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The Humanities Move Off Campus

As the classical university unravels, students seek knowledge and know-how elsewhere.

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Until recently, classical education served as the foundation of the wider liberal arts curriculum, which in turn defined the mission of the traditional university. Classical learning dedicated itself to turning out literate citizens who could read and write well, express themselves, and make sense of the confusion of the present by drawing on the wisdom of the past. Students grounded in the classics appreciated the history of their civilization and understood the rights and responsibilities of their unique citizenship. Universities, then, acted as cultural custodians, helping students understand our present values in the context of a 2,500-year tradition that began with the ancient Greeks.

But in recent decades, classical and traditional liberal arts education has begun to erode, and a variety of unexpected consequences have followed. The academic battle has now gone beyond the in-house “culture wars” of the 1980s. Though the argument over politically correct curricula, controversial faculty appointments, and the traditional mission of the university is ongoing, the university now finds itself being bypassed technologically, conceptually, and culturally, in ways both welcome and disturbing.

At its most basic, the classical education that used to underpin the university often meant some acquaintance with Greek and Latin, which offered students three rich dividends. First, classical-language instruction meant acquiring generic methods of inquiry. Knowledge was no longer hazy and amorphous, but categorized and finite. Classical languages, like their Western successors, were learned through the systematic study of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Such philological study then widened to reading poetry, philosophy, history, and oratory. Again, the student learned that there was a blueprint—a structure—to approaching education. Nothing could ever be truly new in itself but was instead a new wrinkle on the age-old face of wisdom. Novel theories of education and entirely new disciplines of learning—to the extent that they were legitimate disciplines—could take their place within existing classical divisions of finite learning, such as philosophy, political science, or literature.

More than just an educational buzzword, then, “interdisciplinary” represented a real unity among fields as diverse as numismatics, epigraphy, architecture, archaeology, philology, art, and literature. Reading Homer or Virgil evoked history, culture, geography, style, language, and philosophy. Poetry was not just the modern habit of breaking up prose into bits and pieces but a discipline of poetic language, meter, and subject matter. Oratory was not just speaking publicly but the art of metaphor, allusion, exaggeration, invective, and hyperbole. The formation of university departments, the concept of a core general-education curriculum, and the expectation that graduates would leave the university with certain skills and shared wisdom were all outgrowths of the study of classics and evolved over two millennia. Classics was not some esoteric discipline but a holistic way of thinking about the world that elevated reason over cant, fad, and superstition.

Second, classical education—reading Homer, Sophocles, and Aristotle, or studying the Delphic Charioteer and red-figure vase painting—conveyed an older, tragic view of man’s physical and mental limitations at odds with the modern notion of life without limits. Love, war, government, and religion involved choices not between utopian perfection and terrible misery but between bad and worse alternatives, or somewhat good and somewhat better

options—given the limitations of human nature and the precarious, brief span of human life. Humility permeated traditional liberal arts education: the acceptance that we know very little; that as frail human beings, we live in an unforgiving natural world; and that culture can and should improve on nature without destroying it.

In this regard, the university living experience—on-campus residence, close association with professors at dinners, and attendance at university lectures—helped reinforce the abstract lessons of the classroom and promote a certain civic behavior. Students had a precious four years in such a landscape to prepare their intellectual and moral skills for a grueling life ahead. The university was a unique place; it thrived because liberal arts in the holistic sense simply could not be emulated by, or outsourced to, private enterprise or ad hoc self-improvement training.

Third, classical education was a window on the West. Study of Athenian democracy, Homeric epic, or Roman basilicas framed all exploration of subsequent eras, from the Middle Ages to modernity. An Aquinas, Dante, Michelangelo, or Montesquieu could be seen as reaffirming, adopting, modifying, or rejecting something that the Greeks or Romans had done first. One could no more build a liberal education without some grounding in the classics than one could construct a multistory house without a foundation.

Over the last four decades, various philosophical and ideological strands united to contribute to the decline of classical education. A creeping vocationalism, for one, displaced much of the liberal arts curriculum in the crowded credit-hours of indebted students. Forfeiting classical learning in order to teach undergraduates a narrow skill (what the Greeks called a *technê*) was predicated on the shaky notion that undergraduate instruction in business or law would produce superior CEOs or lawyers—and would more successfully inculcate the arts of logic, reasoning, fact-based knowledge, and communication so necessary for professional success.

A therapeutic curriculum, which promised that counseling and proper social attitudes could mitigate such eternal obstacles to human happiness as racism, sexism, war, and poverty, likewise displaced more difficult classes in literature, language, philosophy, and political science. The therapeutic sensibility burdened the university with the task of ensuring that students felt adjusted and happy. And upon graduation, those students began to expect an equality of result rather than of opportunity from their society. Gone from university life was the larger tragic sense. Few students learned (or were reminded) that we come into this world with limitations that we must endure with dignity and courage rather than deal with easily through greater sensitivity, more laws, better technology, and sufficient capital.

