

Reclaiming the Core: Liberal Education in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: Colleges and faculties of liberal arts are facing potentially devastating declines in enrollments, driven in part by their own loss of clear purpose. To stem the tide and regain their rightful place at the center of the university, liberal arts faculties need to rethink the meaning of liberal education. This article argues that education in the liberal arts should be directed above all to cultivating practical wisdom, for which a deep inquiry into the central questions of political science is especially valuable. It discusses the relation of liberal education to civic education, the proper tasks of civic education at the university level, the benefits of dialectical inquiry, and the means by which students' thoughtless relativism can be replaced with habit of moral reasoning suitable to a modern cosmopolitan society.

Keywords: higher education reform, civic education, liberal arts, moral reasoning, practical wisdom, political science education

At no time in recent history has the future of higher education in America been under such a cloud. Students, parents, and political leaders decry the high costs of tuition, the increasing levels of student debt, and the declining success of college graduates in finding good jobs. Employers and putative reformers decry graduates' lack of writing and critical thinking skills and their poor performance on measures of outcomes such as the College Learning Assessment. Assessments of student engagement and study

time show dramatic erosion over the past generation.¹ State governments' contributions to public universities have been declining for a decade, and now in many cases have fallen below 10 percent of the costs of undergraduate education. From many sides, including the boards of regents of major state flagship universities in Virginia, Texas, and elsewhere, come calls for cost-cutting, greater accountability, more job skills, more use of online learning, more responsiveness to the wishes of education "consumers," and a restructuring of universities to make them perform more like businesses, including the shuttering of unprofitable operations such as departments of German and Classics. Some predict that the liberal arts college and university as we know them are on their way out, soon to be replaced by more practical, corporate-style training that focuses on competencies learned rather than "time served," and by free, massive open online courses such as those of EdX and Coursera.

These forecasts of doom are surely exaggerated. Colleges and universities will survive, but most likely with at least two major changes: We will see the increasing use of online instruction to deliver some courses and components of many courses, and we will see a continued shift of enrollments out of faculties and colleges of liberal arts and into more practical and technical programs, a trend that has been under way since the 1960s and has recently been accelerating.² Not the university as such, but the liberal arts are in trouble. This fact bodes ill, not only for the future of the academy but for the health of our democracy.

The erosion of support for the liberal arts has many contributing causes, including demographic and economic factors beyond the universities' control, but universities and those of us who teach on their liberal arts faculties bear some share of the blame. Decades of tuition increases far beyond the rate of inflation have opened us up to the question "What

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is it really all worth?" Our courses have always been less obviously conducive to students' future earnings than those in professional programs, and we have not been making as strong a case as we could or should for their value in both monetary and nonmonetary terms. These courses are sometimes politically unbalanced, occasionally frivolous, and often overspecialized. Under the pressure of the popularity contest known as course evaluations, we give too many undeserved As and Bs and are reluctant to demand that students work as hard as we ourselves did in college.³ Too many of our general education courses are staffed by adjuncts and graduate students, leaving us free to conduct research and teach graduate and upper-level courses on the things we love to study, but allowing our core task—of educating citizens to lead thoughtful lives—to slip from the center of our attention. To regain our rightful place as the heart of the university, we must renew our commitment to this project of liberal education and persuade a new, more skeptical, and more impatient generation of students of its importance by demonstrating its value to them on a daily basis.

What, then, is the essence of the education that we call liberal, and how does it differ from the training that prepares students for careers—in law, medicine, business, industry, and even academia? Often, liberal education is described as an effort to instill breadth, general knowledge, critical thinking skills, cosmopolitan sympathies, an appreciation of the arts, and a taste for the life of the mind as an end in itself. These ends are all worthwhile and education in the arts and sciences promotes them all, including the thinking and communication skills that make that education so often a better preparation for success in business and public affairs than any more narrowly tailored technical education ever could be—especially in a world in which most people change careers at some point and many will pursue jobs and professions that did not exist when they were in school. Colleges of arts and sciences achieve all this in a way that no other institution in our society does, and they deserve support for that reason alone. At bottom, however, liberal education is something more fundamental than the pursuit of all these competencies and intellectual habits. It is indeed still practical education, but practical in the original, most radical sense of the word: Its chief project is to cultivate the practical wisdom that is essential for living well and that comes through sustained reflection on the most important questions that we face as human beings. Becoming equipped with the skills to earn a living is, as Thomas Jefferson argued, only one and only the lowest of the three chief aims of education; the others are learning to live freely and wisely as citizens and as individuals.

