



Whatever Happened to General Education?

Chad Wellmon

FINANCE, FOOTBALL, AND FRATERNITIES—not philosophy or physics—are the pillars of the modern American university. It's been that way for more than a century: In *On the Higher Learning in America* (1918)—published fewer than forty years after the founding of Johns Hopkins, America's first research university—Thorstein Veblen, the early-twentieth-century American sociologist who coined the term “conspicuous consumption,” dismissed American universities as little more than “competitive businesses.” In Plato's “classic scheme of folly,” he wrote, long before preening professors decried the corporatization of universities, America's burgeoning institutions of higher education had turned the ancient Greek's scheme on its head. Businessmen had overtaken universities and were managing the “pursuit of knowledge.”¹ An early reviewer of *On the Higher Learning*, writing in the *New York Times*, warned readers that the book was a “gas attack” on a sacred institution.² And, almost a century later, in the fall of 2014, Veblen's rambling but idealistic tirade brought one of my students to tears.

I had started class that day by asking my students whether Veblen's description of early-twentieth-century American universities resonated with their experiences at the University of Virginia. A young woman in the front row sitting ready with pen and notebook immediately replied, “Yes!” We read Plato and Aristotle on ethics, Fichte and Humboldt on universities, and Jefferson on democracy, she continued. But every one of us knows what happens in the fraternities on Rugby Road, every one of us knows how women are treated across campus, every one of us knows that what we do in class has nothing to do with the world outside class. Yet UVA continues to tell us how it forms Jeffersonian leaders who will change the world for good. It's all a lie, she said.

She and almost all of her classmates, from self-identified fraternity brothers to campus activists, thought Veblen could just as well be describing the University of Virginia in 2014. The “accessories” of college life—fraternities, football, and the panoply of student activities—as he put it, “are held to be indispensable, not for scholarly

Chad Wellmon is an associate professor of German studies at the University of Virginia and a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He is the author of *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (2015) and coeditor of *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook* (2017).

Left: *The Freshman Party*, 1943, by Fulvio Pendini (1907–1975); Palazzo Bo, Padua, Italy; Mondadori Portfolio/Archivio Magliani/Mauro Magliani and Barbara Piovani/Bridgeman Images.

or curricular reasons but chiefly to encourage the attendance and life-long financial support of the decorative contingent who take more kindly to sports, invidious intrigue and social amenities than to scholarly pursuits.” School spirit was a business imperative.

Two days after reading Veblen with my class, I led the first meeting of a group of faculty that had been tasked, in our dean’s words, with “reimagining undergraduate education at a public university for the twenty-first century.” Despite its bureaucratic name and, given the nature of academic politics, “The Committee for the Reform of General Education” prompted a two-year argument about the ends of education and the character of our community. The experience was brutal but inspiring.

School spirit was a business imperative at the University of Virginia.

In that first meeting, my colleagues and I from the School of Arts and Sciences quickly came to the same conclusion as my class. Our students shared less a curricular life than an extracurricular one. What bound them together was not their classroom experiences, their chemistry labs, or the books they read, but, rather, the clubs they led, the basketball games they worshipfully attended, and the parties for which they diligently planned. Veblen’s description held true. Our university was a divided institution in service of little more than success—or in UVA’s perverse reformulation of Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) “the endless pursuit of better.” And the consequences were extensive and grave.

But my colleagues and I quickly acknowledged that we, the faculty, were just as complicit. We had been trained to write articles, run labs, and speak with our disciplinary colleagues around the world. But we had not been trained to talk with our students about their moral lives, about

the relationship between what they learned and how they lived, or about the aims and purposes of education. In fact, most of us had been trained to be skeptical, if not suspicious, of such morally frank discussion. Were questions about the purposes, ends, and ethical shape of education legitimate areas of concern for historians, biologists, chemists, or philosophers?

The Check-Box Curriculum

Many of my colleagues in the academy, especially those in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, argue that the greatest threat facing universities and colleges today is *neoliberalism*—an umbrella term for the financial and political forces that are remaking universities in the image of international corporations. The best of these accounts, such as those by Wendy Brown and Ned O’Gorman, describe neoliberalism not just as an economic agenda but as a pervasive rationality that cultivates and enforces market-oriented values to the exclusion of any others, reducing all goods to private, economic goods and transforming humans into objects for market-based investment.³

But critics of the “neoliberal” university don’t go far enough. The university is complicit in, not just a victim of, a broader cultural inability to imagine other reasons and ends for acting, thinking, and being together. Today’s universities operate in keeping with largely private economic ends. (How much will my degree earn *me*?) They lack a robust conception of the *kind* of goods that education and knowledge could be. And they have long institutionalized this failure, or refusal, in their undergraduate curricula.