Political correctness, meanwhile, turned upside-down the old standard of inductive reasoning, the linchpin of the liberal arts. Students now were to accept preordained general principles—such as the pernicious legacy of European colonialism and imperialism and the pathologies of capitalism, homophobia, and sexism—and then deductively to demonstrate how such crimes manifested themselves in history, literature, and science. The university viewed itself as nearly alone in its responsibility for formulating progressive remedies for society's ills. Society at large, government, the family, and religion were hopelessly reactionary.

As classical education declined and new approaches arose to replace it, the university core curriculum turned into a restaurant menu that gave 18-year-olds dozens of classes to choose from, the easiest and most therapeutic usually garnering the heaviest attendance. The result, as many critics have noted, is that most of today's students have no shared notion of education, whether fact-based, requisite knowledge or universal theoretical methodologies. They either do not know what the Parthenon is or, if they do, they do not understand how its role as the democratic civic treasury of the Athenians was any different from—much less any “better” than—what went on atop the monumental Great Temple of Tenochtitlán. Most likewise could not distinguish Corinthian from Doric columns on their venerable campuses, or a frieze from a pediment on their administration buildings. For a brief four-year period, students inherit a now-foreign vocabulary of archaic terms, such as “provost,” “summa cum

laude,” and “honorarium,” which they employ but usually do not understand. While the public may not fully appreciate the role that classical education once played, it nonetheless understands that university graduates know ever less, even as the cost of their education rises ever more. Any common, shared notion of what it means to be either a Westerner or an American is increasingly rare.

The universities apparently believed that their traditional prestige, the financial resources of their alumni, and the fossilized cultural desideratum of “going to college” would allow them to postpone a reckoning. But by failing in their central mission to educate our youth, they have provoked the beginnings of an educational counterrevolution. Just as the arrogance and ideological biases of the mainstream media have made them slow to appreciate technological trends and the growing dissatisfaction of their audience, so, too, are universities beginning to fragment, their new multifaceted roles farmed out to others that can do them more cheaply and with less political sermonizing.

The most obvious challenge to university predominance is technological—in particular, Internet-based education offered by private-sector virtual campuses masquerading as traditional universities. As the American workforce increasingly needs retraining and as higher-paying jobs demand ever more specialized skills, students are beginning to pay for their education on a class-by-class basis through distance learning. Online classes, which do not require campus residence or commuting, also eliminate the overhead of highly paid, tenured faculty, campus infrastructure, and such costly elements of undergraduate education as on-campus lectures and extracurricular activities.

Unfortunately, private online schools also do away with the old notion of offering liberal arts classes to enrich citizenship and enhance technological specialization. Perhaps their unspoken premise is that if universities do not believe in the value of teaching Western civilization as part of a mandated general-education curriculum, then why not simply go to the heart of the matter and offer computer-programming skills or aeronautical-engineering know-how without the pretense of a broad education? And who is to say that paid-by-the-hour instructors at the online University of Phoenix are less responsible teachers than their traditional counterparts? After all, their market-driven employers must serve a paying constituency that, unlike traditional university students, often demands near-instant results for its fees.

At American Military University, it’s worth noting in this light, online instructors receive compensation based on the number of students they teach, rather than the number of courses they offer. Cost-cutting measures are radical in the online education world. Bookstores and libraries become almost superfluous; instead, students simply pay fees for the use of Internet resources. The University of Phoenix actually negotiates deals with textbook publishers to make all of their books available online for a flat fee. The logic is to redefine education as an affordable product that finds its value in the marketplace among competing buyers and sellers.

It’s hard to fault these companies; they are serving a need. It would be reassuring, certainly, to think that a psychology student at Smith or Occidental would receive a broader understanding of the discipline, its history, and its place within the liberal arts than would a counterpart graduating from the far cheaper online Argosy University. But it would be far from certain.

Traditional colleges and universities, seeking to compete, have started to enter the online education market. The present university system is partly subsidized by low-paid, part-time faculty without tenure who teach large classes and thereby support a smaller mandarin cohort of tenured professors with full benefits, fewer students, and little worry about the consequences of poor peer reviews or student evaluations. Indeed, since the 1970s, the percentage of tenured and tenure-track professors in the academy has declined dramatically, as the university seeks to exploit the many to pay for the chosen, though dwindling, few. Schools are now starting to complement these two tiers with a third—a new sort of distance-learning adjunct, paid even less, who offers classes via the

Internet and may never venture onto campus at all, but whose courses carry the prestige of a well-known university brand. An informal survey suggests that distance learning now makes up as much as 20 percent of total offered classes at some schools.

