



Let's Not Forget the Liberal Arts: *The Collapse of Undergraduate Teaching**

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Key Points

- Texas has not closed an SSLC since 1996, despite a long-term decline in the average monthly census, sub-standard care, and sharply rising costs.
- Deinstitutionalization is a national trend; most states have significantly reduced both their institutionalized population and the number of state-run facilities—except Texas, which still operates 13 SSLCs.
- Lawmakers should direct DADS to begin closing and consolidating SSLCs, beginning with the Austin facility, while implementing reforms to ease transition of SSLC residents into the community.

Introduction

When Texas business and community leaders meet to discuss higher education, the discussion tends to focus on economic development. We want our colleges and universities to produce graduates who are prepared for the competitive pressures of the 21st century. We hope that bringing more Ph.D.s into our communities will lead to economic growth.

Eventually someone will ask: “But what about the liberal arts? Don't we need well-rounded citizens who can think?” The group will murmur an assent, and then go back to discussing how improving our colleges and universities can impact the economy.

A college education should be about more than high starting salaries. We want our children—and as many citizens as possible—to know and appreciate literature and the arts. We want our college graduates to read, write and speak well, and to think critically. We want them to be able to make thoughtful moral choices and fully appreciate what it means to be human.

Unfortunately, traditional liberal arts programs are disappearing from higher education in America. There is compelling evidence that tenured professors at large research universities no longer care about teaching undergraduates to read, write, or think critically and many of the smaller colleges that specialize in delivering a traditional liberal arts education are struggling to survive.

The Decline of the Traditional Liberal Arts Education

The sad fact is that a traditional liberal arts education is disappearing from the American college campus. In 1971, 51 percent of degrees awarded were in the humanities, education and the social sciences; by 2005 the number of those degrees had dropped to 24 percent.¹ In research universities, the collapse was even more rapid, and many of the remaining humanities programs were anything but traditional.

Smaller liberal arts colleges are suffering. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently described the plight of a group of small liberal arts colleges with fewer than 750 students. Most of these schools are located in small towns across America and cannot attract many students from outside their own regions. “Even during the economic boom of the 1990s such institutions closed their doors at a rate of about two a year, according to data collected by the DOE.”²

There are three main reasons for the decline in traditional liberal arts degrees:

1. Most students are interested in high-paying jobs, not literature or moral training;
2. Despite polite public support for the liberal arts, most businesses are more interested in graduates having practical skills; and,
3. The modern American research university has all but abandoned undergraduate

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teaching, and particularly teaching critical thinking skills, moral judgment, and good citizenship, substituting in its place a bizarre smorgasbord of courses taught by faculty who often reject American values and the tenets of Western Civilization.

What Students Want

Increasingly, students want a college diploma to enhance their career, and economic success is expected to follow educational success. Today “the value of a college degree is assessed on the basis of how much money graduates earn ... Higher education in the United States is essentially becoming a process of providing credentials, whose value is measured in terms of economic return.”³

“Since 1970, the percentage of freshmen who rate ‘being very well off financially’ as an ‘essential’ or ‘very important goal’ has risen from 36.2 to 73.6 percent, while the percentage who attach similar importance to ‘acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life’ has fallen from 79 to 39.6 percent.”⁴

Of course, liberal arts faculty could cooperate with other departments to deliver the practical skills students and employers want along with a liberal arts education, but instead, as former Harvard University President Derek Bok reports, many would rather fight internal turf wars: “In many colleges and universities, a lamentable chasm separates the liberal arts college and professional departments. Competition for resources is keen, autonomy is jealously guarded, and cross-disciplinary discourse is fraught with difficulty.”⁵

Many liberal arts professors have a “special hostility” for efforts to offer liberal arts training along with courses that teach practical skills. The most critical issue is not to prepare students for successful and meaningful lives, but as the former chair of the UCLA English department put it, “the most critical issue [is] purging the undergraduate curriculum of vocational training.”⁶

In response, students see required liberal arts courses as something to “get out of the way” so they can “get on with what one *really* comes to college for in the first place, the major.”⁷ Disregard for the liberal arts is highest among engineering students, who take an average of only 9 percent of their courses in the humanities and another 9 percent in the social sciences.⁸

What Employers Want

Employers complain that today’s college graduates cannot read, write, or think critically, but students know that all too often “an applicant who boasts of his or her ‘liberal arts’ proficiency is on the way to unemployment or graduate school (postponement of unemployment).”⁹

