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From Eternity to Here: Shrinkage in American Thinking about Higher Education

College is a time for learning, but it's also a time for oblivion. That is, it's a time to think about some things—literature, biology, psychology, history—and a time when you don't have to think about some other things. Today I'm going to be talking about two of those other things. The first is the role of money in education, and the second is the ideology that shapes, and has shaped the institution of higher education. We don't think about these things in part because it's unpleasant to do so, and in part because they remind us of the real world from whose pressures and indignities we are supposed to be magically exempt while we're enlarging our minds and enriching our souls. I'm talking here about students and, in some respects faculty; but even administrators, who think about money all the time, don't necessarily spend much time pondering the ideology that regulates the flow of money. But it's important to think of such things from time to time so you won't be astonished when something happens, and if you can limit the amount of time you spend doing so, the effect might actually be bracing. So I'll be speaking for 45 to 50 minutes. I'll be talking a good deal about “higher education” and “the university,” but my real focus is the concept of liberal education, which is exemplified in this institution.

I will begin with a story, perhaps apocryphal, about a wealthy businessman who wished to support the construction of a new wing of a museum that would be devoted to antiquities from the ancient Near East at his alma mater, the flagship campus of a state university. The collections housed in the wing would be used by students and faculty in History, Anthropology, Archeology, Art History, Classics, and Near Eastern Studies, and of course open to the public. In the course of negotiations, the museum director mentioned that for a certain sum, the wing would bear the name of the donor “in perpetuity.” The canny businessman asked how long perpetuity lasted, to which the canny director replied, “For you, forty years.”

Forty years is not eternity, but it is a good long span; by the time someone had accumulated substantial wealth, he or she could probably expect to die before those years were up, so in that restricted sense it actually is an eternity. The point of the story, however, is not to worry such distinctions, but to note the kind of exchange involved. In return for his gift, the prospective donor was being offered the opportunity to benefit the students of his university and the public in general. He was also being offered the sort of cultural prestige—well, not exactly the sort that money cannot buy, but the sort on which a figure cannot be placed. What he was really being offered was what the German sociologist Max Weber would have called status and what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called cultural capital. Indeed, our prospective philanthropist might well be taken as a walking tutorial in the Bourdieu lexicon: he is seeking simultaneously to

accumulate *social capital* (a position in the network of the high-minded wealthy) and to aid in the creation of *human capital* (by supporting the degree-granting university). When Professor Bourdieu began to talk about these concepts in the 1970s, they represented theoretical discoveries in France, but they had long been part of the rules of the game in the United States, where wealthy people were accustomed to making long-range investments in academic and cultural life—investments, as it were, in perpetuity as such.

This phenomenon, so common in the United States as to seem hardly worthy of analysis, actually involves a remarkable event, one that is almost chemical in nature: a precipitation, from within the businessman's capitalist and economic mindset, of an entirely different set of principles, assumptions, and values. Our apocryphal prospective philanthropist might be conservative in his political beliefs, might believe in the higher rationality of the free market, might believe that those with power and authority deserve to have them, might regard with suspicion, condescension, or even contempt most of his fellow citizens. He might be most comfortable around others like himself. If somebody else built the wing of the museum, he might never find himself visiting it. He might be totally indifferent to the artifacts of the ancient Near East. But if he is the kind of conservative who actually values conservation in some areas, then he might perhaps be gently guided to the understanding that giving people an opportunity to study, to wonder at, to speculate about, and to enjoy cultural artifacts would represent not a renunciation but a realization of his life's work.

