

The Modest College and the Imperial University

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“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from the Rock*

1. Introduction

To understand the ethos of a people, examine their system of education. Educating the young is the essential human act, and in the institutions of a society we can see most clearly the people’s aspirations, their conception of our ultimate end, and their fundamental beliefs about human nature and our place in the cosmos.

Higher education is even more revealing, since it is both most optional and most necessary. Most optional, because in designing higher education, a society is free from the necessity of supplying the young with those fundamental skills common both to survival and all higher tasks. Most necessary, because it is through higher education that the future leaders of society are shaped, upon whose shoulders the burden lies of maintaining those features understood to be most essential.

There is a system of higher learning that best fits the character of a “modest” republic. Balance and moderation are the bywords in such a republic, and higher education (the “modest college”) takes the form of internalizing models of moderation judiciously selected from the history and literature of the past. Students spend most of their time traversing a fixed and common curriculum, which forms a common understanding of virtue both within and across

generations. The citizens of a modest republic organize their colleges along regional and sectarian lines, with a cosmopolitan element supplied by largely spontaneous intercollegiate collaboration. They extend opportunity to the talented but also give serious weight to sustaining family traditions.

A hubristic empire, in contrast, requires a university system that is national, and even global, in character. Imperial universities are first and foremost engines of change and progress, discovering new truths and putting them to work in new techniques and practices. An imperial system most prizes in its students the aptitude to learn new facts and to acquire new skills, with an infinite plasticity and flexibility as the ideal. At the same time, a diverse student body prepares its members for global responsibilities and breaks down those ties to family, creed and religion that might interfere with the smooth operation of the administrative state.

Consider what is required of leaders in a modest republic and in an empire. A republic needs leaders who understand and are loyal to their own local communities, who are restrained in their use of power by respect for venerable taboos and prohibitions, and who are content with a life that is thoroughly bounded and finite – one that requires no greater scope nor more resources than are readily available in a small country operating in a traditional manner.

An empire, in contrast, must be led by an elite with no invidious attachments or loyalties, whose only loyalty is to some abstract ideal or ideology. The elite must unswervingly believe that the success of the imperial project is an end so important as to justify any means whatsoever, however horrifying to their ancestral religions and inherited mores. The elite commit themselves to the pursuit of Progress, perpetual and infinite, without borders. These principles, since they are so abstract and largely negative, need not be taught through a fixed curriculum of canonical texts: indeed, they are better absorbed through a set of similar, parallel processes of initiation

into a wide variety of techniques and specialties, including those that will be needed in “solving” the empire’s many technical and managerial “problems.” In fact, whether the new information or new theories are of any practical use is a matter of secondary importance: what really matters is that the machinery by which the new ideas are absorbed thoroughly alienates the students from inherited ideas and attitudes that would interfere with the single-minded pursuit of Progress.

Some empires have been more ambitious than others. At one extreme, ancient Rome had a divine vocation to bring the rule of law to the world. Similarly, the British Empire embraced “the white man’s burden,” civilizing of the world’s savages. Others were more modest. Spain aimed to bring Catholic missions to the New World and to extract from it as much gold and silver as possible. The Holy Roman Empire sought only to defend Christendom from the Turks and to arbitrate disputes among Christian princes.

The modern world has seen the emergence of a new kind of empire, more ambitious than any in the past. A modernist empire aspires to a global and millenarian consummation, a Third Age in which history is brought finally to an end. This ambition is obvious in the case of the Thousand Year Reich of the Nazis or the Marxist-Leninism of the old Soviet Union. However, it is not hard to see the Western world, the United States in particular, as at least potentially in the grip of a similar hubris: to make “the world safe for democracy,” for a democratic capitalism at the “end of history” (in Frances Fukuyama’s phrase).

Leo Strauss and his students have claimed that the American founding was modest, even “base,” in its aspirations, aiming only at material prosperity and the minimal honesty it requires, in contrast to the ethical “perfectionism” of the ancients (including Aristotle). This ignores the fact that, since Francis Bacon, the material world has become the central focus of the modernist conception of infinite progress. The ancients, and especially Aristotle and his successors, were

not “perfectionists” in any sense. (The term seems to have been coined, as a label for Aristotelians and other eudaemonists, by John Rawls in his 1974 *A Theory of Justice*.) They did rate moral value as higher than mere material progress. In doing so, they were placing a goal at the center of the political project that was difficult, perhaps even impossible, to achieve fully and stably, but it was a *finite* goal, one that could be approximated by any decent society with resources adequate for a simple life with time for leisure. In contrast, modernists, following Bacon, pursue the unbounded goal of More: more power, longer life, more conveniences, more pleasure, more varied experiences and diversions, all without any natural terminus.

2. A Typology of Theories of Higher Education

The ancient tradition of higher education in the Western world starts with the seven liberal arts as its foundation, culminating in the study of philosophy, theology, law, and medicine. The theory and practice of the seven *artes liberales* (the arts appropriate for the free person, the man with the leisure to pursue happiness) resulted from the confluence of three ancient traditions: the philosophical (especially the Stoic, Neo-Platonic, and Peripatetic), the rhetorical (including moderate sophists like Isocrates and syncretists like Cicero), and the theological (the humanism of Philo, the Alexandrian school, Augustine, and Boethius).

The synthesis of the three strands was not always untroubled, and the various components (especially the philosophical and rhetorical) have waxed and waned in relative strength, with philosophy dominant in the late Middle Ages, giving way to the rhetorical during the Renaissance and Reformation.¹ The synthesis repeatedly emerged triumphant, with champions like Boethius, Augustine, Cassiodorus, Thomas Aquinas, Melancthon, Joseph Butler, Matthew Arnold, and John Henry Newman. In the Late Middle Ages, the Neo-Platonists and Stoics

successfully merged their enterprise with that of philosophically informed orators like Cicero and Quintilian. Among Christians, the austere rejection of classical learning advocated by Tertullian fell decisively before those who found in classical philosophy and literature a providential preparation for the Gospel.

In the classic work on American higher education, *Literature and the American College*, Irving Babbitt² delineates the elements of the new, modernist synthesis. There are once again three strands to what Babbitt labels “humanitarianism” (in contrast to the “humanism” of the ancients). First, a scientific humanitarianism typified by Francis Bacon, the seventeenth century propagandist and impresario of scientific research. Second, the sentimental and voluntarist humanitarianism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who substituted “the shifting quicksand of sensibility” for ancient philosophy’s rational “law for man.” