these old white, racist, and elitist studies would be substituted courses designed to teach Jake and Suzie to see the world as their professors envision it—with teachings that instruct them in the views of the new social justice, with courses that show them the evils of a country most of them admired, and with literature designed to proselytize for the various isms that made up the social ideology of the academic class—well, then, the bubble finally burst.⁹

⁸Do not, dear Reader, think that the banner of skepticism or criticism is only carried by the academic Left. The pseudo-Socratic stance—the view that the real meaning of a liberal education is to call all beliefs into question, to smash all idols, and to change rather than inform students' minds—has its partisans on both sides of the academic aisle. For now, I leave it to you to think of the names.

⁹Oddly enough, it was not simply high culture or elite and haughty studies that were rejected with the dismissal of Great Books and the study of Western Civilization, but the more “ordinary” was fast rejected as well. In many places, what came under attack were standard beliefs and practices—ordinary religious and familial institutions, ordinary relations between the sexes, and ordinary sentiments of patriotism. It may have been this stigmatization of the ordinary, more than the attacks on the cultured and elite that turned most “ordinary” people, especially parents, against the new “liberal arts.”

Can a remnant return? Can the stones that were rejected become a new foundation? Perhaps. But it will be a monumental undertaking. It will require university administrators willing to take on those who brought us to this sorry state. I do not know that such leaders are around. It would take thinking through again all the old reasons for liberal education and discovering new ones. It will not be sufficient to pretend that the humanities really are useful in preparing people for all that comes later, whether in graduate school or on the job. If we have any value it can't be simply that we are good pre-professional studies, warm-up acts for the real education that follows us. We have to have, in ourselves and in what we do, a value and integrity of our own.

Moreover, the liberal arts will have to make peace with vocational, technical, and professional education. This is pragmatic, utilitarian America. Just as our forefathers managed to meld liberal and civic education in some institutions and liberal and religious education in so many others, we will have to find a way of happily coexisting with, learning from, and adding to professional education and technical training. After all, we all know farmers who know more biology, natural science, and botany... nurses who know more biology, science, and psychology... and cabinetmakers and architects who know more about beauty, design, proportion, and material science than 90 percent of our liberal arts graduates. Why are we not in league with them?

Additionally, the liberal arts will have to discover once again how to be of service, of benefit, *of value* to our students. Young men and women today are not different in nature than in the past. They still are curious about themselves, ideas, and the universe. They still want to see the world and see it whole. They still want to know about love, justice, friendship, loyalty, betrayal, fear, and courage. Why do we insist that our narrow graduate school issues and analyses are really what will move them? The liberal arts will again flourish when we can show our students that the issues that most intrigue them are better approached by open and sympathetic readings of Augustine or Shakespeare than by any lit crit course or class in the Department of Critical Whiteness Studies. (No, don't get rid of these new departments or studies—just don't pretend they're part of the liberal arts any more. Hell, group them together and give them their own college on campus! Then fund them on the basis of their enrollments.)

Finally, even though we will no longer twist ourselves in knots trying to show that we really are “of use,” let's try to understand and show how we

can truly be of *value*. Above all, let's try to understand what the better angels of America's own practical soul have always seemed to know—that the liberal arts have value for the individual but that they also serve a *public* function. Would we not serve the greatest of public functions by again working to present and preserve the ideas and insights of the past, transmitting the best in civilized culture, and sharing with our fellow citizens the finest imaginative literature and writing that we have?

Moreover, do we really think that we will survive as a nation if our leaders and our citizens are ignorant of history, ignorant of economics and of our religious traditions, ignorant of the majesty of science and its limitations, ignorant of the nature of equality or the grounds of our rights and liberties, ignorant of both the greatness and evil possible in human nature?

As I said at the beginning of this essay, there was never an actual liberal arts bubble that one day burst. But there *was* a universe of thought and culture living in our institutions of higher education that, over the last few decades, passed away. Yes, remnants remain—hundreds of stupendous teachers and guides, a number of centers, and a half-dozen worthy associations. Is there more? Did the Renaissance begin with more?

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