Our paradigmatic but increasingly rare benefactor might be unaware that a long tradition of reflection has endorsed his decision to promote the common good by creating opportunities for individual enrichment. He has probably not read the founding document of philanthropy, Andrew Carnegie's 1889 essay "The Gospel of Wealth." [I know many philanthropists but I have yet to meet one who has read it.] Inequality, Carnegie argued there, was a function of the advance of manufacturing and capital: on his visits to Indian tribes, he noted, he perceived almost no difference between the tepee of the chief and those of the braves. If wealth was wasted on luxury and display and permitted to become hereditary, Carnegie argued, it could easily lead to decadence, waste, and corruption; but such corruption could be avoided through the deliberate reduction of wealth through a progressive estate tax and especially through philanthropy. [[XX]] A rich man could enter heaven, Carnegie believed, if he adhered to Christian principles not by "such imitation of the life of Christ as Count Tolstoi gives us, but, while animated by Christ's spirit . . . laboring for the good of [his] fellows," thereby earning, in addition to eternal salvation, "the affection, gratitude, and admiration of his fellow-men." Traditional forms of giving had not permitted Carnegie to distribute his wealth fast enough to suit his impatient nature and had failed to address the root causes of social ills, and so he invented a new mechanism, the private foundation, that enabled him, as one writer has put it, to do "good works in gross." Carnegie concluded "The Gospel of Wealth" with a list of seven areas in which philanthropy could be most effective, headed by universities and libraries. [[XX]] "The best means of benefiting the community," he wrote, is for philanthropists to "place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise," including books and works of art, which are "certain to give pleasure and improve the public taste . . . in this manner returning their surplus wealth to the mass of their fellows in the forms best calculated to do them lasting good." For Carnegie, it was

the responsibility and the privilege of the private citizen to provide for the needs of society in perpetuity.

The Carnegie Corporation was established in 1911 to “promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding”; [[XX]] in time, Carnegie’s example would be followed by his fellow capitalists John D. Rockefeller, John Danforth, Henry Ford, Henry Luce, William Randolph Hearst, and by the descendants of Andrew W. Mellon, all of whom targeted higher education in their philanthropic giving. The language in the mission statements of these private foundations often made implicit reference to the specific needs of the United States, but were more characteristically inclusive, speaking of the interests of mankind at large. The Hearst Foundation, for example, stressed its intention to extend to “people of all backgrounds” the “opportunity to build healthy, productive and inspiring lives.” The Danforth Foundation, established in 1927 by the founder of the Ralston Purina Company, supported higher education as a way of promoting vaguely religious or at least morally uplifting goals, including “charitable and humanitarian purposes and . . . the well-being of mankind.” In 1952, the Danforth Graduate Fellowship Program was established to “bring into college teaching a larger number of young men, thoroughly trained according to the highest scholastic standards, who are aware of the place for moral and religious values in teaching and counseling.” Religiosity aside, this was a moment to be cherished, when the profits from Purina Dog Chow were used to fund graduate education in a number of fields, including the humanities.

[[And here I should warn you that I’m going to ask you to treat some extremely dull and apparently empty statements as if they were interesting and full of content, because, when you consider what worldly work they helped to accomplish, they really are.]]

In the world of private foundations, the connections between individual enrichment, the general social good, and higher education were, at mid-century, held to be strong and clear, as was the connection of all of these to the national interest. [[XX]] Asserting these connections was in large part the point of the program of “general education” outlined in the Harvard “Red Book” of 1945, *General Education in a Free Society*, which sought to articulate the basic principles of the system of American education that would arise after the second World War. It is perhaps the most important document in the history of American higher education, and again, I’ve met very few people who have read it. But in it, we find spelled out some principles that have come to seem timeless truths, even clichés, the sort of thing that have no origin, but just are. It was in the Redbook that the idea of a “core curriculum” was announced. Lots of places now have core curricula, but many of them have forgotten why. As the Redbook put it, the core curriculum was intended not just to provide coherence and breadth to undergraduate education, but specifically to establish and promote throughout American society the “common knowledge” and “common view of life” that, in the views of the committee that wrote the book, all Americans ought to have. [[XX]] As Harvard president James Bryant Conant had said in his charge to the committee, “Our purpose is to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are American and are free.” The committee responded with a book-length endorsement of the argument

that the entire educational system including both public and private higher education should encourage the development of “certain intangibles of the American spirit.”

This sounds highly nationalistic, but the distinctive genius of the American spirit, in the eyes of the committee, was that it encouraged people not to define themselves through their jobs or stations in life, but rather to think of themselves as human beings who were free to explore the full range of possibilities inherent in the human condition. [[XX]] The ultimate goal of education, they concluded, was not the development of abstract intellectual ability and definitely not vocational skills, but “mastery of life; and since living is an art, wisdom is the indispensable means to this end.” This widely endorsed account of higher education had the effect of placing the humanities at the very center of the liberal education, as the curricular instrument for inculcating American identity.

