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OUR ESSAYS

APRIL 8, 2014

The Liberal Arts Are in Trouble--Should We Celebrate?

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As students and their families rethink the value of the liberal arts, defenders of traditional education are understandably ambivalent. On the one hand, the diminished stature of the liberal arts seems long overdue, and this critical reevaluation might lead to thoughtful reform. On the other, this reevaluation might doom the liberal arts to irrelevance. To that end, *Minding the Campus* asked a list of distinguished thinkers a straightforward question: should we be unhappy that the liberal arts are going down? Here are responses from Heather Mac Donald, Thomas Lindsay, and Samuel Goldman.

Heather Mac Donald, Manhattan Institute

We shouldn't only be unhappy if the liberal arts are "going down." We should be ashamed. Our highest duty as a civilization is to keep alive those works from the past that gave birth to our present freedoms and that constitute the most profound expressions of what it means to be human.

I see no evidence that a "critical evaluation" of the liberal arts is underway, beyond an ignorant flight on the part of some college students towards more allegedly marketable majors. This idea of a job-ready major is a fallacy; outside of vocational training and some select STEM fields, few majors, whether economics or philosophy, have a direct connection to most jobs.

But while the marketable major is an illusion, there is no question that the conceit is driving many students away from humanistic study. The irony is that colleges are themselves wholly responsible for endangering those fields that were once their very *raison d'être*. For it is their sky-high tuitions that are fueling this migration into purportedly more bankable fields and their adolescent politicization of the humanities that is failing to give students a reason to look back.

Tuition levels are the result of universities' own decision-making—above all, their insatiable drive to expand their student services bureaucracy. No branch of that endlessly growing bureaucracy is more senseless and self-indulgent than the **diversity superstructure**, founded as it is on a **demonstrable lie**: that colleges are bastions of discrimination against minorities and females.

Colleges could eviscerate the "I can't afford to be a literature major" argument overnight by eliminating their wasteful bureaucracies and slashing their tuitions by half. In the meantime, the humanities should fight back against attrition with their strongest suit. Forget the "we teach **critical thinking**" gambit, and other mealy-mouthed efforts at asserting a vacuous, process-oriented relevance. No, the humanities should step up and proudly proclaim: "We are the purveyors of beauty more lethal than you may possibly be able to bear and knowledge more profound than you can yet fathom. We are your vehicle into the past and into the minds of other human beings. Within our precincts are works of unparalleled eloquence, wit, and imagination; to die without having experienced them is to have led a life shortchanged."

Obviously, the humanities themselves have rendered such arguments off-limits with their plunge into narcissistic identity politics. Such terms as "beauty" and "knowledge" are deeply "contested," as they say in High Theory, if not egregiously embarrassing. But if all that a liberal arts degree can offer students is another tour of oppression and victimhood, there's no reason not to major in sociology. If the humanities go down, the loss will be universal, but they will have only themselves to blame.

Thomas Lindsay, Texas Public Policy Foundation

No one should be happy that the liberal arts are going down. Properly understood, the liberal arts constitute the core of the examined life defended in Socrates' famous statement, "The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." In our secular age, the liberal arts represent the last, best hope of ennobling democracy, of liberating us from absorption in the present, of raising our gaze above ourselves, without which we risk sinking below the level of the beasts.

When we understand the liberal arts as indispensable to freeing us from unconscious thrall to the unexamined assumptions that form our and every culture, we see that they are not "going down."

They went down some fifty years ago. Beginning with the near-wholesale abandonment by our colleges and universities of a required core curriculum, which was replaced by its present-day impostors—"general education" and "distribution requirements"—our universities have become "*multi*-versities," where courses are dished out in nearly as indiscriminate fashion as lunch choices at the campus cafeteria.

Going deeper, what brought down the liberal arts was the denial on the part of universities that there are absolute truths toward which the liberal arts might lead us and therewith liberate us from the unexamined life. In taking down the liberal arts, relativism simultaneously has toppled the authority of the defense of limited government and individual liberty articulated in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the U.S. Constitution. And this simultaneous takedown is no accident: The American experiment in self-government, like the liberal arts, stands or falls with the power of human reason to discover truth.



