

Dark Satanic Mills of Mis-Education

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The “higher education system” in the United States has metastasized to the point that the body politic will soon be unable to sustain it, given its insatiable demand for resources. Tuition and fees have grown at more than three times the cost of living in the last two decades, outstripping even the rise in medical care cost. These astronomical costs reflect the burden of a tenured professoriate that is increasingly well paid and decreasingly burdened with identifiable duties. At the same time, the value of the ‘education’ that it provides is vanishing, even when measured in terms of the ‘bottom line’. Only a small minority of college graduates secures a job that in any sense ‘requires’ a college-educated holder, while total college debt now dwarfs the aggregate of consumer debt and approaches that of mortgages. At the same time, it is harder and harder to maintain with a straight face that students are, by engaging with pop culture studies, turgid French semiotic theorizing, or left-wing activism, acquiring the intangible and ineffable values of a liberal education. The higher education ‘bubble’ threatens soon to burst, with consequences more calamitous than the recent collapse of the booms in internet companies or high-risk mortgages.

1. Bacon and Rousseau: The Two Towers

It’s essential to begin with the intellectual roots of the current crisis in higher education. To do so, we can do no better than to turn to the works of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the great humanist scholar of the last century. Babbitt was a professor of comparative literature at Harvard for forty years. With Paul Elmer More, Babbitt led the movement in American movement known as the New Humanism, a forerunner of the American conservatism of Kirk, Weaver and Buckley. Babbitt’s *Literature and the American College* (1908) is a searing and prescient critique of the progressive movement as it had begun to take hold of American higher education.

We make a grave mistake if we think that the problems of academic gargantuism (Russell Kirk's "Behemoth State University") began with Sputnik or the G. I. Bill. The spiritual crisis of higher education has roots far deeper, extending back to the very opening of the modern era in 17th century Europe. Babbitt saw Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) as typifying the turn from the classical tradition to the modern fascination with technology as power.

Thirty-five years later, the British philosopher and literary scholar C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) published his masterpiece on the philosophy of education, *The Abolition of Man* (1943). Lewis's *Abolition of Man* attacks the one-dimensional scientism that was destroying any conception of a rational foundation of humane values, anchored in the teleological structure of human life.

Neither Babbitt nor Lewis was in any sense opposed to the knowledge generated by the flowering of the science of nature in the early modern period. They both noted, however, that modern science was (as Lewis put it) "born in an unhealthy neighborhood and at an inauspicious hour." (*Abolition of Man*, 1943, p. 47) Sir Francis Bacon, the great promoter and propagandist for scientific research as a public enterprise, embodies all that was "unhealthy" and "inauspicious" about that milieu. Bacon asked that Nature be "put to the rack" and forced to reveal her secrets. He recommended that any thought about the ends or purposes of nature (teleology) be relegated to theology; instead, practical men should impose their own wills upon the raw material of nature by better understanding the isolated propensities of the elements and particles making up material things. "Knowledge is power," Bacon declaims.

By replacing the contemplation of essences and final causes from the study of nature, Bacon and his followers ensured the doom of that what Babbitt called the "law for man" and what Lewis called "the Tao", the basis for objective value. Inevitably, man himself came within the scope of a scientifically denatured nature, a realm of blind forces subject to technical manipulation, in place of the ordered cosmos (both macrocosm and microcosm) of the ancients. From that point on, it was impossible to distinguish between

ordered and disordered impulses and affections. Reason became, as Hume put it, the abject slave of the passions, a technically proficient ability to scratch whatever itches.

Babbitt demonstrates that it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who first grasped the “liberating” potential of the ethical nihilism implicit in Baconian science. If nature (including human nature) is blind and dumb, then the individual being is free to follow its own whims, shrugging off the constraints of conventional morality as nothing more than the heavy hand of a dead past. Science has debunked the moralists of the past as superstitious worshippers of a rational and meaningful order that predates the emergence of the individual consciousness. Instead, human beings must be ‘compelled to be free’, taught to treat every felt impulse within as an unquestionable authority, fully realizing Plato’s nightmarish vision of the ‘democratic soul’ in *The Republic*, which Lewis captured as the Subjectivist of Book 1 of *The Abolition of Man*.