The stated goal of the program outlined in the Red Book was to produce a society composed of fully realized individuals bound in solidarity by their common possession of individual freedom—a “community of free men.” [[XX]] These twinned principles were translated into policy by the six volumes that appeared in 1947 under the name *Higher Education for American Democracy*, the “Truman Report,” which defined education as a “means to a more abundant personal life and a stronger, freer social order.” These seem like two versions of the same bland thing, but hidden in these phrases are two quite different goals that are conjoined in the Redbook: personal enrichment and freedom on the one hand, and a coherent, cohesive society on the other. In this distinctively American conception, whose roots go back directly to the founding of the nation, the national interest was served and the social order built through a system of higher education devoted to the cultivation of individual freedom. In the vision of the Truman Report, the American system would not be primarily devoted to furthering research, educating civil servants, or certifying a social class, but rather to fostering a certain kind of individual life—rich, abundant, free—in the context of a strong and unified society. What distinguished this vision, then, was a confidently normative understanding of both the private and the public dimensions of American life. The twenty-five or thirty years that followed are commonly referred to as the Golden Age in American higher education.

As you can see, American thinking on higher education was at this time largely focused on undergraduate education. Even at some of the most prestigious institutions, research was not a priority: Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia were known not for research, but for teaching, or, in Harvard’s case, for sheer prestige unconnected to either research or teaching. But things changed very rapidly over the course of the 1950s, when the newly established National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health began to put the immense power of the federal government to work, situating scientific research in the university. With huge government funding available, university-based science and mathematics became increasingly dependent on grant-funded research on specific projects. Once considered a purely intellectual pursuit undertaken for its own sake, driven by the prospect of intellectual joy and accountable to no external authority, science became, with the new prospect of government funding, increasingly instrumental, to the point where there is now an unbroken chain connecting knowledge to science to research to technology to industry to production to economic growth and finally to wealth and well-being, a chain that forms the main justification for research.

The rapid rise of the research ethos in the university culture of science transformed American higher education, which had been constructed a half century or so earlier as an innovative combination of educational processes and research activities in which undergraduates and graduates were mixed together in the same institutions. Not only did science become more professionalized and more research-oriented, but so did everything else in education, including the liberal arts disciplines. [[XX]] This didn't happen all at once, but it is only slightly misleading to consider the astonishing period of 1963-65—the years of the Kennedy assassination, *The Feminine Mystique*, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, the sudden emergence of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the murder of Medgar Evers, John Glenn's orbiting the earth, the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, the increasing military commitment in Viet Nam, Martin Luther King's Nobel Peace Prize, the assassination of Malcolm X, civil rights marches in Selma and Montgomery, the “Great Society” and the “War on Poverty”—as a hinge period in which American thinking about higher education turned from one model to another. In that brief span, two apparently unrelated texts appeared that signaled the dawn of a new era.

[[XX]] The term “hinge” is taken from the first of those texts, Clark Kerr's 1963 book *The Uses of the University*. Kerr, the president of the University of California system, argued that the university stood at a “hinge of history,” poised between an older conception of the integrated university and a new, then only dimly perceived entity that he called a “multiversity”—not a unified educational institution but a decentered mesh of partnerships, a “knowledge industry” geared to production, research, technology, and industry. The multiversity-to-be would contribute to productivity and profits, to the extension of human life, and to military and scientific supremacy, but its success in these endeavors would, he pointed out, require some changes in the old routines. Once considered members of a distinguished guild, the faculty would come over time to realize that they were employees, hired to perform certain tasks. Since their salaries would be paid in part by government grants, corporate funding, and consulting fees, they would gradually transfer their loyalty outside the university, sacrificing a measure of autonomy in return for increased support. The university would also surrender some of its traditional autonomy, with the subjects of research now determined by “leadership groups of society.” The multiversity would be mobile, flexible, nimble, responsive; it would not be a place where post-medieval masters disseminated wisdom to students, but a place where teams of experts would be assembled to work on specific projects. The mission of education would, like the idea of knowledge for knowledge's sake, recede from prominence, to be replaced by a devotion to sponsored research, innovation, and productivity. Naturally, the position of students would require some adjustment (downward): tuition would help with the funding.