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In this light, market pressures are not the chief factor driving the current critical reevaluation of the liberal arts. More precisely, market pressures on the liberal arts are hardly new—Tocqueville's time spent here in the 1830s led him to observe that democracy in America favors an education in what is useful toward securing comfortable self-preservation. But while market forces are not new, American society has of late come more and more to realize that the liberal arts, as currently impoverished by relativism, are of less and less value.

Further, the more impoverished the liberal arts become, the greater the ferocity with which they seek no longer to educate but rather to indoctrinate students into relativism's willfully unexamined assumptions. On this latter point, no less than Harvard's recent report on the humanities, "**Mapping the Future**," agrees. The primary concern of "Mapping" is students exiting the humanities. Since 1966, humanities majors have dropped from 14 to 7 percent of degrees nationwide. In examining the reasons for the exodus, Harvard confesses to driving off independent-minded students repelled by the intolerance too often taught and practiced in the humanities. "Mapping" acknowledges, "We sometimes alienate" humanities students who get the message "that some ideas are unspeakable."

Another factor often neglected amid our current concern over the fall of liberal arts study is the rise of the societal goal that nearly all should go to college. This educational romanticism fatally neglects the fact that mastery of a coherent, rigorous liberal arts curriculum is achievable by but a fraction of the great numbers now attending college thanks to the college-for-all orthodoxy. Thus, "Mapping's" concern over the percentage-drop in humanities majors is likely overwrought, because, if the liberal arts are not for everybody, sending ever-more students to college should only be expected to reduce the percentage of humanities majors relative to the now-larger pool. The college-for-all agenda also has played no small role in diluting the rigor of what does remain of the liberal arts, thereby contributing to the popular perception that they lack intellectual respectability.

As to whether or not the critical reevaluation of the liberal arts will lead to their thoughtful reform or doom them to irrelevance, my point in this piece is that the pervasive relativism and concomitant intolerance currently found in the liberal arts *already* has doomed them in the deepest, most meaningful sense. We can and must, of course, hope that a reevaluation will produce thoughtful reform, but that does not answer the question, "From where and whom will reform come?" From the market? The liberal arts properly constituted were always looked to as a guide to rescue a purely market-oriented focus from falling guilty to the charge that it knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. From politicians? They have feared and likely will continue to fear pushback from those chiefly responsible for dooming the liberal arts, the higher-education establishment, which enjoys an organized, well-funded lobbying effort in both Washington, D.C., and the state capitols—whereas the people lack both the intensity and the organization required to threaten politicians' electoral imperative.

This is far from saying that we should not hope that a critical reevaluation yields thoughtful reform. But hope is not a strategy. The fundamental question is this: Who will educate the educators? Any successful strategy must entail no less than a refounding of the American academy, which is to say, must entail restoring the quest for wisdom as the highest human possibility. Absent this, the most fundamental of human revolutions, one is hard-pressed to expect anything other than a continued descent into misogyny, intolerance, and barbarism.

Samuel Goldman, George Washington University

The phrase "going down" is too general. Rather than a single entity, "the liberal arts" designates a far-flung constellation of activities and institutions. In order to assess the fate of the liberal arts, these dimensions have to be distinguished. Here are a few key elements of liberal arts, with some thoughts on challenges and prospects for each:

Liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges are in big trouble. According to a 2012 article in the journal *Liberal Education* there were 212 liberal arts colleges (LACs) in the United States in 1990. Today, there are only 130.

Arguments about the higher education bubble would lead one to expect that the colleges that dropped off the list went bust. That's not the case: only a few of the missing LACs actually closed. Instead, they changed their curricula, emphasizing pre-professional or vocational education.

This trend has affected remaining LACs, too. According to Swarthmore president Rebecca Chopp, only 10 residential liberal arts colleges in the country offer no vocational majors whatsoever. And at 55% of LACs, only about half the students graduate with liberal arts. In sum, there are many fewer liberal arts colleges than there used to be. And those that survive aren't as humanistic as they used to be.