Rousseau proposed a new “morality” of feeling, to replace the dying morality of reasoned self-discipline. Justice and virtue were to be replaced by an amorphous compassion, which subsequent history has revealed to be almost infinitely malleable, producing holocausts and gulags as easily as free dental plans and kindergartens. As Babbitt puts it, “Rousseau confounds the law for man with his own temperament.”

Alasdair MacIntyre, “Aristotle or Nietzsche” in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd edition, 1984). Nietzsche builds on the radical egoism of Rousseau.

We can best understand the modern university by seeing it as built on the synthesis of these two tendencies, Baconian and Rousseauan. The hard sciences are justified almost entirely in pragmatic and utilitarian terms, as the incubators of technology, not as observatories from which to behold and contemplate the music of the spheres. The humanities, in contrast, have abandoned the hard road of fact to become the playgrounds of ‘values’. Since all value is the arbitrary projection and construction of liberated egos, there is no true hierarchy of value to be learned and internalized and to structure the

course of learning into a true curriculum. Instead, each professor of the humanities is free to make the classroom into a laboratory of untrammelled fantasy.

From such a perspective, the 'core curriculum' forms neither a core nor even a curriculum. General education consists merely in those few subjects (linguistic, mathematical and methodological) that are of general usefulness. General education is thus a necessary evil, a mere propaedeutic to the student's inevitable specialization.

Babbitt is writing near the end of the term of Harvard President Charles William Eliot (president from 1869-1909). Eliot revolutionized higher education, not only at Harvard, but also throughout the country, by replacing the set curriculum with the elective system. Babbitt quotes Eliot, embodying the Rousseauist cult of individuality:

A well-instructed youth of eighteen can select for himself a better course of study than any college faculty, or any wise man.... Every youth of eighteen is an infinitely complex organization, the duplicate of which neither does nor ever will exist. (p. 96)

Babbitt sardonically comments, "The wisdom of all the ages is to be as naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore."

Eliot's elective system at Harvard was the perfect curricular embodiment of Rousseau's philosophy, in which the student is "compelled to be free" by being denied the opportunity to undertake a coherent and well-ordered course of study. As Babbitt notes, Rousseau is essentially the resurrection of ancient Greek sophism. Translated into education, the result is what Babbitt calls "the democracy of studies." The modern university is a mere cafeteria of courses, with no structure or principle of selection. Plato also predicted this outcome in *The Laws* (819A): schooling as "encyclopedic smattering and miscellaneous experiment." As Babbitt observes that a bachelor's degree now "means merely that a man has expended a certain number of units of intellectual energy

on a list of elective studies that may range from boiler-making to Bulgarian.... a question of intellectual volts and amperes and ohms.”

Tyranny of elective system. Illusion of student autonomy.

General education as mere preparation for specialization

The modern synthesis represents a Devil’s bargain: humanists accepted the dominance of the natural sciences and technology, in turn for a protected role as junior partner, wrapping the naked pursuit of profit with the robes of academic tradition and the *artes liberales*. In turn, natural scientists protect the humanists from political pressure, freeing them to pursue Rousseauan liberationism.

This synthesis of scientific and romantic progressivism took hold first in the research universities of Germany in the 19th century. Until the early twentieth centuries, most American colleges continued in the ancient and medieval traditions of the seven liberal arts, with a fixed canon of texts, all in Latin. The liberal arts curriculum was the fruit of twenty-five hundred years of maturation and development, beginning with the ancient schools of Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates and the Stoics, and continuing with the Romans Cicero, Quintilian, and Cassiodorus, revived in the early Middle Ages by Isidore of Seville and John Scotus Eriugena, and institutionalized by the anonymous founders of the European medieval universities in the twelfth century. Higher learning from late antiquity until the twentieth century was organized by the seven liberal arts as foundation -- the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (including drama, poetry, and history, as well as “music” in the modern sense) -- with philosophy and theology as the capstones. The goal was essentially an ethical one: the formation of the virtues of self-control and prudence. The method was the reading and emulation of a relatively fixed canon of literary classics, works that “embody the seasoned and matured experience of man, extending over a considerable time.” “By innumerable experiments, the world winnows out the more essential from the less essential.” (p. 114)