At times, Kerr seemed almost eager to see the new vision become a reality. But by the time he died, in 2003, he was dismayed by some of the changes about which he had been so prescient. Liberal education and its ideal of moral citizenship had suffered greatly, and while the United States had become the unchallenged leader in research, the university had become even more fragmented, and both public and private forms of funding less reliable, than he had anticipated. We do not, these days, speak enthusiastically about the new possibilities opened up by the dynamic new multiversity;

instead, we use a term that signifies the corruption or betrayal of an older form: the “corporatization” of the university, or, more pungently, “the university in ruins.”

The secondary markers of corporatization are so numerous that enumerating them makes one feel that there is nothing left: the proliferation of administrative positions, the huge gulf between faculty and the top administrative salaries (not to mention the gap between the highest paid professors and assistant coaches), “performance” bonuses for deans, “incentives” for faculty performance, persistent attacks on tenure, the rise of profitable “distance learning,” the transformation of academic units into cost centers subject to quality assurance guidelines, conflicts between academic freedom and corporate interests, expansive claims by the university of faculty members’ intellectual property rights, the inexorable growth in the number of adjunct faculty, the “outsourcing” of services, faculty raises made contingent on validation from the “market,” the growth in the ranks of administrators, the disappearance of campus-based bookstores, the veneration of “entrepreneurship” in all areas of the university including undergraduate programs, the diminishment or cooptation of faculty governance, decreased administrative and trustee transparency, the humbling of academic disciplines before paradigms of assessment grossly inappropriate to them, decisions to shutter “unproductive” departments (Classics, German, Philosophy), institutional mission statements couched entirely in management rhetoric, the tendency to treat students as customers who must always be right, the tendency on the part of faculty to compete for students by offering attractive electives (and a counter-tendency to devote most of their attention to the professionally rewarding activity of research), the recession-proof growth of athletics rationalized by the fear of diminished alumni giving, an eagerness to brand and even to franchise the institution—and, in recent years especially, the thundering appearance of very large for-profit universities whose unembarrassed mission statements address (if they do not always meet) exclusively vocational goals.

Corporatization might seem to be the opposite of philanthropy, but in recent years, philanthropy itself has become corporatized. If earlier philanthropy took the form of “gifts” (endowment to support the wing of the museum) more recent philanthropy takes the form of “investment.” The new “venture philanthropy,” as it is sometimes called, typically supports programs or projects defined not by the institution but by an individual or private foundation. The new “philanthropocapitalists” have vastly increased the amount of support given to higher education (with some calling it “megaphilanthropy”), but their support has been attached to a new understanding of the relationship between donor and recipient. The new mode favors agility, “impact,” assessment measures, measurable results in a short time frame, an attention to immediate problems rather than root causes, and exit strategies for the investor. The bare-knuckled capitalists of an earlier time sought the betterment of mankind by supporting institutions they trusted; the new breed wants a quantifiable return on a “social investment.” Venture philanthropy is naturally drawn to programs addressing worldly problems such as the environment, the alleviation of poverty, or public health; it inclines toward science, technology, and management, and away from the humanities. Whatever the personal behavior of the philanthropocapitalists compared to the old-school philanthropists, the new order is cold-blooded, rational, and largely indifferent, if not hostile, to liberal education.

Feeling that they must play the hand dealt them, many institutions of higher education have altered themselves to conform to the new spirit of patronage by subordinating the educational mission to the research mission, and pure or basic research to applied or externally-funded research. Claiming helplessness in the face of necessity, many institutions have, in short, imposed on themselves the perspective of the kind of person who would never, ever experience the call to old-school philanthropy.

If Clark Kerr's book prophesied all these changes in the relation between the university and the capitalistic private sector, a second text marked a change in the relation between the university and the public sector. The National Endowment for the Humanities was created in 1965 to support cultural and educational institutions, and to give grants for individual research—some of which have gone to Grinnell faculty. Like the developments that drove the multiversity, the NEH seemed like a good thing for higher education, the formal assumption of federal responsibility for the academic departments that had the job of educating Americans about their heritage and the benefits “which come to them because they are American and are free.” More directly than the social or natural sciences, the humanities speak to the two goals named by the Truman Report, “a more abundant personal life and a stronger, freer social order.” And so, it was thought, the government should support them, and a federal agency was the way to do it.