The weak job market almost certainly discourages students from enrolling in LACs or, if they do, majoring in the humanities. But the real problem is the abandonment of the justification for the LAC. Having rejected many of their traditional religious, civic, and moral responsibilities in the 1970s, LACs now have trouble explaining what they're for. No wonder students prefer options that seem more likely to lead to employment and often cost less.

More serious teaching and learning goes on at liberal arts colleges than conservative critics sometimes suggest. Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that they will recommit as *institutions* to traditional ideals. As result, they will likely continue to die out, whether through actual closure or vocationalization. In a few decades, the only survivors may be elite LACs, which offer valuable branding as well as the small-scale setting in which some students thrive, and religious colleges which retain the sense of vocation that inspired the founders of American high education.

Undergraduate Education. The picture here isn't quite so dire. Recent reports have trumpeted the finding that number of degrees conferred in liberal arts subjects has dropped precipitously since the 1960s. It turns out, however, that most of the drop occurred in the 1970s—long before the current economic crisis or the culture wars of the 1990s. So the challenge to undergraduate enrollments doesn't seem to be either new market pressures or recent intellectual developments. In fact, much of the drop is attributable to women entering non-humanities fields as their professional opportunities expanded.

But this interpretation offers no cause for self-congratulation. The fact remains that the liberal arts hemorrhaged students in the 1970s—and have done nothing to win them back since. At elite universities, moreover, the number of humanities majors at elite universities *has* dropped in the last decade. The social sciences appear to be the main beneficiaries of the shift.

Unlike the crisis of liberal colleges, this problem has a solution. Professors and departments of the liberal arts don't need major institutional commitments to attract more students. They do need to offer better courses. "Better" means two things: First, effective humanities courses need to focus on serious content of enduring importance rather than specialist research or pop culture ephemera. Second, they must include rigorous reading and writing requirements, which equip students with the flexible skills that employers value more than specific job training.

Offering better courses won't be easy, but it's certainly possible. For that reason, I'm relatively optimistic about the prospects for liberal arts education within larger universities. The liberal arts will probably not recover the central role they enjoyed in the golden age of American higher education after World War II. But they don't have to accept irrelevance.

Graduate Education. This subject is almost too depressing to discuss. For mostly self-serving reasons, departments of liberal arts subjects continue to admit far more Ph.D. students than they could ever hope to place in jobs. That wouldn't be so bad if those

Subjects continue to admit far more Ph.D. students than they could ever hope to place in jobs. That wouldn't be so bad if these students were honestly informed of their prospects and provided with adequate funding. Too often, however, they're led to believe that chances of employment are much better than they really are and used as cheap labor to staff the classes that tenured faculty don't want to teach.

The future of the graduate system is murky. For mysterious reasons, enrollment in doctoral programs in the arts and humanities actually increased by 7.7% in 2013. On the other hand, good (meaning pessimistic) information about the risks and rewards of graduate school in the humanities is much easier to find than in the past. So if more people are going forth to the slaughter, they can be expected to know what awaits them.

The Life of the Mind. But liberal education can't be reduced to colleges, course offerings, or graduate program. As Leo Strauss suggested, these are organized settings for a certain kind of experience: the experience of things that the Greeks described as *kalon*—the fine, the beautiful, the noble. Do the liberal arts today offer this experience?

It seems to me that this question can't be answered on the systematic level. The experience of the beautiful is something that happens to and among individuals engaged in study and discussion with and about great works and great minds. All the humanities majors in the world wouldn't guarantee it. And the economic pressures and intellectual fads can't preclude it.

So in the long run, I'm optimistic. The traditional objects of liberal arts study—the intellectual and artistic products of Western civilization—are too rich and too rewarding to go down permanently. Plato will still be Plato, Augustine will still be Augustine, Shakespeare will still be Shakespeare in fifty years, or a hundred, or a thousand. Barring social or environmental cataclysm, they will always find readers. And some of those readers will organize themselves for purposes of serious learning and teaching. Perhaps that will occur within universities, perhaps outside them. Either way, the liberal arts will survive.