Consider the University of Virginia and its general education curriculum. Like that of most universities, it consists of numerous formal categories through which students carve up their academic and intellectual lives—a few social sciences courses, some humanities courses, and

a mixture of science and math courses. Such a check-box curriculum also ensures that faculty members remain segmented, institutionally, in terms of departmental division but also, subjectively, in terms of our scholarly lives. As scholars, our primary commitments are to international disciplinary networks, not to a local corporate body of teachers and students. These so-called distribution curricula institutionalize choice as the singular virtue for both students and faculty.

Since at least 2000, faculty at several universities—including Harvard, Stanford, and William and Mary—have attempted to reform their curricula. They have issued reports lamenting the lack of a coherent, common experience and the absence of a shared intellectual project. Yet many of these reports have had a negligible impact, whether because of delayed votes, infinitely reconstituted committees, or faculty exhaustion. Why?

Between 1900 and 1940, however, general education was heralded as the solution to a cultural problem, the answer to questions about the purpose of education and knowledge in a modern age.

To answer that question, we must go back to the late nineteenth century, when the research university eclipsed the college as the most important institution of higher learning in the United States. Throughout the 1880s and '90s, as research universities such as the University of Michigan, Johns Hopkins, Harvard, and Cornell grew in national and international prominence, their critics and advocates alike began to worry that a coherent and morally edifying body of knowledge was missing from American higher education.

Today, deans and members of committees like the one I chaired at my university consider general education a problem in need of

a solution. Between 1900 and 1940, however, general education was heralded as the solution to a cultural problem, the answer to questions about the purpose of education and knowledge in a modern age. Amid extensive debate, faculty members and university leaders eventually began to tout newly designed general education programs as the best way to fill the void left by the rapid and widespread collapse of the classical American college.

The Rise of Intellectual Agnosticism

In 1905, William Rainey Harper, the University of Chicago's first president, took a look at the fragmented state of undergraduate education and decided that it needed to be reformed. The elective system, introduced by Harvard's Charles Eliot and Brown's Francis Wayland decades before, had created an arrangement in which (to quote Wayland) "in so far as it is practicable, every student might study what he chose, all that he chose, and nothing but what he chose."⁴ Choice was the only thing that mattered.

Harper blamed an organizational structure that trained students to conceive of knowledge not as a whole but as vivisected into distinct disciplines and "technical departments." The "artificial and misleading" organization of American universities had become "so fixed that, like the letter of the sacred Scriptures, it is by many supposed to be part of the original creation itself."⁵ Such an organization not only divided knowledge; it formed internally incoherent and distracted students. Universities provided students with no fixed points of orientation. As a consequence, students had no sense, as Amherst's president, Alexander Meiklejohn, put it in 1912, of the "organic relationship of knowledge," nor of "the common task which should bind them together."⁶ The ethical and intellectual incoherence of American higher education, however, was ultimately rooted,

Meiklejohn warned, in an “intellectual agnosticism.”⁷ And this was a social crisis that threatened not just college curricula but the very coherence of American democracy.

For most of the preceding century, aspiring American postgraduates had trekked to German universities in Berlin, Leipzig, or Bonn to study with world-renowned philologists or chemists. Upon their return to the United States, many, such as the Cornell philologist and founding president of the Modern Language Association, James Morgan Hart, extolled the emancipatory character of German *Wissenschaft* (scholarly knowledge) and helped to transform classical colleges into modern research universities and even to establish such institutions. But they failed to understand that the German conception of *Wissenschaft* didn’t translate well to American culture.

Whereas German *Gymnasien* and universities formed humanistically inclined *Wissenschaftler*, America’s antebellum classical colleges formed classical gentlemen.

Then, as now, *Wissenschaft* referred not only to science in the English sense of natural and physical sciences, but also to cultural and social sciences—and, indeed, to any systematic form of knowledge. It was embedded in a distinct social system with its own institutions and notions of what counted as real, authoritative knowledge. All German *Wissenschaftler*, whether chemists or classicists, had been educated in the classical *Gymnasium* and could read and write Greek and Latin. They shared a common culture and a faith, however vague and implicit, in the power of ancient cultures to provide norms and ideals for the present. *Wissenschaft* didn’t just produce knowledge; it guided right action, formed people, and provided meaning. It promised a scholarly

community that extended beyond any particular time or place.