The NEH was created by an Act of Congress. The ideas in this Act were manifestly drawn from our old friend the Redbook, but here is a case where one dull phrase does not quite equal another, and the difference tells us a lot about that hinge moment I've been talking about. Take for example the Act's restatement of the Red Book's “wisdom.” **[[XX]]** According to the Red Book, “The aim [of education] is mastery of life; and since living is an art, wisdom is the indispensable means to this end.” While citing and affirming this sentiment, the Act manages to strike a decisively different tone: “Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people . . . masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.” Gone, you'll notice, is the pleasing reference to life as an art; gone, too, is the tone of confidence in the matching of ends and means. Gone, most of all, is the Red Book's tone of spacious post-war assurance, which is replaced by the imperative mood, the announcement of a demand made upon citizens, and the implied threat of servitude if the demand is not met.

I think I can see another kind of demand in another passage of this text. The Act was primarily written by Robert Lumiansky, a lifelong academic and head at that time of the American Council of Learned Societies, an organization about as exciting as its name. Lumiansky was, however, actually an exciting guy. Among his accomplishments are helping to found the place where I now work, the National Humanities Center, but in addition to that he was the mentor of my mentor, and taught at Penn, UNC, and Tulane, all places I have taught as well. And so I feel his pain, or at least I feel the pain I imagine he had. The year before he wrote the passage we've been talking about, Lumiansky had been primarily responsible for *The Report of the Commission on the Humanities*. Influential people read this and liked it so much they asked him to draft the Act of Congress that would bring the NEH into being. When Lumiansky wrote that report, he was just an academic, albeit a highly idealistic one. So he expressed himself in this way: **[[XX]]**

World leadership of the kind which has come upon the United States cannot rest solely upon superior force, vast wealth, or preponderant technology. Only the elevation of its goals and the excellence of its conduct entitle one nation to ask others to follow its lead. These are things of the spirit. If we appear to discourage creativity, to demean the fanciful and the beautiful, to have no concern for man's ultimate destiny—if, in short, we ignore the humanities—then both our goals and our efforts to attain them will be measured with suspicion.

Pretty inspiring. But when it came time to write an Act of Congress a year later in 1965, he put the same sentiment in this way:

. . . the world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.

No legislator could vote to commit tax dollars to the first passage, but the second seems to be written for a different audience, for it makes you want to stand up and salute. The Act abandons all thought of “asking” other nations to follow our lead, dismisses the notion that others might view us with suspicion, and, asserts that our unquestioned leadership in the realms of ideas and spirit “must” compel the awed respect of the world. This Act received enthusiastic support in the Congress, but in these small differences, you can feel the chilling effect of the Cold War. Henceforth, the humanities—like everything else—were to be understood in this context.

With the winds in Congress and in the Executive branch now blowing in the direction of a “stronger” but not a “freer” social order—and away from “personal life” altogether—the goals of the Truman Report were, in the 1960s, being pulled apart. Still, under the lingering conviction that the humanities testified to American leadership in things of the spirit, the NEH enjoyed bipartisan support with budget increases every year until the Reagan presidency, when, under the combined pressures of the 1980 recession and the neoconservative moment, the ax suddenly fell and the budget was cut very sharply. The Cold War did not last forever, but politics did, and continued to weigh heavily on the fortunes of the NEH. The political situation worsened in 1989, when the NEH got caught up in the controversy surrounding federal (NEA) funding of the scandalous photographer Robert Mapplethorpe; and then, after the 1994 midterm elections that brought Republicans back to power in Congress, the NEH became the helpless object of determined attack. In testimony given before a committee of Congress in January 1995, William J. Bennett and Lynne V. Cheney, who had been NEH chairs during the Reagan and Bush years, targeted the NEH, as did organizations such as the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Christian Coalition. The arts and humanities establishments, Bennett and Cheney testified, had become so corrupted that the public would be best served if the Endowment was abolished. Bennett and Cheney did not get their wish, but the NEH budget for funding discretionary programs was reduced by almost half the following year. Overall, the NEH has lost over two-thirds of the resources it had in 1979. So while federal support has provided the humanities with badly needed funding, it has also exposed the humanities to the vicissitudes of politics, and made them vulnerable to forces completely beyond their control. That's what you call a mixed blessing.