Although business leaders rave about the importance of a liberal arts education in public, more often than not job offers go to those with technical skills. When a speaker at a gathering of university presidents and CEOs claimed that “a liberal arts education was the single best preparation for a career in business and management,” the CEOs “nodded in polite agreement, but their college recruiters persisted in hiring the business-school graduates to fill jobs in the areas of demand.”¹⁰

University of Rochester President Emeritus George O’Brien tells of a college president, “whose institution was the very epitome of liberal arts education,” extolling the virtue of a liberal arts education to a group of trustees. One of the trustees, the CEO of a small corporation, listened attentively to the virtues of the liberal arts graduate compared to “narrow specialists.” Finally, the trustee spoke: “How true. We need that sort of person in my corporation. But we only need one of them—and that’s me.” Wellroundedness may be immensely useful to senior managers, O’Brien concludes, but few college grads are hired as CEOs.¹¹

Collapse of the Traditional Liberal Arts at the Modern American University

It would be easy—and many universities would encourage us—to blame the collapse of the humanities on the commercial crassness of students and business. But is it too much to ask that college graduates learn to read, write, think critically, and pick up useful practical skills?

Harry Lewis, longtime Dean of Harvard College, believes that the real blame for the collapse of the humanities rests squarely on the shoulders of academia: “These students are not soulless, but their university is.”¹²

In many ways, our universities, by misapplying the tenets of scientific inquiry to the human condition, have abandoned the very idea of a central set of truths that can be passed from one generation to another.

Simultaneously, as tenured faculty have abandoned teaching for academic research, they have left an ill-prepared part-time faculty of adjuncts and graduate students to teach a curriculum that is not only devoid of meaning, but often openly hostile to American values and the tenets of Western Civilization.

Abandoning the Truth

In the earliest days of American higher education, students learned practical skills and moral reasoning. Colleges like Harvard and Princeton specialized in training ministers and lawyers. Other schools prepared students for trade related jobs. But all faculty considered moral reasoning and civic responsibility an integral part of the core curriculum.

In the late 1940s, a profound change swept across the American university as government money in the form of war-related research contracts flooded American college campuses. By 1946, Federal research grants to universities were three times more than total revenues of higher education in 1941. Soon every professor longed to be a highly paid scientific researcher. Training students to read, write, and think became far less important than the tenured faculty's pursuit of knowledge and the Federal dollars that came with it.

Over time, the tenured research faculty gained control of college campuses and began to run them for their own benefit. The traditional liberal arts professor, with a focus on human values, was looked down upon by scientists.

The emphasis in the university changed from passing truth on to students, to serving "faculty with their specialized skills." George O'Brien explains: "It is from the view of a research university faculty that the principles that do and will govern higher education must be understood and evaluated."¹³

O'Brien and others believe that there was a profound transfer of power from university presidents to independently funded tenured researchers: "In an institution-of-discovery, the discoverers achieve authority. Old-style presidents ministered to the Truth; modern presidents administer unto the truth seekers."¹⁴

Universities once dedicated to the pursuit of truth soon slipped into a relativist abyss. Harry Lewis observes: "At Harvard today, all knowledge is equally valued as long as a Harvard professor is teaching it, and that does not bode well for posterity."¹⁵

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According to Derek Bok, "in many disciplines values are regarded with suspicion as mere matters of opinion."¹⁶ Bok believes that "it is no accident that among the traditional purposes of undergraduate education, the two that were most neglected during the past century—moral reasoning and civic education—are the two most heavily freighted with issues of value."¹⁷ He laments that "highly educated young people ... find themselves in a world of unprecedented ambiguity, where it's not clear ... if anything can be said to be absolutely true."¹⁸

Revealed or discovered truth became an embarrassment to campus intellectuals because it did not fit the scientific paradigm. O'Brien says that "given the dominance ... of the natural sciences in establishing the research paradigm, it is no wonder that professors in the humanities feel beleaguered and abandoned in the current curriculum. The humanities are concerned essentially with human values: ethical, political, aesthetic, religious—none of which awaits radical discovery."¹⁹

The result is unsettling. According to Bok, "the education offered undergraduates has become incoherent and incapable of addressing the larger questions of 'what we are and what we ought to be.'"²⁰ Bok quotes Allan Bloom: "There is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is."²¹ "The story of liberal education has lost its organizing center—has lost, that is, the idea of culture as both origin and goal, of the human sciences.' Without a compelling, unifying purpose, universities are charged with allowing their curricula to degenerate into a vast smorgasbord of elective courses."²²

While U.S. Secretary of Education, William Bennett asked: "Where are our colleges and universities on the issue of their responsibility to foster moral discernment in their students?"²³

Collapse of Teaching and the Inability of Graduates to Read, Write, and Think Critically

American universities have lost not only their moral compass, but also any interest in teaching undergraduates. As a result, many college graduates are not being trained to read, write or speak well, or to think critically.

