

The Academics’ Lament and the Traditional Liberal Arts

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Several months ago I attended a two-day seminar that examined the liberal arts as a “contested concept.” Much of the discussion was framed in terms of a conflict between a more traditional view of liberal education, represented by Robert Maynard Hutchins, and a more pragmatic view exemplified by John Dewey. One of the implicit, and occasionally explicit, themes in the discussion was that pragmatic ideas, particularly in some cruder utilitarian formulations, posed a threat to important aspects of the liberal arts.

Whether or not the participants, mostly faculty in the humanities teaching at small liberal arts colleges, agreed with this framing of the theoretical issues, almost everyone seemed to feel that the liberal arts in higher education were either being marginalized or were directly under attack. A “narrative of decline,” [1] a kind of academics’ lament, hung over the discussions. The “traditional” liberal arts were in grave danger because of demands for relevance and practicality on the part of parents and students, employers, and even administrators and faculty colleagues. New career-oriented programs (fashion merchandising was mentioned, along with business) were taking resources and students away from traditional majors and areas of study. Other developments in higher education—for example, demands for assessment and testing—were also cited as threats to traditional teaching in the liberal arts.

As I identify myself as a pragmatist [2] who embraces the liberal arts, my instinct was to believe that the conflicts, theoretical and practical, were overdrawn and the threats overstated. Most of the seminar participants seemed to agree that some compromise was possible and desirable—if for no other reason than as a pragmatic response to the pressures just mentioned. But it was a grudging response, and in retrospect I believe it is important to look more closely at the academics’ lament about the liberal arts. Specifically, what understanding of the liberal arts is threatened by more pragmatic views and contemporary pressures on higher education and how should proponents of the liberal arts, traditional and pragmatic, respond?

There seemed to be three key elements to the traditional view of liberal education embodied in the academics’ lament. First,

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the liberal arts should be defined as primarily inquiry and learning for its own sake. The liberal arts, properly understood, involve faculty and students teaching and learning without any practical aim or object of gain in mind or training with an eye toward a job. The disinterested pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake is at the heart of the liberal arts. This pure pursuit of knowledge is set above and against any motivation for learning in order to advance one's economic prospects or other practical aims. To suggest that market considerations might be taken into account in the liberal arts is a corruption, with the word "market" itself being a pejorative term.

A second, parallel element in this viewpoint is that certain subjects, mainly in the humanities, are central to the liberal arts. The study of literature and languages, philosophy, and history were typically cited as core subjects. These were set apart from more practical studies and concerns, even as relentlessly and proudly impractical. One of the readings for the seminar explored the idea of "valuing useless knowledge." [3] Although other well-accepted branches of inquiry—the sciences and social sciences—were included as part of the liberal arts, it was the humanities that were typically cited as being studied for their own sake—and thereby most threatened.

The last part of the academics' lament has something of an uneasy relationship with the other two. Pursuing something for its own sake invites the question of why the pursuit or its object is valuable. The common answer to this (seemingly practical) question is that the liberal arts, the disinterested study of particular subjects, have some positive result for the individual. This result was expressed in different ways—one becomes "truly educated," or more elevated in understanding or sensibilities, or lives a fuller and richer life. One of the seminar participants described the liberal arts as "soul food," food that "enriches the soul." If this result seems vague, its converse is more sharply stated: too many students graduate without an adequate grounding in the liberal arts, often in courses of study that don't contribute to their full development as human beings.

It is easy to be skeptical or even cynical about the traditional perspective and to question its historical lineage and contemporary realism. From the nation's founding through at least the nineteenth century the liberal arts were reserved for the few who had the resources and leisure to pursue them. A liberal arts education groomed upper-class men to assume what were seen as their natural positions in society—almost all others were excluded by dint of sex, race, and class. Similarly, the claim that certain areas of study are the core of the liberal arts can be seen as an elitist, ornamental view of education and

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culture (e.g., Great Books) that fails to acknowledge the full range and evolution of our knowledge. Finally, the notion that certain areas of study (e.g., Latin) have a special effect on the student echoes an outmoded notion of “faculty psychology” [4] long ago disposed of by the expansion of areas of study (including in the humanities) and advances in psychology and pedagogy.

But if we take a more sympathetic view of these elements, both theoretically and practically, and in particular consider students’ needs and perspectives, there are values here that need to be properly understood and defended. Instead of offering narrow notions of purpose, subject matter, and results, the liberal arts are best served by seeing continuities and connections between intellectual life and other pursuits, between and among areas of study, and as part of the larger project of liberal democracy.

First, the phrase “for its own sake” is somewhat misleading. The “disinterested” pursuit of subjects comes out of real human interests—to know the past, to imagine the thoughts and feeling of others, to express aesthetic values, to understand nature. The desire to know and understand reflects a “felt difficulty,” to use Dewey’s phrase. Idle curiosity is never completely idle. The case of science is instructive. No one doubts the legitimacy of disinterested, scientific pursuit for its own sake, despite the fact that many scientific studies do not have practical applicability, even over some long term. The same can be said of academic study in the liberal arts generally. We cannot be certain of the effects of inquiry in any area, but following intellectual concerns wherever they lead is a practical interest, broadly understood, and a natural form of human endeavor.