Behind the ongoing drama surrounding the budget of the NEH, a larger and more shadowy story concerning research was unfolding. Like the NSF and the NIH, the NEH funded research. But despite the fact that humanistic scholars have an immense research assignment—all of our knowledge about the entire human past—research has been a steady loser in the NEH budget. And it has been possible for legislators and administrators to squeeze the funding for research with a clean conscience in part because, as we have seen, the humanities have been defined in terms of high ideals and things of the spirit, and these do not require a lot of archival work. Compare this situation with science, where research rules. Nobody is surprised, much less outraged, when distinguished scientists spend all their time in the lab and rarely visit a classroom—they're doing important work, after all, curing cancer and discovering the origins of the universe, and can't be spared!—but screeds against scholarly “overproduction” in the humanities have been a longstanding feature of the public discourse, especially among conservatives. While, for the public at large, the value of science is almost entirely realized in research, the value of the humanities is realized in society at large, in the form of individual and collective wisdom. Thus the sciences are perceived as being centered in graduate school and in labs, while the humanities are seen as centered in the undergraduate classroom and really in civic life at large. Thus the NEH has funded a small and shrinking handful of research projects, and a host of projects—museums, libraries, state humanities councils—that have nothing to do with higher education.

To recapitulate, then, the impact of these developments: The first “hinge” concerned the increasing privatization or corporatization of higher education, in which huge amounts of money were directed to colleges and universities, most typically to support certain kinds of directed or sponsored research. The effect was that higher education had access to more money than before, but this support came at the cost of institutional autonomy and the independence of researchers. Another effect was to marginalize the humanities, which could never command anything like the same support as scientific, technological, or medical fields. The second development concerned public funding for higher education. The National Endowment for the Humanities was formed—astonishingly, with an initial goal of providing 1-to-1 funding with the National Science Foundation—to support the humanities. While the Endowment has provided some support for research, that support has never been great and has shrunk considerably over the last generation; moreover, the existence of the Endowment has exposed the humanities and higher education to political attacks that have frequently taken the form of attacks on academia itself. As a consequence, the Endowment has directed a large share of its dwindling resources to areas such as libraries, museums, and state humanities councils that have nothing to do with higher education.

The big story, then, is not about research or the humanities but about something more important—the evisceration of the idea that virtually defined American culture after WWII, of *mass liberal education*. The ultimate effect of the changes that began to take root in the hinge period of 1963-65 is that the private and public entities that fund higher education have been devoting themselves to owning, and growing, those parts of the system that actually compete with the educational function. With venture philanthropy focusing on donor-defined programs and projects, with scientific funding overwhelmingly committed to research, and with the NEH supporting a tiny amount of research but little else in colleges and universities, the nation in general has been tacking

away from the aspiration to create more abundant personal lives and a stronger, freer social order through higher education. The ligatures binding American higher education—a system that had earned the respect of the world by its innovative coupling of liberal education and research and its expansive vision of human flourishing—are being stretched, frayed, even ruptured.

The only people thinking of perpetuity these days, it seems, are people like the hypothetical prospective philanthropist we met at the beginning, who was willing to embrace an open-ended future he would never see, to contribute to a world that would have forgotten him, to do his share to pass on to futurity artifacts of enduring value, inviting students and the general public to make of them, and of themselves, what they will. Liberal education has benefitted immensely from the support of such people. But not every institution can expect to be supported by them, hypothetical as they sometimes are, and, when real, exposed to the vicissitudes of the market and the winds of change as they tend to be. Perhaps, one might feel, the entire situation might be improved if the American state could find a way to take greater responsibility for higher education without politicizing the issue; perhaps we could create entities funded but not controlled by the government and entrust them with responsibility for sustaining higher education, thereby combining the assurance of stable funding with independence from political pressures.