For Americans, by contrast, this common culture was embodied in the classical college and thus tied to undergraduate education. An American undergraduate followed a curriculum that emphasized training in Latin and Greek language, mathematics, and moral philosophy. Whereas German *Gymnasien* and universities formed humanistically inclined *Wissenschaftler*, America’s antebellum classical colleges formed classical gentlemen. The purpose of the classical college, as the Yale Report of 1828 put it, was to provide “the discipline and the furniture of the mind,”⁸ and the languages were Latin and Greek, rather than French or German, because they were best suited to this task.⁹ These curricular programs drew their coherence from nineteenth-century assumptions that all truth claims—regardless of whether they were scientific, moral, or religious in nature—could ultimately be integrated. These truth claims had, by definition, a moral effect, the power to change people.

This ideal of “mental discipline” was the end of a college education, and it was tied, in complicated ways, to the broader moral idiom of mainline American Protestant culture. Mental discipline was an epistemic and ethical ideal that stood in for the unity of the mental faculties and the premise that the human mind was the basis of all knowledge and the source of basic truths. It also referred to the process by which the mental faculties were perfected through rigorous exercise. Mental discipline was both the product and process of a proper education. The ultimate end of this regime was the perfection of the faculties as a reflection of the perfection and unity of nature. The classical college curriculum was built upon the presumed analogy between natural and moral laws, both divinely given. The coherence of the well-ordered and disciplined mind mirrored the coherence of a divinely well-ordered cosmos. The well-educated college student embodied this unity in his person and was capable, wrote the

University of Michigan's founding president, Henry Tappan, in 1851, of viewing all "knowledge [from] the highest points of view."¹⁰

The Meaning of Modernity

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, however, the tenuous and highly idealized coherence of the classical curriculum had started to come undone. As the sheer number of colleges proliferated (from fewer than thirty in 1800 to more than two hundred by 1850), and enrollments grew accordingly, college curricula began to change. In the 1860s, colleges introduced the elective system. The newly created research universities of Johns Hopkins, Clark, Harvard, and Chicago transformed higher education into an increasingly specialized and differentiated institution—and, in so doing, remade undergraduate education. With their ascendancy came the creation of academic departments; the development of professional academic societies (from the Modern Language Association to the American Historical Association); the introduction of undergraduate majors; the establishment of separate professional schools (business, engineering, law, and medicine); and, quite simply, the offering of ever more courses.

When critics such as Meiklejohn and Harper lamented the sorry state of undergraduate education, they were claiming that something was missing from the new undergraduate curriculum. And although they rarely agreed on what exactly was lacking, they began to invoke the term "general education" to name this anxiety. In the first several decades of the twentieth century, faculty members across the country debated, designed, and implemented new general education curricula in an attempt to recover an epistemic and ethical ideal—the unity and coherence of knowledge.

In 1919, John Coss, a philosophy professor at Columbia University, designed and taught

the first version of the famous "Contemporary Civilization" course, one of the first general education programs: a two-semester course that focused almost exclusively on "present-day problems."¹¹ Meanwhile, Contemporary Civilization's sister courses, the Humanities A and B core sequence, emerged out of a "great books" course designed by English professor John Erskine to acquaint immigrant students with "the great Anglo-Saxon writers."¹² During the next two decades, Erskine's course evolved into the "Colloquium on Important Books." Taught by Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling, it became Humanities A (on literature) and B (on music and arts) in 1937, and was required for all Columbia College students beginning in 1947.

Early in the twentieth century, the new general education curricula appeared in an attempt to recover an epistemic and ethical ideal—the unity and coherence of knowledge.

Much of Columbia's faculty argued that the imposing presence of the research university required a counterbalance in the form of a unified curriculum for undergraduates. But they offered two starkly different solutions. Contemporary Civilization focused on the present and a constantly changing human condition, whereas the Humanities sequences focused on a highly selective canon of texts thought to reveal the unchanging nature of the human.