Bok describes how American selective colleges have failed to deliver value to students:

“Fewer than half of the recent graduates believe that college contributed ‘a great deal’ to their competence in analytic and writing skills or in acquiring knowledge of their major fields of study ... The vast majority of graduating students are still naïve relativists who ‘do not show the ability to defensibly critique their own judgments’ in analyzing the kinds of unstructured problems commonly encountered in real life. Surveys of student progress in other important dimensions, including writing, numeracy, and foreign language proficiency, indicate that only a minority of undergraduates improve substantially, while some actually regress.”²⁴

“Many seniors graduate without being able to write well enough to satisfy their employers. Many cannot reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, non-technical problems, even though faculties rank critical thinking as the primary goal of a college education.”²⁵

“Only a small minority of seniors emerge convinced that ill-structured problems are susceptible to reasoned arguments based on evidence and that some answers are sounder than others.”²⁶

Harry Lewis believes the problems are even more fundamental: “Universities have only a weak and superficial grasp of the scope of their educational mission for undergraduates. They are often puzzled about what they should teach, and are uncertain, even unprincipled, in their responses to educational problems.”²⁷

George O’Brien describes how times have changed: “The old-style collegiate institutions of the nineteenth century were populated with faculty who taught almost everything in the curriculum.”²⁸

The rise of the modern research university, modeled after the German academy, has made it clear that its main goal is not to serve students, but rather the “pursuit of knowledge,” as defined by the tenured faculty. Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the founders of the German university model, was emphatic: “The teacher no longer serves the purposes of the student. Instead, they both serve learning itself.”²⁹

Journalist and higher education critic Charles Sykes traces the failure of the modern American university to Humboldt releasing faculty from the responsibility of serving students: “In the musty halls of 19th-century academia, where the new scientific spirit was beginning to burn, Humboldt’s creed rang like a trilling call to independence.”³⁰

The ability to teach has been devalued. Increasingly, faculty are recruited, hired and promoted based on their ability to write academic articles for scholarly journals. Good teaching is seen as evidence that a tenure track candidate isn’t serious enough about publishing. As a result, good teachers, by definition, are blocked from tenure appointments.

While the treatment of gifted teachers indicates academia’s indifference to teaching, it only hints at how deeply the contempt for teaching is ingrained within the academic culture. “It’s the kiss of death,” Associate Professor David Helfand, winner of one of Columbia University’s General Studies Distinguished Teachers Awards, told *Newsweek on Campus*, “if you volunteer to teach two classes instead of one before tenure. They will say, ‘This guy is a teacher.’”³¹

Tenured Brown University researcher Jacob Neusner refers to academics devoted to the teaching of undergraduates as “the non-publishers, the non-lecturers, the homebodies, without ambition of an intellectual, let alone a scholarly character, the book-reading camp counselors.”³²

Harvard College Dean Harry Lewis explains how tenure is granted today: “The professors, vying for positions and promotions at the great research universities, are ever more narrowly trained, more specialized, and more advanced in their specialties. Tenure is given mostly for research, in part for teaching, and not at all for the interest or skill in helping students become adults. Few of today’s professors enter academia as a mission, a noble calling. Of those who do,

few survive to tenure at top universities. The pressure to publish a great deal in a short time makes academic writing duller, less adventurous, and more technical, since junior faculty members opt what they know to be acceptable to the journals and academic process.”³³

Lynne V. Cheney, then chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, questioned the value of the academic research that has replaced teaching as a calling for professors: “If we are completely honest about it, we must admit that the overemphasis on research has—in the humanities as in other fields—meant a lot of useless activity, a lot of publishing that serves no purpose, beyond expanding the authors’ c.v.’s [curricula vitae] ... Many publications will mainly gather dust on shelves in libraries.”³⁴

Former Harvard President Derek Bok describes how completely tenured faculties have abandoned their teaching responsibilities:

“While willing to force students to take freshman composition, senior faculty have long been reluctant to teach such a course themselves. Professors in the sciences and social sciences quickly referred the task to their colleagues in the English department. Thereafter, in one college after another, the work was gradually handed down to lower and lower levels of the academic hierarchy.