Tomorrow: responses from Patrick Deneen, Peter Wood, and Peter Lawler.



COMMENTS (8)

Heather MacDonald shows abysmal ignorance of higher education finances when she writes:

"Tuition levels are the result of universities' own decision-making ... Colleges could eviscerate the "I can't afford to be a literature major" argument overnight by eliminating their wasteful bureaucracies and slashing their tuitions by half."

First, tuition increases at public universities have been almost entirely the direct result of cuts in public (state) funding. This is not the case with official tuition at private colleges, but net tuition -- after scholarships -- actually hasn't been rising all that fast at private schools. If you're paying full freight at Yale or Harvard, and even at most lesser private colleges, in all likelihood your parents are rolling in dough.

Second, as much as one might rightly decry administrative bloat, which as MacDonald correctly points out consists mostly of "student services," it is simply not the case that half of even the educational budgets at colleges goes to functions which could just be jettisoned. Cut out half the core budget and you will eliminate libraries, deans, heating, physical plant, the registrar, and other things that are essential to keeping a campus running.

Posted by Jonathan | April 8, 2014 8:07 PM

Wonderful set of essays. Fact is, even if you could find a traditional humanities curriculum, you aren't likely to pay \$50,000 for it. You certainly aren't going to pay for the giant heaps of ordure which ooze forth from the vast majority of contemporary humanities departments (and, increasingly, social science ones).

As a parent, it is my duty to make sure that junior is gainfully employed after graduation. I simply won't pay for poor choices. My advice to the would-be student of great works of Western Civilization is to study biochemistry, geology, electrical engineering, and so forth. I have no doubt some enterprising fellow will figure out a way to educate you in the classics, for a reasonable fee, in the comfort of your own home and without the political and administrative hassles which bedevil the modern brick-and-mortars.

Posted by Adam | April 8, 2014 9:38 PM

The thing that will finish many liberal arts colleges – vocational training or no – is the unconstitutional VAWA of Biden and others. If they are adhering to this outrageous directive, they will eventually go out of business, regardless of what kind of extra twaddle they offer. And they will deserve this.

Posted by Steven Frattali | April 9, 2014 1:06 PM

As a STEM graduate, I think "celebrate" has a malicious connotation that isn't appropriate here. Democracy as a concept comes from the humanities side of the human experience, but capitalism comes from the STEM side. Both of these are enabling forces for the betterment of the species, responsible majority rule coupled with a profit motive for innovation.

The question is, do our achievements as a species owe more credit to responsible majority rule than they do to the profit motive? One is the fertile ground and the other is the farmer's blood and sweat.

I understand that it's frustrating to the humanities professions that the market rewards STEM skills more, and Heather's point about rising tuitions is absolutely correct: when you charge people for a good (education), you should expect them to look at the received value and then judge whether or not it's a valuable purchase. As long as the price for humanities and STEM degrees are the same, and the market rewards one more than the other, a rational consumer will continue to choose one over the other.

I have no interest in celebrating the reduction in demand for humanities degrees, but I do think that there's value in having the educational services industry look inward and see why this is rather than to continue justifying (self-servingly) the high price.

Posted by James B | April 9, 2014 2:42 PM

Higher costs of education? A lot of people talk about that, don't they? They spend a lot of time blaming it on bureaucratic empire building, when they blame it on anything at all. Well, they tend to blame it on other people's political ideologies, too. That is a valid

point, whichever side you've chosen.

The topic of rising education costs needs to be addressed. Most definitely. I'll grant that much.

But...how much of those rising costs are due to the regulatory environment? By that, I mean that people seldom address the numerous local, state and federal laws that require extra spending by the college or university. In practices, those laws mean that yet another bureaucrat gets a job or increases the size of his or her own little empire, at your cost, whether in tuition or in taxation.

The more laws you have, the more paper pushers and bureaucrats you need. Like gravity, it's a law of nature. Red in tooth and claw, you are the prey, they are the predator.