Charge of ‘reductionism’. The distinction between moral and intellectual virtues in Aristotle. Intellectual wisdom (sophia) contributes to practical wisdom (phronesis), which unifies and rationalizes all of the other moral virtues (justice, courage and temperance). Liberal education presupposes a good upbringing, with good habits. Education is required to elevate these habits and infuse them with an understanding of the human telos.

All that began to change in the last nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as American progressives began importing the German model, most prominently at Johns Hopkins, Cornell and Harvard. The Teutonization of American higher education was completed under the influence of the post-war G.I. Bill and the explosion of scientific research in the Sputnik era. As a result, most professors today (whether inside or outside the humanities) have no concept of what liberal education is. Neither they nor their teachers were liberally educated.

2. The Corruption of Higher Education

Our system of higher education might be quite harmless, for all that. It no longer offers liberal education, but we might hope that at least it does a decent job of vocational training. However, once the academy was severed from its classical roots, it lacked the moral and epistemological foundations needed even for its base, Baconian aims. Technical and economic progress depends, not just on cleverness, but also on character: self-discipline and wisdom. As G. K. Chesterton, nothing is so impractical as pragmatism, and in the last twenty years we’ve begun to see the unraveling of academic pragmatism.

In short, the modern academy is morally depraved. It has become the most morally corrupt segment of our society, and this for two reasons:

1. The absence accountability to anyone or anything. In the shift from classical liberal education to the Bacon/Rousseau model of “higher education”, the professoriate claimed the right to be immune to outside control or supervision. The ideal of ‘academic freedom’ replaced control by alumni, trustees, church authorities and other representatives of the wider community.

2. Exploitation of a new academic underclass, due to the separation of professional rewards and undergraduate teaching. We have a perfect two-class system: privileged, tenure-track bourgeoisie and exploited academic proletariat (adjuncts, graduate students and lecturers). Ironically, the one place in our society in which the academy’s Marxist theory actually applies is to the academy itself.

Universities are prestige factories. It is in the admissions office, and not in the classroom, that most of the value of the B. A. is generated. Once a student is in, all he has to do is spend four to six years jumping through a series of arbitrary and undemanding hoops in order to claim a prestigious credential. What he actually learns or doesn’t learn during that period is utterly irrelevant. A complete disjunction exists between the real business of the university (viz., creating and maintaining prestige) and the teaching of undergraduates.

Why is the lack of accountability so *morally* corrosive? Teachers do not think of themselves as servants of their students or their communities. This creates a culture of entitlement among the faculty, fueled by resentment of bourgeois wealth. Why, the pampered professors wonder, do mere car dealers and other small businessmen earn more than I do?

In the classical model, there was indeed hierarchy: teachers over students, master-teachers over apprentices. However, professors did not see themselves as morally or spiritually superior to their college’s graduates. The Bacon-Rousseau model changes all this. For Baconians, professors are the creators of new knowledge. For Rousseauans, the

academic is a secular saint, the paradigm of spiritual and intellectual freedom, in contrast to the average citizen, who is enslaved to social conventions.

In the Bacon-Rousseau model, teaching of undergraduate students serves only two purposes: (1) justifying the input of resources into academic research, and (2) recruiting the researchers of the future. The vast majority of students are merely fiscal cannon fodder, units to be processed and cashed in, in support of the higher calling of scientific research and spiritual liberation.