SUSTAINING LIBERTY

Let us turn to the central of these three aims, which is arguably the most important task not only of political science departments but of universities altogether in a democracy, the task of preparing citizens for self-government. What is required to educate engaged citizens and leaders in the practical wisdom that self-government requires? Not all civic education is liberal education, but civic education of the highest and best kind is both an essential element of lib-

eral education and one of the best introductions to the other branches of it. The civic education that belongs to the universities' project of liberal education continues and builds on the civic education offered by elementary and secondary schools but also transforms it. At all levels of their education students should acquire a knowledge of our Constitution and our democratic processes, of the world and the challenges that it poses to us, of the differences that divide us from one another and from our critics abroad, and a sense of the common ground on which those differences may, if possible, begin to be bridged. At the lower levels, however, civic education's most important work is to expound and make the case for our own political traditions and principles, our own leading statesmen and reformers, and the moral principles that we as members of a liberal democratic society most need and value, thus cultivating a sober and reflective patriotism. In the civic education that belongs at the university level, by contrast, the focus moves to thinking deeply for oneself, considering alternatives, and grappling with the enduring questions about political things to which human beings have found many different compelling answers. This capacious civic education has at its core an exploration of the great debates about justice and the ends of government that have animated human history. Studying these debates allows students to understand the principles that inspired our American constitutional system and the deepest arguments for them, beginning in classical antiquity; the most powerful critics of our principles and way of life, including both major political philosophers and the contemporary critics who have drawn inspiration from them; and the most powerful rival visions of how human beings should live—visions from other times and places, such as the aristocracies of ancient Greece or pre-twentieth century Europe and the theocracies of the classical and modern-day Islamic world. The skills and habits of thought to be learned include the ability to read hard books carefully, to ask good questions, to write clear and cogent arguments, and to discuss serious questions vigorously in a spirit of civility. This spirit is fostered by liberal education because as people become more thoughtful about the questions that divide them, they tend to become more respectful of different answers to them. And at the core of liberal education is precisely the process of becoming reflective about big questions—what they are, why they matter, why they are difficult, and why pursuing answers to them is nonetheless worthwhile. For us as teachers of political science, the questions central to our research and teaching are among the most important that we face as human beings in the modern world: What are the proper purposes and responsibilities of governments? What is democracy? What are its strengths and limitations, and what are the requirements for its flourishing? What natural abilities, education, and institutional constraints make the difference between good and bad leadership? What rights deserve universal protection, and why, and how is this protection best achieved? How can and should governments handle the challenges posed by religion and religious conflicts, by technology, and by economic competition and inequality? And how do different constitutions, laws, and political institutions shape not only the material well-being but the character and happiness of the people who

live under them? Faculties and colleges of liberal arts are the only institutions in our society that can guide young people systematically through such an inquiry, and departments of political science have a leading role to play.

LIBERATING MINDS

In grappling with the questions at the heart of a good civic education, we are led of necessity into the deepest questions we face as human beings: What are the permanent features of human nature? What are the most important components of human excellence or virtue, and of human flourishing or happiness? What are our obligations to one another, and what is their basis? What is love, and do human beings have the capacity for genuinely unselfish devotion to one another? How much is it possible for us to know about the ultimate causes of all that exists, including ourselves? To the extent that wisdom about these matters is available to us, is it to be found chiefly in revelation or in unassisted human reason? Since ancient times, liberal education has promised fulfillment of the Pythian injunction “Know thyself,” liberating individuals from unthinking thrall to merely provincial answers to these questions and cultivating thoughtfulness about human nature and the human condition through a study of great works of literature, religion, and philosophy. This is an education that requires and rewards serious leisure: our own words for school and scholarship come from the Greek word for leisure, *scholē*. But except in a very few cases, such leisured thoughtfulness is best understood less as a pursuit of “knowledge for its own sake,” than as a pursuit of practical wisdom in the spirit of Montaigne, who sought self-knowledge so that he might pursue genuine happiness and not a phantom of it. In our universities we have but a few years to try to instill some taste for serious leisure and some capacity for self-reflection in people whose subsequent lives are most likely to be extraordinarily busy. For many of them, a handful of required general education courses will be their only exposure to this undertaking. To introduce students to the centuries-long debate about what it means to be human, human guides are essential, and earnest face-to-face conversation is indispensable. Yet general education courses are increasingly viewed only as a vehicle for developing rudimentary skills and as prime candidates for delivery by computers.

But the turn to computers has come partly, at least, in response to an abdication by professors. In his thoughtful book, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, Andrew Delbanco argues that professors in the humanities and social sciences once saw it as their function to guide students through sustained exploration of the meaning of life and the variety of ways that it has been understood, but today this is rarely the case. How has our view of general education come to be so impoverished? Observing the same trend, Anthony Kronman in *Education's End* suggests several causes: the growing importance of specialized research in the twentieth-century American university; the attempt of the humanities and social sciences to emulate the hard sciences and thus to turn to less important questions that can be studied in more scientific ways; and the rise of political correctness and cultural relativism so extreme that all such questions seem pointless.