We do not have to speculate about the results, because such a system is in place in many countries. In the United Kingdom, to take one conspicuous example, over eleven hundred such entities exist, and have responsibility for funding many areas of public life—so many that the entities have acquired both a name and a reputation. The name is “quango” (for quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization) and the reputation is mixed, with pronounced weakness in the field of higher education. A glance at the Website of one prominent quango, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), gives a sense of the spirit in which they approach their work. ~~[[XX]]~~ Here is the AHRC’s description of its “Knowledge Transfer (KT) Strategy”:

The Technology Strategy Board (TSB) is charged with driving forward the DIUS [Department of Innovation, University and Skills] innovation agenda. In doing so it recognises the AHRC’s position as a leading authority on research-based KT and innovation for the Creative Economy. Through our learning and experience in developing innovative KT models, AHRC has been well placed to provide expert advice to TSB in scoping and developing the first TSB Collaborative R&D Competition for the CIs [Creative Industries] ‘Application of Digital Technologies’ and the Knowledge Transfer Network (KTN) for the CIs. The AHRC/TSB relationship has been enhanced further through AHRC’s co-funding of applications to the CI collaborative R&D call, where a significant arts and humanities academic element is evident.

Note how odd and apologetic is the appearance, at the very end, of the phrase “arts and humanities.” Is it any surprise that the end-result of this “strategy” was to recommend cutting funding for the humanities entirely?

Although this entity, this quango, is privately incorporated, it has not provided any protection for higher education from the economic pressures faced by the government; indeed, such vulgar gibberish is the most eloquent expression of Britain’s current economic plight, which has forced the land of Shakespeare, Handel, Locke,

Milton, Austen, Dickens, Joyce, and Byatt to surrender the arts and humanities to a bureaucratic entity that ultimately reports to “the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS).”

Nor is the UK alone. The “Framework Programmes” for the European Union do not even consider making grants to proposals in higher education that do not promise to contribute directly to economic development. This policy is sometimes described by European reformers as the “American” approach, but many Americans would, I believe, recoil in horror from the thought that their system of higher education would be subjected to such a regime. A more traditional American perspective on economism was voiced long ago by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen. If “The Gospel of Wealth” announced the founding principles of philanthropy, then Veblen’s 1918 polemic, *The Higher Learning In America: A Memorandum On the Conduct of Universities By Business Men*, lays out the fundamental arguments for preserving the differences between higher education and business in terms that now seem impossibly radical. [[XX]] Noting the decline of the “disinterested pursuit of knowledge” in the face of “the incursion of pecuniary ideals in academic policy,” Veblen was moved to an agitated eloquence: “the resulting abomination of desolation is sufficiently notorious. . . . [a] stale routine of futility . . . this regime of graduated sterility . . . a perfunctory routine of mediocrity . . .” Veblen did provide his readers with a simple solution, which, however, has not been widely embraced: “All that is required is the abolition of the academic executive and of the governing board. Anything short of this heroic remedy is bound to fail, because the evils sought to be remedied are inherent in these organs, and intrinsic to their functioning.” An easy solution, it would seem—but who would fire the board of trustees?

Many Europeans, working hard to reform the European university system in the confidence that they are replicating the American approach that has produced such brilliant results, might be surprised by Veblen’s vehemence. And Americans themselves might find it hard to think their way back to a time when the integrity of higher education was measured by its independence from “pecuniary ideals.” But there are those who still understand the ideology that Veblen was reflecting. [[XX]] In a 2006 article, a Danish researcher, Jesper Eckhardt Larsen, noted that American colleges and universities take on themselves an educational role far beyond mere job preparation. “The college institution,” he said, “tries to carry a large burden of leading to civic engagement, moral responsibility and lately also global and environmental awareness. . . there are quite a few good reasons to get inspired by the American model. At its best, the American liberal arts college facilitates a breadth of cultivation. . . it is relevant for life rather than just for work, it has a broader agenda than *Wissenschaft* [knowledge] alone and it includes ethics, civic engagement and the instilling of a global outlook in its students. Moreover, it seems to give back to the humanities their inherently educational function inspiring all students.” It is both moving and vexing, at a time when Americans themselves seem to be losing their way with respect to higher education and the larger goals it is intended to serve, to be reminded how inspiring “the American model”—at least the American model that was—still is to others.