In 1922, the debate about general education spilled into the broader public when *The New Republic* published a series of articles on the state of university and college education. Several authors lamented the "centrifugal" forces tearing American universities and colleges apart. Some, such as the president of the University of Michigan, M.C. Burton, blamed Eliot and his

elective system¹³; others argued that the curricular confusion of American colleges was ultimately a consequence of the fragmenting effects of modernity, especially the ascendancy of the sciences.

Scientists, Meiklejohn contended, assumed that “knowledge has no unity,” and they institutionalized this unfounded presupposition in university curricula and their own scholarship. The sciences, he wrote, “stand upon the ruins of an older scheme which they have smashed... [and] because another scheme of thought has broken down, they think the schemes of thought are gone forever, that unity in knowledge is a myth.”¹⁴ Scientists had given up on the unity of knowledge and, thus, truth. The acceleration of knowledge had overwhelmed the prospect of truth. In this light, the task of “modern thought,” concluded University of North Carolina president H.W. Chase, was to recover the “unification of knowledge.”¹⁵ Universities, he lamented, could come to no “clear conviction of what knowledge is.”

These wide-ranging anxieties and discussions about the ends of education and the centrifugal experience of modern knowledge found their most concentrated expression in a debate about curriculum reform at the University of Chicago from around 1930 to 1942. It was a struggle over the very meaning of modernity, a battle in which the stakes were not just curricular but metaphysical, ethical, and political. Not incidentally, the debate helped transform Chicago from a midwestern Baptist football powerhouse to an intellectual bastion.

The New Plan and Its Discontents

In 1931, a group of faculty, frustrated by the mediocre academic quality of Chicago’s undergraduates and the power of football over the campus culture, introduced the New Plan, a curriculum organized around four two-semester

survey courses covering the areas of the university’s four divisions: biological sciences, physical sciences, humanities, and social sciences. By 1935, Chauncey Boucher, the dean who led the effort, could argue that the New Plan’s intellectual rigor had reduced the average time it took to earn a degree; perhaps most importantly, he could also point out that Chicago’s vaunted football program had collapsed.¹⁶

Curriculum reform at Chicago was a struggle over the very meaning of modernity, a battle in which the stakes were not just curricular but metaphysical, ethical, and political.

But the New Plan had a powerful critic, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Chicago’s new president. Appointed at the age of twenty-nine, Hutchins left his position as dean of Yale Law School and came to the university just as Boucher was beginning discussions that would eventually result in the New Plan. Soon after his arrival, Hutchins began collaborating with a young and feisty philosopher named Mortimer Adler on a “great books” honors course modeled on Erskine’s Columbia course.

Before his arrival at Chicago, Adler had been developing a methodology and taxonomy for organizing all sciences and fields of knowledge, a project inspired by the metaphysics of the medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas. A New Yorker from a Jewish family, Adler mined Aquinas for permanent, rational categories of knowledge and a timeless conception of human nature. Attracted to Adler’s encyclopedic aspirations, academic ambitions, and grandiose claims, Hutchins enlisted him in a plan to remake the University of Chicago. Their “Great Books” course was the vehicle, and it represented a direct challenge to the New Plan.



Three Wise Books, 2005, by Jonathan Wolstenholme (b.1950); private collection/©Portal Painters/Bridgeman Images.

In 1934, Hutchins began a public assault on the New Plan, delivering a series of talks and speeches to faculty, alumni, and trustees in which he denounced the contemporary system of education for merely pouring “facts into the student” and “accumulating data” with no sense of purpose.

What followed was a highly personal debate about the role of research and modern scholarship in undergraduate education. Even the *Daily Maroon*, the undergraduate student newspaper, got involved, mostly by mocking the defenders of the New Plan as mindless positivists, endlessly piling up data. Adler and Hutchins’s “Great Books” program juxtaposed the humanities with the natural and social sciences and claimed that the humanities, with their purportedly timeless, metaphysically inflected truths, were the only legitimate source for moral and epistemic guidance—everything else was mere empiricism. Ethics, and, by extension for Hutchins, social coherence, depended on a transcendent, perfect, largely invisible reality, one that only a metaphysically informed ethics, preferably of the Thomistic variety, could afford.

The real object of derision, however, was the very idea of *Wissenschaft* and the concept of knowledge as research—of knowledge not as something to be revealed, but as something to be created and unendingly pursued. Adler and Hutchins believed that undergraduates should be reading the *great books* and absorbing their eternal verities without being subjected to the contingent claims of modern science.