One can also see a growing cultural reaction to the modern university in the spread of conservative Christian colleges. According to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, enrollment in such schools increased 70.6 percent between 1990 and 2004, versus 12.8 percent for public universities and 28 percent for all private universities. The national news media have split into genres predicated on political partisanship: network news, public radio, and large newspapers for liberals; and talk radio, cable news, and Internet sites for conservatives. So, too, have our mainstream universities, promising free thought but in reality indoctrinating their students, become increasingly distinct from religious colleges and universities that take pride in a more classical curriculum.

The religious schools are recognizing their market advantage. What was once the old Bible school has now often become the popular conservative antidote to the liberal university. Liberty University and Oral Roberts University have seen endowments and enrollments soar as they have broadened their mandates to encompass general cultural conservatism rather than solely religious orthodoxy. Liberty University is no longer Jerry Falwell's weird and tiny Liberty Baptist College of the 1970s but has swelled to more than 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with another 4,500 enrolled in online graduate programs alone. Thirty years ago, Fresno Pacific College was a small evangelical Mennonite campus; today, its successor, Fresno Pacific University, is a generic traditional campus that offers an alternative to the cumbersome bureaucracy and politically charged culture of nearby California State University, Fresno. The teacher-credential program at Fresno Pacific's education school, for example, has earned regional acknowledgment for being more rigorous, better organized, and freer from therapeutic and political biases than its much larger counterpart at CSU, Fresno.

The growth of classically minded religious colleges is not limited to the Protestant evangelical movement. Against-the-grain Catholic schools have flourished, too, offering an alternative not just to Berkeley, Wisconsin, and Amherst but also to increasingly liberal Notre Dame and Santa Clara, which have abandoned traditional Catholic themes and classical values. Thomas Aquinas College, founded in 1969, to take one example, has won recognition for its traditional curriculum. A few nonreligious schools, too, like Hillsdale College and St. John's College, concentrate solely on the classical curriculum, offering Great Books–based courses whose very success serves as an effective critique of higher education elsewhere.

It's no accident that millions of laypeople don't find endowed professors at elite schools interesting or useful. Many public universities have rejected merit pay for faculty on the grounds that academic or teaching excellence is impossible to quantify. More elite private universities have embraced a star system of compensation, but in the liberal arts, the criteria of evaluation usually hinge on esoteric and jargon-laden scholarly publications, not teaching excellence. So those who wish to discover history or literature—to learn about the Founding Fathers or military history, say—often look outside the university, to public intellectuals on television and noted best-selling authors like David McCullough or John Keegan.

Private companies have made considerable profits by responding to the public hunger for inspired teaching of traditional liberal arts. The Teaching Company markets prerecorded lectures with rich content in history, literature, and other subjects from proven classroom stars, many of whom have found far less success under normal academic evaluation. Rosetta Stone's software offers foreign-language instruction in dozens of languages, without the embedded cultural sermonizing that often characterizes foreign-language departments' curricula. In a series of CDs from a company called Knowledge Products, marketed as "Giants of Philosophy," the late Charlton Heston narrates excerpts from the seminal philosophers of the Western tradition. Consumers understand that they are buying the words of the philosophers themselves, read and explained by a skilled orator and actor, and

skipping the postmodern jargon and leftist bias.

In the future, to learn professions, many students will enroll in specific classes to master accounting, programming, or spreadsheets, and not feel the need to study inductive reasoning or be equipped with the analogies and similes supplied by great literature and the study of history. If, later in life, graduates feel robbed of such a classical foundation, they can buy CDs and recorded lectures or take self-administered correspondence courses. Since universities are no longer places for disinterested investigation in the manner of Socratic inquiry, one can envision a future in which there will be liberal schools and conservative schools, and religious schools and antireligious schools. But the old, classical, unifying university will then have completed its transformation into a multiversity: knowledge, imbued with politics and ideology, will be fragmented, balkanized, and increasingly appropriated by for-profit companies.

Traditional colleges and universities aren't about to die, of course. But their attractions—and especially the enticements of the Ivy League schools, Stanford, Berkeley, and such private four-year colleges as Amherst and Oberlin—will largely derive from the status that they convey, the career advantages that accrue from their brand-name diplomas, and the unspoken allure of networking and associating with others of a similarly affluent and privileged class. They are becoming social entities, private clubs for young people, certification and proof of career seriousness, but hardly centers for excellence in undergraduate education in the classical sense. For all the tens of thousands of dollars invested in yearly tuition, there will be no guarantee, or indeed, even a general expectation, that students will encounter singular faculty or receive a superior liberal arts education—let alone that they will know much more about their exceptional civilization than what they could find on the Internet, at religious schools, or on CDs and DVDs.

Once academia lost the agreed-upon, universally held notion of what classical learning was and why it was important, a steady unraveling process removed not just the mission but the mystery—and indeed, the beauty—from the American university. How ironic that the struggling university, in its efforts to meet changing political, technological, and cultural tastes and fads, willingly forfeited the only commodity that made it irreplaceable and that it alone could do well. And how sad, since once the university broke apart the liberal arts, all the religious schools, self-help courses, and CDs couldn't quite put them together again.

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