Again, the essential principle of this American model is that it is predicated on mass liberal education with a strong humanities component. The humanities anchor liberal education, the goal of which is not the acquisition of a skill or a set of facts, but rather the fostering of the experience of intellectual freedom that can and should be

enjoyed by citizens is a mature democracy. The United States is not the only, or necessarily the purest or the fairest democracy in the world, but it is the only one so far that has sought to inculcate democratic principles in its educational system.

Liberal education also has another benefit that may interest those concerned about American competitiveness in the new global “knowledge economy.” Although Larsen does not mention it, there is now a good deal of evidence suggesting that liberal education produces the best educational results. Summarizing this evidence, Francis Oakley notes that in the United States, the best outcomes are delivered by those institutions that offer the most concentrated form of liberal education to a select population eager to receive it: liberal arts colleges, and especially the best liberal arts colleges. Within that group, he notes, it is the strength of the “humanities orientation” that counts most heavily as “a component crucial to the prevalence on their campuses of good educational practices.” According to Oakley, those institutions educate best that adhere most closely to the classical ideal of liberal education: “the selective private liberal arts college, perhaps more than any other institution of American higher education, exemplifies much of what has come to be known as best educational practice in undergraduate education . . . students who attend selective liberal arts colleges will enjoy unique educational benefits.”

The very best liberal arts colleges can hardly be taken as a model or even as a plausible ideal for the thousands of American institutions of higher education. By one account, only eight per cent of all institutions of higher education in the United States offer a program of liberal education, and of those that do, liberal arts colleges represent a tiny fraction. But virtually all the institutions of higher education in the United States that enjoy a broad and favorable public recognition are committed to some kind of liberal education, including Cal Tech and MIT. In the enormous and diverse context of American higher education, the results achieved by liberal arts colleges serve to underscore the educational value of liberal education in all kinds of institutions. Even the authors of the widely noticed recent book *Academically Adrift*, which offers a harsh critique of American higher education for its failure to improve the learning skills of its students, carve out an exception for students in liberal arts fields, who show “significantly higher gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills over time than students in other fields of study.”

We cannot, then, draw from the fact that most students do not attend colleges like Grinnell the conclusion that we should no longer aspire to make some form of liberal education available to all. The most boldly imaginative aspect of the post-WWII compact was its perhaps quixotic and definitely nationalistic but fundamentally noble attempt to create a society unified not just by its history, language, or political system, but also, and more importantly, by the common opportunity to rise through education to the level of one’s merits. This country was not built on the idea of inherited inequality, and immigrants did not come here dreaming that their grandchildren would comprise a permanent helot class, fit only to be trained rather than educated. In addition to its proven educational benefits, liberal education, which tries to “place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise,” as Carnegie put it, gives substance to the promise of democracy.

The prestige, wealth, and tuition of the top liberal arts colleges remind us of the fact that regardless of the high-minded idealism of the rhetoric of liberal education, the

actually-existing institutions that most faithfully embody that rhetoric exclude, stratify, and consolidate the status quo at least as often as they create opportunities for mobility. That fact is, however, no reason to abandon the rhetoric, the aspirations, or the institutions, any more than we should abandon the Declaration of Independence because its fine sentiments applied at first only to the landowning class.

I think we should insist on the fundamental premise that higher education is higher than something, and that its mission is to encourage people to reach higher than they might have thought possible. Education is not higher if it simply mirrors the preferences and immediate desires of society, if it fails to inculcate the perspective of perpetuity. But that perspective must be informed by a concern for the deeper, long-term needs of a particular time, place, and community, which must be served. Advocates for liberal education cannot simply insist that knowledge is only worthy of the name if it is pursued for its own sake, and that liberal education is contaminated when subjected to utilitarian justifications. The challenge for higher education is to find a balance between a reasonable and rational willingness to adapt its own structures and premises in light of ever-changing facts on the ground and an insistence that the real goals are not immediate, economic, or vocational, but goals of a different kind: the promotion of more abundant personal lives and a freer, stronger social order. There is a hidden genius in these banalities. Indeed, we must make every effort to reclaim, reactivate, and reinvigorate our own clichés. They are the envy of the world, and rightfully so.