Adler had outlined a metaphysical plan for the university in the form of a curriculum based on fixed categories he derived from neo-Thomistic principles. Hutchins translated Adler’s epistemology into a political imperative. “Unless it is admitted,” he wrote, “that the natural moral law underlies the diversity of mores, that the good, the true, and the beautiful are the same for all men, no world civilization is possible.”¹⁷ Hutchins’s great-books plan was driven by a democratic commitment to the idea that such an education should be available to all on the belief that the only hope for social and cultural order lay in shared metaphysical principles about the order of knowledge.

One of the most trenchant responses to Hutchins's plans came from a young economist on the Chicago faculty named Harry Gideonese. In 1937, Gideonese published a blistering review of Hutchins's *Higher Education*, accusing him of, among other things, attempting to impose an "absolutist system" of metaphysics on the undergraduate curriculum. Modern science, he argued, had "freed itself" from such systems. Whereas Hutchins sought "immutable ideas" and "indubitable first principles," Gideonese embraced the contingency of all knowledge in the "presence of empirical data."¹⁸

Although Gideonese quoted Kant's dictum that "concepts without precepts are empty, precepts without concepts are blind," his primary argument focused not on epistemic claims but on epistemic virtues and dispositions—the person and character of the scholar. In a modern world awash with data and information, no one scholar or group of scholars could legitimately presume possession of the truth or the unifying force of any one system. Hutchins and Adler, defenders of the great books, Gideonese argued, were more interested in recovering a lost metaphysics than in forming young people. He accused Adler and Hutchins of epistemic hubris.

Gideonese lost the curriculum battle. Hutchins denied him tenure. And in January 1942 the Chicago faculty voted to adopt a new, all-general education curriculum—what would only years later become the Chicago Core.

While Hutchins berated and cajoled his own faculty, he also carried on a more public debate with John Dewey in the pages of the reformist journal *The Social Frontier*. Hutchins criticized Dewey's philosophy of progressive education, while Dewey condemned Hutchins's conservative program. Although Dewey framed his discussions of educational reform in terms of progressive versus traditional, he shared many of the concerns about the fragmented state of American education. He, too, realized that research universities had transformed undergraduate education.

He had also anticipated, in 1902, the arguments of the 1920s that curricular problems were ultimately effects of the modern sciences, which he wrote had "created a new universe, material and social."¹⁹ In particular, the sciences had ushered in an uncontrollable increase in knowledge, a growth that led, he continued, to the "congestion of the curriculum and the conflict of various studies for a recognized place." The response of universities and colleges had been to "throw the entire burden of election upon individual students."²⁰

If Adler embraced an idealized Thomistic tradition in his search for unity, Dewey turned to a monolithic notion of science.

The introduction of elective schemes, however, simply concealed what Dewey considered to be the more salient fact: that the crisis of education was "only a reflex of the lack of unity in the social activities themselves, and of the necessity of reaching more harmony, more system in our scheme of life."²¹ The fragmentation of modern knowledge mirrored the fragmentation of modern social life. Whereas Adler and Hutchins would later argue that the task of the modern scholar and institutions of higher education was to recover some idealized lost unity, Dewey argued in 1938 that unified knowledge could be achieved only by means of a "scientific method" that got at the "significance of our everyday experiences."²² If Adler embraced an idealized Thomistic tradition in his search for unity, Dewey turned to a monolithic notion of science. Scientific method could not secure metaphysical truth, but it could bind and sustain people caught in the epistemic and ethical tumult of modernity.

Adler, a former student of Dewey's at Columbia, continued to raise the rhetorical stakes of the debate, claiming in 1942 at

conference in New York that Chicago's faculty represented "perfectly the disunity and chaos of modern culture."²³ In the closing lines of his lecture, he charged that the Chicago faculty members who had voted against Hutchins's curriculum—and thus rejected the claim that education and ethics more broadly must presume a rational and unchanging human nature and shared beliefs about the nature of reality—posed a greater threat to civilization than Hitler. They had opted for cultural chaos.²⁴

In a reply to Adler and Hutchins, Dewey's acolyte and regular defender in these debates, Sidney Hook, neatly summarized the chasm that separated the two sides. "To speak of the nature of man," he wrote, "is already a sign that a selective interest is present. What is designated by the term 'man' may have many natures depending upon the context and purpose of inquiry. Even if the nature of man is defined in terms of what differentiates him from other animals, we can choose any one of a number of diverse traits that will satisfy the formal conditions of the definition."²⁵ The human was an abstraction, and thus no clear ground for a curriculum.