Of course, it is impossible for universities to give *no* attention to the demands of undergraduates. In place of education, the modern university offers four to six years of fun and entertainment, with increasingly luxurious dorms, four-star eateries, swimming pools and gymnasias that would be the envy of professional sports teams. Classroom teachers have joined the ranks of this entertainment medium, a transformation propelled by increased reliance on student evaluation of teachers. The results are predictable: falling standards, accelerating grade inflation, ever lighter workloads. This means the abolition of the ancient hierarchy of teachers and students: teachers are now afraid of their students and are anxious to gratify their every desire.

You'll notice that I haven't yet mentioned Political Correctness. The leftist ideology of the politically correct exists primarily to rationalize a corrupt system. Post-modern and multicultural philosophies justify the jettisoning of the classics of the past, in preference to whatever meaningless minutiae form the focus of each professor's research agenda.

At the same time, political correctness represents the fact that human nature abhors a spiritual vacuum. The post-modern English scholar Stanley Fish has rightly expressed skepticism about the revolutionary aspirations of the politically correct left (*Save the World on your Own Time*, Oxford University Press, 2008). In its place, Fish recommends that "scholarly communities" should seek to do merely academic work, whose quality is determined by the group's own internal standard, in a kind of shared solipsism. However, Fish's deflationary vision of scholarly communities with no purpose beyond reproducing

themselves and their parochial standards offers no transcendent meaning to today's scholar. As G. K. Chesterton noted, one of our primary needs as human beings is the need to be more than pragmatic. Liberationist philosophies offer spiritual meaning to the endless drudgery of academic production. The leftist professor can convince himself that his parsing of sexist syntax or his close reading of 50's sit-coms represent a road to spiritual and political liberation. The current obsession with sexual perversity and libertinism kills two birds with one stone: it is simultaneously titillating to undergraduates, while offering the modern Rousseauan Puritan an outlet for his fanatical pursuit of salvation through liberation from sexual restraints.

3. Beer and Circuses

The collapse of standards generates an inordinate amount of free time for students, liberated from the "burden" of studying (reading and writing), as documented by the recent book by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). The authors also found that 32% of the students they studied did not take *any* courses with 40 pages or more of reading per week, and 50% did not take a single course in which they wrote more than 20 pages during the semester. The authors also report that students spend an average of only 13 hours per week studying -- 50% less than a few decades ago, and much of that study took place in fashionable but inefficient group settings.

This free time, when combined with sexual liberationism, preached both in the classroom and through student services, has created the hook-up culture of mandatory promiscuity, yet another instance of students' being 'compelled to be free'. The result is non-stop partying, with all of the attendant abuse of alcohol, marijuana, and other recreational drugs. Addiction to pornography and video games has also taken hold, especially among male students. Colleges have become Club Med-like resorts, encouraging hedonism, sloth, inflated expectations and a climate of ungrounded entitlement.

The college has replaced *in loco parentis* with *in loco diabolus*. No system could be designed that is more effective than the modern university at undermining character and disabling students from the tasks of vocation, marriage, family and citizenship. The American Civic Leadership Project has documented that college education does not increase political participation or civic involvement, and the college educated are no more knowledgeable about American history or the Constitution than other citizens.

4. The Imminent Collapse

Talk of a higher education ‘bubble’ is well justified. Costs are spiraling out of control: far above the pace of inflation, even beyond the pace of medical costs. The price of a four-year degree has gone up ten-fold in the past 30 years, the cost of living has gone up only threefold in that same period. In other words the reasonably priced state university degree of even modest quality is no longer available.

The reason for the spiral: an arms-race for prestige, which is inherently a zero-sum game, driving up the salaries of both administrators and well-published research professors. The rising costs have no relation to the quality of instruction.

As a result of the moral degeneration of the university, the Baconian promise of economic prosperity through research and education is increasingly an empty one. Fewer and fewer American students have the self-discipline required even for degrees, like engineering, natural science or accounting, that offer short-term economic benefit. Most so-called research is worthless, since its value is defined in self-referential terms: good research in each field is whatever good researchers in that field do (as defined by leading journals and conferences), regardless of any benefit or lack of benefit to the wider community. This self-referential circle means that research in even the hard sciences becomes increasingly political and unrelated to reality: witness, for example, the fashionable fantasy of ‘global warming’.