“By the early 20th century, senior faculty were shifting the responsibility to their younger, untenured colleagues. By the 1940s, junior faculty were passing the baton to graduate students. As freshmen enrollment rose rapidly during the decades following World War II, English departments turned increasingly for their staffing needs to part-time adjunct instructors (usually would-be writers in need of income or Ph.D.s without a permanent academic job).

By the 1990s, more than 95 percent of all compulsory writing classes in Ph.D.-granting English departments were taught by adjuncts or by graduate students.”³⁵

Presidents and deans went along with faculty shirking their teaching responsibilities because “graduate students and adjunct instructors can be hired to do the job for much less money.”³⁶

“More than 20 years ago, classicist William Arrowsmith wrote ‘The Future of Teaching,’ a moving tribute to and plea for the ‘ancient, crucial, high art’ of teaching. It still carries a prophetic quality. ‘Behind the disregard for the teacher,’ Arrowsmith wrote, ‘lies the transparent sickness of the humanities in the university and in American life in general.’”³⁷

So teaching duties are left mainly to graduate students and adjuncts who are poorly paid, given little to no training, and no supervision. That turns out not to matter a great deal, because the curriculum they are given to deliver has so little meaning or coherence.

An Empty Curriculum

The curriculum of most large American universities is a mish-mash of courses that reflect the research interests of the faculty, rather than a program designed to teach students to read, write, or think critically.

University of Rochester President Emeritus George O’Brien writes: “If students cannot read, write, or be eloquent, one contributing cause is the scattering of their studies and personal interactions, which works against repetitive practice.”³⁸ That doesn’t matter to a faculty of academic researchers who scoff at breadth as evidence of a weak intellect: “Well rounded? As has been brightly said, a cue ball is well rounded and rolls wherever it is neatly stroked.”³⁹

O’Brien continues: “The ‘philosophy’ of the modern curriculum maximizes variety and choice at the expense of cohesion and concentration.”⁴⁰ Each faculty member has added his own sub-specialty to a jumbled mass: “During the grand expansion of higher education that has marked the century since the rise of the research university in America, one could argue that *cutting off* has been a minor activity compared to adding on. It is one thing to ‘decide’ which of the delectables on the dessert tray should be appropriated; it is quite another to decide to diet and forbear desserts altogether.”⁴¹

Journalist and higher education critic Charles Sykes agrees: “With his emphasis on specialization, the new breed of professor exerted an almost irresistible pull away from general education and toward a curriculum devoted to training other specialists.”⁴²

Academia claims to be dedicated to “academic freedom” and “unbiased inquiry.” Anecdotes from inside the ivory towers suggest this doesn’t extend to beliefs not shared by the tenured faculty.

Vassar President Alan Simpson adds: “You can have a man studying the herring industry from 1590 to 1600 in Scandinavia, and when that young man gets his Ph.D. and is employed by a university, the first request he makes to them is, ‘May I teach the herring industry from 1590 to 1600 in Scandinavia?’”⁴³

George O’Brien reminds us that the research oriented professor is a relatively new concept, not a time honored tradition: “The ascendance of the disciplinary specialist is, then, a twentieth-century notion ... What is consequential for the research university ... is that faculty specialists drive the curriculum, not the reverse. If, then, modern universities are specific collections of specific specialties, which specialists and how many of such become issues to be determined.”⁴⁴

“Students are unhappy,” Harvard’s Harry Lewis says, “because too many faculty members are not interested in them, except as potential academics, and the curriculum is designed more around the interests of the faculty than around the desires of the students or their families.”⁴⁵ “At the same time, the empty curriculum is so removed from the real world that many students learn how capitalist economies create jobs from the solicitations of companies eager to hire them. Something is wrong with our educational system when so many graduating Harvard seniors see consulting and investment banking as their best options for productive lives.”⁴⁶

Lewis feels the problem goes to the core of the modern research university: “A look at the college curricula of other great universities suggests a deeper problem. Universities are having a hard time making the case that the education they offer is about anything in particular.”⁴⁷

Hostility to Western Civilization and American Values

The emptiness and incoherence of our college curriculums is troubling. It is even more disturbing when radical faculty substitute their own agendas in place of the traditional humanities.

Academia today embraces the philosophy of relativism, the idea that all points of view are equally valid. They make only one notable exception—in denouncing Western Civilization and American values.