Posted by Warren Bonesteel | April 9, 2014 5:32 PM

Come now. You speak as if humanities degrees STILL "preserved great works from the past." They don't. My children -- both stem and btw both well educated in humanities starting in childhood, both history and literature buffs with some language instruction -- scrambled to find "less than offensive" humanities to fill their requirements. Even World Geography is a screed on the misdeeds of Western Civ. (And truly abismal economics assumptions.) Also, though they're both history buffs, there was no ancient history offered. There was one beginning Latin class, at an inconvenient time. No Classical Greek. No history of the Enlightenment and no American history without the substratum of "evil things America did." I KNOW. I looked over the course catalogue with them.

Before you excoriate those who don't want to take humanities at any price, maybe you should look at the average curriculum being offered, the slant on it, and the people teaching it. (Someone who also teaches Women's Studies is going to have an interesting take on Austen. We'll just say that.)

As for what is being taught to most humanities' majors -- those I've had the misfortune to interact with in a professional capacity don't know the rules of grammar, but know that Marxism allows them to interpret everything and can tell you the "historical victimhood" in anything -- even a map.

Bah. Good riddance. (And for context, I'm a Language and Literature MA, and my kids attend a state university.)

Posted by Sarah | April 9, 2014 5:56 PM

It's not the liberal arts that are dying but merely weird activist progressivism now that the whole of literature is tucked into anybody's pocket who has adult time to delve into it. I studied only science in college, sneaking liberal arts requirements in as total fluff like scientific writing or intro to theatre along with the chemistry foreign language requirement. Then after graduation I started buying books, and more books. It was a conscious plan all along to not allow others to interpret literature and autobiography for me. It was the autobiographies that almost always pointed to favored reading lists of great men, and a few lists out there too of great books. I don't need academics any more than I need priests to interpret the Bible for me. I can read them myself.

Posted by NikFromNYC | April 9, 2014 8:57 PM

We would be unhappy with the liberal arts going down, but they hit bottom at least a decade ago.

They continue to be studied with little institutional assistance: in private homes, in churches, in study groups, in think tanks (off budget), even academically among a few scholars who--and a *very* few departments that--defy fashion and politics.

But why should we be unhappy with liberal arts *departments* going down? They are thoroughly and irremediably corrupt.

MacDonald: "They [the departments?] have only themselves to blame." -- But of course

Lindsay: "no less than a refounding" -- Bravo! But who will bell that cat?

Goldman: "in the long run, I'm optimistic" -- Oh. I wish you had given a good reason.

Jonathan: MacDonald, you ignorant slut! public (state) funding droppeth from heaven upon the place beneath, and how dare it not! -- You can't make this stuff up.

Adam: I want Adam Junior to be well-educated; but I can't spend a small fortune on it. -- well said; especially as we pay the taxes that cause the public (local, state, and federal) funding to drop from heaven upon so many places beneath

Steven Frattali: VAWA will kill the colleges. -- Well, that *kind* of thing may be turning them largely into ladies' finishing schools. But there's always been a lot of money in that.

James B: I'm not making fun of you, man. I just want you to write this down and put it in a safe place: "Democracy as a concept comes from the humanities side of the human experience, but capitalism comes from the STEM side." Look at it again in ten years.

Posted by R. Alazar | April 10, 2014 12:23 AM

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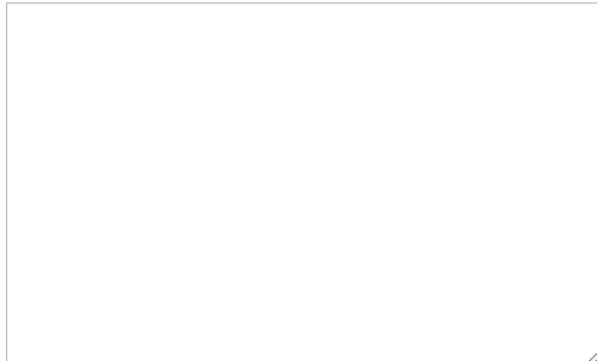
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Published by the Manhattan Institute