More specifically, disinterested study in the liberal arts has valuable, practical results for students. Encouraging the development of objectivity and dispassionate analysis across a range of subjects promotes useful skills and desirable qualities of citizenship. To follow logic and evidence where it leads in science and elsewhere, to sympathetically imagine the views of others, to understand the problems of interpretation and language, to develop historical perspective, and to see the philosophical difficulties in the choices we face are all desirable qualities the liberal arts promote. Even from a narrow, practical viewpoint, employers routinely note the value they place on broadly educated students and the analytical and communication skills promoted by the liberal arts. [5] Thus, study “for its own sake” has practical value for the students.

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A similar argument can be made with respect to the notion that certain subjects are primary in the liberal arts. The scope of human inquiry (“for its own sake”) and knowledge has broadened appropriately, including more practical and applied areas of study, and colleges and universities reflect this. The common devices of general education and distribution requirements, imperfect as they are, typically recognize the importance of liberal studies. At the same time, practicality prevents requiring students to study all that might be desirable. [6] In any case, the consensus that liberal studies are part of a proper higher education suggests that the liberal arts, and the humanities in particular, do not need to claim any special status. That formal training or practical studies might also claim a place in the educational system, something that dates at least to the development of the land-grant university, need not exclude the liberal arts. [7] A pragmatic “both-and” solution is possible and desirable.

Here too it is important to consider the interests and perspectives of students. Students are more conscious of economic pressures and the role of educational credentials in the market. Likewise, they now have at their disposal, for better or worse, a wealth of information that offers them alternative cultural objects and worldviews. Setting the traditional liberal arts subjects apart from and even against the world may repel rather than attract students. Students want to understand how the questions raised in the liberal arts are real and meaningful for any pursuit. [8] At their best, interdisciplinary and cultural studies can engage students in the liberal arts in ways that do not make them seem esoteric and apart from real concerns. Traditional disciplinary-based pedagogy that is truly student-centered can do so as well. [9] The challenge may be greater in the humanities than in the sciences and social sciences (where there is an assumption, justified or not, of relevance), but it is a challenge many faculty in the humanities can and do readily meet.

Finally, with regard to “food for the soul,” it is important not to identify the liberal arts with too narrow a conception of culture, education, and the good life. There is a danger in seeing the good life as contemplative and withdrawn, setting the liberal arts apart from mundane or practical concerns (“useless knowledge”), and making the understanding and mastery of certain cultural objects (e.g., the Great Books) essential to the good life. On the contrary, the aim of the liberal arts should be to encourage an appreciation of the variety of dimensions of human interest and potential. For example, earlier formulations of the liberal arts emphasized developing character for service.

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[10] The expectation then, as it should be now, is that liberal arts cultivate not only intellectual virtues but civic and practical ones as well. Academics may live the contemplative life, but an orientation toward thought and abstraction should not be seen as disconnected from, or denigrating, other ways of living, including those involving social, political, and economic activity.

In this respect, the liberal arts and the academy generally need to make peace with, or at least acknowledge, the importance of the market. Whether we like it or not, given the economic conditions students face and the role of educational credentials in the market, it is unrealistic to expect students and others to accept too narrow a notion of learning for its own sake or to ask them not to wonder how academic studies relate to the market and other “real-world” concerns. A good life includes, indeed presupposes, making a living. And students often want to know how their studies can help them understand and navigate in the larger society. Again, a “both-and” approach would point to the important skills and dispositions promoted by the liberal arts that are valued in the market—and in life generally.

Overall, then, if the liberal arts are threatened, at least part of the threat comes from within, from too narrow a self-concept. If liberal studies are seen as somehow self-contained and self-validating, the risk grows of them becoming merely ornamental, as opposed to being potentially valuable for all students. The academics’ lament needs to be recast so that the liberal arts are not set apart and above, but rather are integrated with, the rest of the academy and society. Studies in the traditional liberal arts have a significant place, but not pride of place, and promoting a good life recognizes that there are many ways of living such a life in a liberal democratic society.

This kind of pragmatic response is also the best strategy for dealing with some very real external threats to the liberal arts. There have been increasing demands for documenting outcomes through narrow testing and suggestions that higher education be evaluated by its ability to “serve the needs of the knowledge economy.” [11] To seek some simplistic measure of the results of a college education or to demand that there be immediate and direct economic value to higher education would reduce education to a mix of credentialism and training. To overemphasize the economic function of higher education in improving the competitiveness of the individual and society moves us away from a more humane vision of education as serving and supporting a democratic vision.