Martin Anderson, a scholar at Stanford’s Hoover Institution describes the battle: “An intense debate is now under way in our universities on the teaching of the so-called Great Books of literature and history. A small but influential number of faculty want to strip the curriculum of many of the great works of Western literature, most of them written by, as they put it, ‘dead white men,’ and to replace them with lesser-known works by authors of different racial backgrounds, authors from third world countries, and female authors.”⁴⁸

Former Harvard President Derek Bok notes that student indoctrination begins the first day of school when university spokespeople “announce as fact to incoming freshmen” that “all institutions in America are deeply sexist” or “racism involves only acts of discrimination by whites against minorities.”⁴⁹

Former University of Texas President Peter Flawn commented: “In the social sciences, five thousand years of accumulated wisdom about human behavior appear to count for very little, and research projects commonly are proposed to demonstrate what anyone who has been alive and reasonably sentient for forty years already knows.”⁵⁰

Flawn warns that ethnic pride is encouraged except for Anglo-Saxons: “It is racist ... for Anglo-Saxons to show pride in the accomplishments of their ethnic group. Anglo-Saxons are too close to the sins of empire for their accomplishments to be universally admired. The only acceptable behavior for an Anglo-Saxon university president is to graciously accept personal and institutional guilt for historical injustices.” He advises that faculty be-

lieve that the traditional values of “Western civilization, are inherently racist, sexist, capitalist, and designed to deprive people of freedom” and that “attempting rational dialogue” is a waste of time.⁵¹

Academia claims to be dedicated to “academic freedom” and “unbiased inquiry.” Anecdotes from inside the ivory towers suggest this doesn’t extend to beliefs not shared by the tenured faculty.

Ohio University economist Richard Vedder quotes a description of American academia as “a forum for destructive political and social propaganda, for conventional wisdom, for mindless adherence to dogma in the name of, ironically, open-mindedness” and notes “a distinct lack of academic freedom and a pervasive effort to squelch unpopular theory, research and opinion on the American campus.”⁵²

Martin Anderson goes even further:

All the evidence—national surveys, university studies—proves beyond a doubt what anyone who has spent a little time in academe knows: the college and university faculties of America have been politicized. Major chunks of the faculty and administration, especially in the social sciences and humanities, are rock-solid left in their political views. It is no longer a question of whether there is a tendency or a tilt to the left; the faculties of American universities and colleges are overwhelmingly leftist.⁵³

Academic intellectuals are not supposed to consider political affiliations when hiring or promoting. They do. They are not supposed to consider political implications when they design courses and assign readings. They do. They are not supposed to judge students according to their political views. They do. And when they do, they are led down the path of academically suspect courses, of ‘political correctness,’ and finally into the violation of the most sacred tenets of their profession—free speech and academic freedom.⁵⁴

Suggestions for Reform

So how do we re-introduce the traditional humanities into the mainstream of Texas higher education? The first step may be fundamental reforms to our colleges and universities, starting with reforms necessary to attract, hire, and promote the right teaching faculty—one that will build a coherent curriculum that teaches students to make better moral decisions and read, write, and think critically. These reforms are far-reaching and may require a massive overhaul of the academy itself.

In the short run, those of us who want to graduate well-rounded students, schooled in the principles of Western Civilization should:

- Stop contributing to universities that do not provide clear evidence that a traditional liberal arts education is part of every major;
- Financially support smaller colleges that advance the traditional liberal arts; and
- Direct students to, and hire graduates from, these smaller traditional liberal arts colleges.

Replicating Colorado’s move from funding institutions directly to student-centered funding would also help solve this problem. With students empowered as the customers, the curriculum would be more geared to the courses they demand rather than obscurities, and more resources would be focused on teaching rather than provincial research.

We can provide a traditional liberal arts education to more Texas students, but the most important step will require fundamental reforms to our colleges and universities. ★

Endnotes

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- ⁴ Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2006) 26.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 283 quoting Joan Stark and Malcolm Lowther, *Strengthening the Ties That Bind: Integrating Undergraduate Liberal and Professional Study: Report of the Professional Preparation Network* (1988) 33.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 78, quoting William Schaefer, an academic vice chancellor at the University of California, Los Angeles.
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- ⁸ Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2006) 298.
- ⁹ George Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education* (2000) 79.
- ¹⁰ Richard S. Ruch, *Higher Ed, Inc. The Rise of the For-Profit University* (2001) 71.
- ¹¹ George Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education* (2000) 79.
- ¹² Harry R. Lewis, *Excellence Without A Soul* (2006) 18.
- ¹³ George Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education* (2000) xii-xiii.
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- ²³ *Ibid.*, 158, quoting *Harvard University Gazette* (17 Oct. 1986) 1, 8.
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- ²⁸ George Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education* (2000) 16.
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- ⁴⁴ George Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education* (2000) 16-17.
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- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.
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