In fact, the economic return on an American college degree is in free fall. Fewer than 30% of graduates secure a job that ‘requires’ a college degree (in any sense). Median salary of college graduates last year: \$27,000 a year. Average debt burden: \$21,000.

As a result, we have begun to see the emergence of the Uncollege movement (www.uncollege.org), with a growing number of young people joining the ranks of the higher education refuseniks, following in the footsteps of entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, Michael Dell and Michael Zuckenburg.

5. What Needs to be Done

First, let’s look at the long-term view, and let’s free ourselves to imagine the best possible future.

There are in fact some encouraging signs: namely, the proliferation in recent years of great-books programs, some with strong emphasis on classical languages (Latin, Greek). These are mostly religious, both Protestant and Catholic, including Thomas Aquinas College, New Saint Andrews College, Wyoming Catholic College, C. S. Lewis College, the College of Saint Thomas More, Ignatius-Angelicum, and over thirty other colleges and programs. This trend needs to be accelerated.

1. Disassemble the existing system. De-fund state universities. Replace with scholarships awarded for academic merit and usable at private, religious and for-profit colleges, and with tax deductions for tuition.

2. Eliminate accreditation. The regional accrediting bodies are nothing more than higher-education cartels, ensuring that students can go to any college they like, so long as they are all exactly the same. They are simply monopolies, created and sustained by the power of the Federal government, which denies all federal aid to students in non-accredited institutions. We should replace official accreditation with private companies like provide

impartial, third-party assessments, as Moody's or Standard and Poors for the bond market.

3. Encourage the development of small residential colleges, collaborating through the internet. We need more collaborative networking among existing schools and programs, and more encouragement to the formation of new ones. Low overhead: nothing but teachers, students.

In the medium term, there are several things that could be done to mitigate to some extent the damage done by the present system.

1. Create disinterested, double-blind evaluation of student learning.

Require state universities to offer benchmark exit exams to their graduating students (like the final degree exams at British universities), with individual results appearing on transcripts, and with comparative statistics available to the public. These results can be used to measure the value added by instructors and courses to different cohorts of students. The exam standards, old exam questions and grading rubrics should be made public. In addition, we can supplement local exams with standardized benchmarks, like GRE Subject exams or the College Learning Assessment, once again making results public.

2. Abolish distribution requirements, the pseudo core curriculum of the present system.

This would eliminate most of the politically correct hurdles students face – requirement in multiculturalism, social justice and global learning, for example. Instead, require all degree programs to allow students 12-14 free elective courses. We can establish a core curriculum foundation, a national, non-profit society that awards liberal education certificates to students based on coursework, special exams, interviews, and submitted work.

3. Decentralize power. Break the monopoly of faculty senates, administrators.

(a) Tie funding of departments to number of students taught (within the limits of a grading curve). Programs that succeed in attracting more students, while maintaining high standards, should be rewarded with more resources. 95% of the power of deans and presidents is the power to shift resources to politically favored programs, like ethnic and gender studies. Real competition would enable academic entrepreneurs to create new, student-centered programs, including sequences of courses focusing on the Western canon. In addition, permit departments to compete for students by discounting their tuition rates, creating intra-university free market, thereby applying some real restraint to the upward spiral of costs.

(b) Introduce ‘charter colleges’: permitting free associations of scholars to offer both courses and bachelor’s degrees without requiring faculty senate and administrator approval.

(c) Give curricular autonomy to departments, and allow faculty to ‘secede’ from existing departments to create new self-governing units. This would enable small platoons of conservative faculty to form within the existing system, freeing them to compete on a level playing field with their dysfunctional peers.

4. Abolish or reform the Ph.D.

In the liberal arts, replace the Ph.D. with the M.A., or a new doctorate in Liberal Arts, dropping the requirement of ‘original research’. Instead, require the doctoral candidate to prepare and deliver a series of lectures on classic texts, demonstrating a mastery of understanding, reflection and articulation.