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The emphasis on market concerns and competitiveness produces another, perhaps greater threat to the liberal arts, namely the continuing and increasing segmentation of the educational market itself. Increasingly, the liberal arts are seen as, and are becoming the preserve of, elite institutions that draw disproportionately from the most privileged segments of society. Instead of the liberal arts being a means for creating, in Benjamin Barber's felicitous phrase, an "aristocracy of everyone," [12] we are drifting toward a system in which liberal education is reserved, as it once was, for the few while others are directed toward more specific practical concerns. [13] To the degree that our society devalues and limits access to education in its most complete and inclusive forms, we compromise the real potential of the liberal arts to contribute to society by providing education and opportunity to all.

A more pragmatic view of liberal arts education reminds us of its role in the project of liberal democracy. An education that takes in a broad range of subjects, that goes beyond the immediate and narrowly instrumental, that seeks the truth as valuable in itself and in our long-term interest, is the education most suitable for citizens of free society. The great potential achievement of liberal democratic society, and therefore liberal education, is to give all its members the chance at what might be called the "good life," in all its varied possibilities. [14] This chance is what both the traditional and pragmatic versions of liberal education, at their best, offer. It's a vision that needs to be repeatedly articulated and strengthened. [15]

Notes

1. W. Robert Connor, "Last Bastion of Liberal Education?" *Inside Higher Ed*, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/07/24/connor>.
2. David C. Paris and Bruce A. Kimball, "Liberal Education: An Overlapping Pragmatic Consensus." *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. (Spring 2000), pp. 143–158.
3. Robert Bates Graber, *Valuing Useless Knowledge: An Anthropological Inquiry into the Meaning of Liberal Education*. Kirksville, Missouri: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1995.
4. Joel H. Spring, *The American School, 1642–1985*. New York: Longman, 1986, pp. 63–65.
5. On the practical value of liberal education from the business viewpoint, see Robert T. Jones, "Liberal Education for the Twenty-first Century: Business Expectations." *Liberal*

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- Education*. (Spring 2005), pp. 32–37.
6. Derek C. Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, Ch. 10.
 7. In his inaugural address in 1904, University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise stated, “Be the choice of the sons and daughters of the state, language, literature, history, political economy, pure science, agriculture, engineering, architecture, sculpture, painting or music, they should find at the state university ample opportunity for pursuit of the chosen subject . . . Nothing short of such opportunity is just, for each has an equal right to find at the state university the advanced intellectual life adapted to his need. Any narrower view is indefensible,” quoted in W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, “Vocationalism in Higher Education: The Triumph of the Education Gospel.” *The Journal of Higher Education*. (January/February 2005), p. 3.
 8. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
 9. One of the highlights of the conference was a talk, “I will speak as liberal as the north’: Tales of Teaching at a Liberal Arts College,” by Martha Anderson of Pomona College that included a description of a sample lecture on Othello that could be seen as “traditional” but clearly (and brilliantly) done in a way that would engage any undergraduate audience in the psychological dynamics of identity and passion.
 10. See Fred Anderson, review of *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*, by Gordon Wood, “The Lost Founders,” *New York Review of Books*. (September 21, 2006), p. 58, on the liberal arts education of the founders: “men whose liberal education and public spirit, so it was thought, enabled them to perceive the common good, and whose fortunes gave them the leisure to pursue it without compromising their livelihoods. . . . All of the Founders aspired to this kind of leadership, . . . and all the more intensely because none was a gentleman by birth . . . A liberal education (or the wide reading and humane values associated with it), financial security, and ambition for a public role were all necessary to achieve the status they coveted.”
 11. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education.” <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports.html>. For a critique, see David C. Paris, “Higher Education At Risk?” *Inside Higher Ed*, <http://insidehighered.com/views/2006/10/24/paris>.
 12. Benjamin R. Barber, *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Poli-*

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- tics of Education and the Future of America*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.
13. Robert Zemsky, Susan Shaman, and Marc Iannozzi, "In Search of a Strategic Perspective: A Tool for Mapping the Market in Postsecondary Education." *Change*. (November/December, 1998), pp. 23–38.
 14. In commenting on the declaration of an educational crisis and a "nation at risk" in the early 1980s, Andrew Hacker wrote, "If the schools leave a lot to be desired, the quality of educational commentary has declined even further. We no longer have commanding figures like John Dewey and Robert Hutchins who, in different ways, tried to create a vision of an educated citizenry whose members would have a chance at something called the good life. That this goal, however nebulous, is all but absent from current books and reports is far more disconcerting than our lag in teaching algorithms to restless teenagers." [Andrew Hacker, "The Schools Flunk Out." *New York Review of Books*. (April 12, 1984), p. 40.] The same could be said of recent commentary on higher education.
 15. A good example of this broader and more democratic view of liberal education is the American Association of Colleges and Universities' LEAP (Liberal Education and America's Promise) program <http://www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/index.cfm>.

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