If human nature is a blank slate on which cultures and experiences impose opinions and values that have no objective truth, how is the pursuit of questions about the meaning of life in the academy not a waste of time? Worse, if the subjective answers we have been socialized to accept are the only source of the self-restraint that keeps people honest and keeps society functioning, how is it not irresponsible to make a concerted effort to question them?⁴

TEACHING ETHICS

It will not do to say that teaching ethics is no part of the task of the university. It does indeed belong first to others, to parents, yet we are trying to cultivate thoughtfulness in those who will be parents. If we provide the intellectual tools that give students power in the world and take no notice of the character of those to whom we give them, then we, like the ancient teacher of rhetoric Gorgias, are acting irresponsibly. What is more, if we teach students to question (as liberal education requires) and yet do not teach ethics, we necessarily undermine ethics. But how is the inculcation of ethics compatible with the teaching of serious thinking and questioning? In this perplexity we can do no better than to follow Socrates, as he demonstrates to the earliest prototypes of the public relations expert Gorgias, the relativist Protagoras, and the critical legal theorist Thrasymachus how dialectics offers an education that is both more responsible and more open and penetrating than their own educational projects. Through a dialectical ascent from common opinions, the confusions and contradictions of those opinions come to light, but so do the common structure of human moral thought and the common human nature that can give to ethics a solid foundation.

What would it look like to take our own students' common ethical notions and ascend dialectically from them? In the strange cave that is the modern university campus, three moral premises predominate:

1. There is no truth about right and wrong, only subjective values that no one can or should try to judge.
2. It is extremely important to take a stand for good in the world: to promote environmentalism, for example, or to protect women's rights, or to protect the sanctity of life.
3. There is one and only one principle that is truly right and good, and that is the principle that it is wrong to be intolerant of views that differ from your own.

Students slip from one of these claims to the next, but whenever one presses them to give reasons, they retreat into their relativism and deny that any moral claims can be substantiated or refuted through reason. Even students who consider themselves serious believers often present their moral views and the faith that teaches them as merely “true for me” and all other faiths and moral systems as equally worthy of respect. Their denial of metaphysical truth is morally motivated, resting on the conviction that only people who hold no truths to be truly true can live in peace with one another. This is a dogma that quashes all serious thought.

Our challenge as teachers, then, is to get students thinking more openly but first and foremost more seriously about ethics. This requires resuscitating their simple commonsense

ethical notions and coaxing them to become brave enough to take ownership of what they really think. Not one of them seriously believes that “nothing is right or wrong, but thinking makes it so.” Every one of them is convinced that raping a young girl is simply bad and that killing people for their religion or their race is simply bad. It is hard to state rules that are always valid; students love to think of exceptions. Therefore, it is much better to focus on solid, shared human understanding about virtues and vices. As Aristotle says, continuing Socrates’ answer to the relativists of his own day, “No one would assert that a person is blessed who has no part of courage, moderation, justice, or prudence, but is afraid of the flies buzzing around him, abstains from none of the extremes when he desires to eat or drink, destroys his dearest friends for a trifle, and similarly regarding the things connected with the mind, is as senseless and as thoroughly deceived as a child or a madman.”⁵ And all students can be brought to see that they agree. As students regain confidence in the common sense of this perspective and of their own moral intuitions, they can begin to examine them more critically. They can begin to refine their conceptions of the virtues they cannot help admiring and weave them together into a more consistent whole.

Face-to-face classroom discussions are essential to this undertaking, and many subjects are conducive to it; the refinement of students’ notions of justice in particular can be effectively pursued in every political science course. A study of the great books provides an especially good foundation for this inquiry, however, beginning with Socrates’ refutations of ancient rhetoricians and sophists in Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic*. As students begin to listen to the arguments and debates of Socrates with his contemporaries and of major moral and political thinkers with one another throughout history, they discover that they are listening to a single conversation between friendly rivals who agree about as many things as they disagree about and who speak directly to their own concerns. They find that it is a conversation on the highest level, but one that they are able to enter into. They come to see more clearly that the questions are indeed very hard, that decent and highly intelligent people have disagreed about them, and that behind many of the shallow partisan disputes on the contemporary political scene are profound disagreements between thinkers of the first rank that deserve the greatest respect. Thus, the students’ thoughtless dogmatism is challenged. At the same time, they come to see that the questions are not unanswerable, that there are better and worse arguments to be made, that there are clearly better and worse ways of pursuing our individual and collective lives even if we can never reach universal agreement about which one is best, and that progress in thoughtfulness is attainable even if absolute certainty on most of the contested questions is not. Thus, their thoughtless relativism is challenged as well, being replaced in the best case by a gentle spirit of humanity and a capacity for serious debate without partisan rancor.