Estrangement and Renewal

These laments for a lost curricular unity were elegies for a world undone by the fragmenting effects of modernity—secularization, rationalization, and pluralization. Surveying these debates as an immigrant, Hannah Arendt observed in 1954 that Americans had turned the "general crisis that has overtaken the modern world" into its own "recurring crisis in education."²⁶

Seventy years earlier, however, German scholars and intellectuals had done something similar. In 1877, Rudolf Virchow, a physician and anthropologist, had formulated the crisis of German higher education in these terms: How can scholars and teachers insist that their concepts, their doctrines, and their claims become

the subject of education and public knowledge if that knowledge is contingent?²⁷

This was simply a pedagogically inflected formulation of Nietzsche's attempt, only five years later, to imagine in *The Gay Science* a modern ethics that was both a radically self-conscious and brutally honest account of the contingent and historical character of all moral systems and an affirmation of being a moral human. The task of a modern ethics and, therefore, our institutions of education, *unsere Bildungsanstalten*, as Nietzsche called them, was to offer an affirmative account of how to live under the relentless epistemic anxieties of modernity.²⁸ The pluralization of values, warned Nietzsche, threatened to undermine the stability of universities and all systems of education.

Hannah Arendt observed in 1954 that Americans had turned the "general crisis that has overtaken the modern world" into its own "recurring crisis in education."

Arendt understood the American education debates of the first half of the twentieth century in these Nietzschean terms. The problem of education in the modern world, she wrote, "lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition." The possibility of education requires an individual and institutional recognition that no one can achieve her own liberation. It requires an acknowledgment that we all enter a world of knowledge that precedes us. We first encounter knowledge as guests and are called to gratitude. The inherent conservatism of education, its defense of authority and tradition, distinguishes it from a democratic public life defined by a stridently egalitarian ethos and skepticism toward authority and tradition. Education

relies on authority and tradition in a world that considers both illegitimate. The debates about curricular reform revealed the tragic “estrangement from the world” at the core of American higher education. And they undermined the ends of education—the “task of renewing a common world.”²⁹

Toward a Curriculum as Bulwark

When my colleagues and I began meeting in the fall of 2014, we joined in what the authors of the 1945 Harvard Red Book had called the “search” for a unified curriculum.³⁰ And we were haunted by the debates that had taken place in Chicago and New York. We lamented the specialization of undergraduate education and our own scholarly lives, but we also acknowledged its intellectual value. We worried about the incoherence of our students’ intellectual experiences, but we shared stories of their serendipitous and personal discoveries of connections. We spent two years arguing and wondering what might bind us together, a faculty at a public university in 2016. We understood the need for shared commitments and common purposes, but we were unsure how to forge them.

According to Veblen, American culture didn’t have the ethical resources to imagine goods and ends that were not simply economic.

Unlike some of our predecessors, however, we didn’t seek to recover a lost metaphysical order of knowledge or common moral ground. But neither did we deny our status as moral beings with distinct obligations, deep desires, and ethical ideals—or that our deepest, most comprehensive commitments often conflict and may even be incompatible.

And so in May of last year, 83 percent of my colleagues in the College of Arts and Science voted to pilot a curriculum based on this premise spelled out in the first paragraph of the proposal: “A curriculum is not just a formal list of requirements but instead an assertion of values, purpose, and commitment.”

Such a statement assumes, of course, that faculty members have such values and ideas about the ends of education; that they can come together to debate and articulate them; that they can, then, craft a curriculum that gives voice to these values and ideas. But a curriculum need not affirm one common, particular, and comprehensive set of values and purposes. We would have to argue about that.

It remains to be seen what will become of UVA’s proposed curriculum. Veblen had little confidence that universities could reform themselves, not because he considered faculty members institutionally inept or the “captains of erudition” brilliantly conniving. He doubted the possibility of change because he doubted that American culture could change. “The popular sentiment,” he wrote, fully embraced the notion that “businesslike administration [was] the only sane rule to be followed in any human enterprise.”³¹ The broader culture didn’t have the ethical resources to imagine goods and ends that were not simply economic. And, so, absent other moral imaginations, the practices and virtues that had come to organize and sustain universities were those of businesses whose only good was economic utility.