5. Ban the use of temporary, part-time and non-tenure-track teachers.

Eliminate the distinction between tenure-track and non-tenure-track instructors. Everyone who has the responsibility for teaching students given equal status in departmental and college decisions. Every instructor should be equally eligible for tenure.

6. The Power of the System to Resist Change

Our higher education industry is powerless to educate, and the vast majority of its so-called research is utterly worthless, ignored even by the specialists who generate it (as Mark Bauerlein at Emory has demonstrated). However, there is one thing that the system does to perfection: defend itself against political pressures to change. Universities have assembled the most impressive parallelogram of political forces in modern history. Here is a partial list of their strategic assets, both tangible and intangible:

1. Deeply ingrained habits within the public at large, and within political and business leaders, of deference to supposed scientific experts and humanistic elites (both Baconian and Rousseau).
2. The totemistic loyalty of vast alumni networks to athletic teams and symbols, sustained by the energy of nostalgia for lost youth.
3. The claims of the 'research university' to be engines of scientific progress and economic growth, endlessly and uncritically repeated by media and the press, despite growing evidence to the contrary. Supposedly great research universities like Berkeley or Ann Arbor have done nothing to prevent the financial meltdown of California and Michigan; indeed, they are arguably crucial contributing factors, by undermining the remnants of classical and Christian culture.
4. Statistically fallacious argument about the economic value of a college education (the mythical \$1 million premium in lifetime earnings), which is associated in the public's mind (without statistical basis) with the supposed 'quality' of one's university, as defined by prestige and selectivity.

5. The sunk costs fallacy: the millions of Americans who have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in their own college education and that of their children find it painful to take seriously the possibility that this investment was wasted.

6. Well-oiled public relations machinery, including alumni organizations, publications and lobbying offices, as well as revolving door between academia, politics and media that ensures an endless supply of uncritically deferential press and sycophantic political “leaders”.

7. An Effective Counter-Strategy

In order to push back against all this, we must make strategic use of information and alternative media to convince the public that the system is broken. To reprise, we must get across the following five points:

1. The system is expensive and wasteful, with billions of dollars in unjust privilege for those at the top of the hierarchy.
2. Students are not intellectual challenged, improved.
3. Character and citizenship are undermined rather than strengthened.
4. Most research is useless by any objective measure.
5. College degrees have been oversold on economic grounds. For most students, there is a poor return on the investment of both funds and time.

In order to realize these goals, we must first use our political alliances to ensure greater transparency in higher education.

1. The 2009 Texas syllabus law is a model for this. The Texas law now requires each state university to put every course syllabus and every instructor CV on-line, accessible and searchable by the general public, and only three clicks from the home page. This opens up the possibility of independent research of curricular content, research that can go beyond mere anecdotes to quantitative results, and to demonstrating what has been omitted from the curriculum. The National Association of Scholars has begun a systematic study of the history curriculum at UT-Austin and Texas A&M, the results of which will have explosive results, strengthening the hands of the reform element within the boards of regents.

2. Texas A&M University has introduced a model of fiscal transparency. The Board of Regents requires that the salaries of professors be made public, along with information about how many students the professor is teaching and the size of outside research grants received.

We can go still further.

1. We can reveal the per-student instructional cost of each course in the schedule of courses, revealing the wide disparities in the distribution of resources. Undergraduates in many popular fields are unwittingly subsidizing graduate study and study in a handful of fashionable and politically favored programs, like gender and gay studies.

2. Make public internal assessments of learning, using Collegiate Learning Assessment, GRE, LSAT and MCAT results.

3. Track economic and emotional returns after college, comparing to matched samples of college refuseniks.

4. Make public statistics about crime, including rape and assault, public drunkenness and disorderly conduct.

In closing, let me return to the long-run perspective. Since the higher education system is no longer up to the task of perpetuating our Western culture, other means must be found. Fortunately, information technology is a great generator of means, if we can summon the will to use it rightly.