RESTORING THE RADICAL MEANING OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Just as in civic education, so in liberal education *tout court*, political science is uniquely suited to take the lead. Large

portions of our discipline aspire to be a science like pharmacology whose work is meticulous and cumulative, but in its original conception, “the art of politics,” as Socrates called it, or “the science of political things,” as Cicero called it, is rather a foundational discipline. It is philosophically fundamental inasmuch as it seeks knowledge of human things simply; it is practically sovereign or architectonic inasmuch as politics is what sets the shape and limits of every other pursuit, adjudicating questions not only about who may rule and what the rulers may and may not do but what structure the family is to have and who may marry; what powers parents are to have; which professions and forms of economic activity are to be allowed or encouraged; what kinds of speech, books, and research are to be allowed or encouraged; what education is to be given to children; and what religions (if any) are to be tolerated or encouraged and what powers their leaders are to enjoy. The decision to deregulate or privatize any of these matters is as much a political decision as the decision to regulate them strictly. The political institutions and laws of every society are of course influenced by many sub-political factors, but politics is nevertheless the most decisive field of human activity to the extent that it is in the political arena that the contests about all the great questions of human life sooner or later play out, and political philosophy is the discipline in which they are all argued at the highest level. A different way of expressing this same thought is to say that in human affairs human nature sets the parameters of what is possible, but it is the regime that determines most decisively the shape that human life is given within those parameters, beginning with its answer to the question of who is to rule, on the basis of what assumed virtue or qualifications, and with a view to what ends. Thus, the various regimes human history has produced and especially their finer exemplars represent an array of powerful, comprehensive answers that have been offered to the most important of human questions.

In political science thus radically understood, questions of concrete, often urgent practicality and questions of ultimate meaning come together in especially fruitful ways for liberal education. The most important questions about human nature and justice are palpably relevant to all the questions empirical political scientists study, and raising the fundamental questions brings the study of particular cases to life in the classroom. At the same time, contemporary political events and disputes are an ever-present testing ground for the arguments of political philosophers, likewise helping to bring their books to life for students. The infatuations with abstract theory, the extremes of cultural relativism, the absorption in the trivial and ephemeral that beset many fields of the humanities and social sciences today are more easily avoided in a field in which we are continually brought back by our subject matter to consider the stark differences between security and genocide, thriving economies and grinding poverty, the rule of law and rampant corruption. Yet even as these contrasts clarify obvious truths about good and bad, they force us to grapple with the most difficult questions about what exactly human beings owe one another and why. And just as political science is an essential discipline for thinking through the central normative question of the meaning of justice, so it is well equipped to shed light on the deepest empirical

question of the humanities and social sciences, the question of what human nature is. This question was for much of the past century in eclipse, but as the burgeoning field of evolutionary psychology has begun to make a strong case for the existence of a fixed core to human nature, the prospects for renewed study of a plethora of fundamental questions about the character of our sociability, aggression, ambition, love, and the capacity for self-sacrifice are reviving in the social sciences. Political science, with its grounding in the centuries-long debate about human nature that comprises the history of political philosophy, is especially well positioned to inform and guide this study. Thus, at its healthiest, political science can be an organizing or architectonic discipline for liberal education, raising all the most important questions and providing a structure and multiple methods for pursuing them, both quantitative and qualitative, historical and current, thematic (peace studies) and contextualized (Latin American studies), theoretical and practical, always moving from the biggest questions to the most concrete applications and test cases. At its best it is neither value-free nor partisan, neither a reflexive proponent of fashionable moral opinion nor cynically detached, but relentlessly curious, probing, and self-critical, challenging ourselves and our students alike to think more deeply about what matters and to show whether

human reason is not, after all, able to solve our thorniest problems and thereby to vindicate humanity's capacity for rational self-government.

NOTES

1. Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, "Leisure College, USA: The Decline in Student Study Time," AEI Online, <http://www.aei.org/article/education/higher-education/leisure-college-usa/>; Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Derek Bok, *Our Under-achieving Colleges* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

2. According to a recent count, the number of liberal arts colleges in the United States dropped from 212 in 1990 to 130 in 2012: Vicki L. Baker, Roger G. Baldwin, and Sumedha Makker, "Where Are They Now? Revisiting Breneman's Study of Liberal Arts Colleges," *Liberal Education* 98, no. 3 (summer 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of undergraduates pursuing a major in the liberal arts has fallen to about a quarter.

3. Few courses today demand more than 40 pages of reading per week or as much as 20 pages of writing, features that have been positively associated with substantial student learning by Arum and Rosko in *Academically Adrift*.

4. Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

5. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1323a27–33, p. 197.