My hope is not that our curriculum will be autonomous, completely free of fiscal constraints and social utility. My hope is that our curriculum will sustain the idea of the university as a unique and crucial institution for the exchange of reasons, ideas, and longings, as a bulwark against the excesses of economic imperatives and democracy’s demagogues. As confidence in our social institutions collapses, the university is, at least in theory, ideally suited to be a beacon of public discourse and democratic and intellectual ideals

and virtues. The students who course through UVA and the faculty who sustain it enter its bricked, serpentine walls as they are—formed by sometimes-shared, sometimes-conflicting practices and cultures and with a range of prior commitments.

Given its history and the continued strength of its ideals, the university may be the institution best equipped to sustain such an experiment in pluralism and democratic discourse.

We all love and relate to the world differently. To expect that we cease to be who we have become is both naive and wrong-headed. And yet we come to a common and historical institution, the university. We arrive with a shared commitment, however inarticulate and inchoate, to its purposes and virtues: the creation, discovery, curation, and transmission of knowledge. The modern research university has long embodied these ideals and maintained the scholarly practices and virtues necessary for their flourishing: a devotion to open discussion, a critical disposition, a commitment to rational argument based on evidence and exactitude, and a love of learning.³² Now, more than ever, we have to identify these practices and virtues and defend them. We must also acknowledge that the university will and should transform us all.

To do so, however, we also need to acknowledge that these practices, virtues, and ideals are, on their own, insufficient. Like any robust civic institution in a democracy, the university can't merely tolerate differences. As even mainstream liberal theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls have acknowledged, the university community needs to draw upon the same motivational resources provided by plural religions, traditions, and cultures that enable the members

of the greater society not only to survive but to flourish.³³ Our differences may well keep us from embracing a common, singular vision of the good, but they motivate us to commit to common projects, common purposes, and shared goods. We are, as the legal theorist John Inazu writes, “unlikely to agree upon the meaning of abstract notions” such as justice, truth, dignity, or the fundamental purposes of our lives and communities.³⁴ But at least most of us in the university accept that these are fundamental concepts calling for passionate yet generous debate. Given its history and the continued strength of its ideals, the university may be the institution best equipped to sustain such an experiment in pluralism and democratic discourse.³⁵

Such a vision of the university is not the one of value-free objectivity Max Weber held up early in the twentieth century as the ideal institution of modern knowledge.³⁶ Weber's university, long the model for the modern liberal university, demanded, however implicitly, a masculine denial of who we are and long to be in the name of a single virtue—intellectual rectitude or scientific objectivity. To those who lamented lost unities and modern fragmentation, he said, Be a man! The only honest form of life, he suggested, was a virile refusal to seek easy consolation in just-so stories of epistemic wholeness and moral certitude.

And yet even Weber's vision for knowledge and universities acknowledged that all inquiry, all scholarly and intellectual engagement, is driven by prior values and commitments that motivate us to ask the questions we do and teach the courses we care about. It is incumbent upon faculty to be honest and to acknowledge why we are committed to universities, however different or similar the reasons might be. For many of us who teach in universities, that motivating reason is what Weber called *Wissenschaft* and Dewey “scientific method.” But few of us recognize either of these two conceptions of science for what they are—complex sets of sometimes

coherent, sometimes competing traditions. Just as there is no monolithic, fully coherent tradition or religion, so there is no monolithic science or scientific method. There are varieties and relationships. What are their shared and distinct practices, virtues, and ends? And how do they relate to other traditions of knowledge, whether more explicitly religious or less so? The university should be an institution in which these discussions of competing visions of knowledge and of the good are encouraged and sustained, where the practices and virtues that enable them are cultivated in young people and in ourselves.

Notes

- 1 Thorstein Veblen, *On the Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*, ed. Richard Teichgraber III (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 88.
- 2 Brander Matthews, "Mr. Veblen's Gas Attack on Our Colleges and Universities," *New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, March 19, 1919, 125, 137, 138.
- 3 See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015) and Ned O'Gorman, *The Iconoclastic Imagination: Image, Catastrophe, and Economy in American from the Kennedy Assassination to September 11* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- 4 Francis Wayland, *Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education: Read March 28, 1850* (Providence, RI: George H. Whitney, 1850), 52.
- 5 William Rainey Harper, "Waste in Higher Education," chapter IV, *The Trend in Higher Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1905), 99.
- 6 Alexander Meiklejohn, "What the Liberal Arts College Is," part I, section II, in *The Liberal College* (Boston, MA: Marshall Jones, 1920), 41.
- 7 Ibid., 42.
- 8 Committee of the Corporation and the Academical Faculty, "Reports on the Course of Instruction in Yale College," (New Haven, CT: Hezekiah Howe, 1828), 7.
- 9 Caroline Winterer, *Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780–1910* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 35.
- 10 Henry P. Tappan, *University Education* (New York, NY: George P. Putnam, 1851), 11.
- 11 John J. Coss, "The New Freshman Course in Columbia College," in *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook*, ed. Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 343.
- 12 Quoted in Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754–2004* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 290.
- 13 M.L. Burton, "The Undergraduate Course," supplement, *The New Republic* 32 (October 25, 1922), 9–11.
- 14 Alexander Meiklejohn, "The Unity of the Curriculum," supplement, *The New Republic* 32 (October 25, 1922), 2–4.
- 15 H.W. Chase, "The Problem of Higher Education," supplement, *The New Republic* 32 (October 25, 1922), 4–5.
- 16 This and the following paragraphs draw on Menand, Reitter, and Wellmon, "General Education: Introduction," in *The Rise of the Research University* and John W. Boyer, "A Twentieth Century Cosmos: The New Plan and the Origins of General Education at Chicago," *Occasional Papers on Higher Education XVI* (Chicago, IL: College of the University of Chicago, 2007).
- 17 Quoted in Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 30.
- 18 Harry D. Gideonse, "The Higher Learning in a Democracy," *The Rise of the Research University*, 319.
- 19 John Dewey, *The Educational Situation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1902), 86.
- 20 Ibid., 85.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1963), 88. First published 1938.
- 23 Mortimer J. Adler, "God and the Professors," in *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: A Symposium* (New York, NY: Kraus Reprint Co. 1971), 138, <http://connection.ebsco-host.com/c/speeches/9732798/god-professors>. Accessed January 2, 2017.
- 24 On Adler's lecture and the conference more generally, see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* and Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Intellectuals and Total War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, in press), 31–47. I owe a great debt to both of these accounts.
- 25 Sidney Hook, *Education for Modern Man* (New York, NY: Dial Press, 1946), 26.
- 26 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education" (1954), <http://www.thecriticalreader.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ArendtCrisisInEdTable.pdf>. Accessed January 2, 2017.
- 27 Rudolf Virchow, "Die Freiheit der Wissenschaften im Modernen Staatsleben" (The Freedom of the Sciences in the Modern Life of the State) (1872), Amtlicher Bericht über die Versammlung Deutscher Naturforscher und

- Ärzte (Official report of the German Association of Scientists and Doctors) 50 (1877), 65–77, 73.
- ²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, ed. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, trans. Damion Searls (New York, NY: New York Review Books Classics, 2015).
- ²⁹ Arendt, “The Crisis in Education.”
- ³⁰ *General Education in a Free Society: A Report of the Harvard Committee*, introduction by James Bryant Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 36.
- ³¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America*, 202.
- ³² For an extended account of these practices and virtues, see Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).
- ³³ John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3, 1; Jürgen Habermas, *Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt: Eine Diskussion mit Jürgen Habermas* (An Awareness of What is Missing: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas) (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 2008).
- ³⁴ John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 132.
- ³⁵ John Inazu, “Law, Religion, and Confident Pluralism in the University,” *The Hedgehog Review/THR Blog*, September 20, 2016, <http://iasc-culture.org/THR/channels/THR/2016/09/law-religion-and-confident-pluralism-in-the-university/>.
- ³⁶ *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Science as Vocation) in *Max Weber Schriften 1894–1922*, ed. Dirk Kaesler (Stuttgart, Germany: Alfred Kröner, 2002), 510–511.

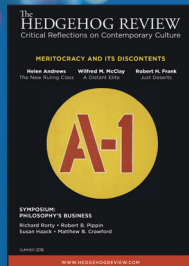
The HEDGEHOG REVIEW

PHONE 434-243-8935
EMAIL hedgehog@virginia.edu
ONLINE hedgehogreview.com

Gaps in your collection?



THE CULTURAL
CONTRADICTIONS
OF MODERN SCIENCE
FALL 2016



MERITOCRACY AND
ITS DISCONTENTS
SUMMER 2016



WORK IN THE
PRECARIOUS ECONOMY
SPRING 2016



RE-ENCHANTMENT
FALL 2015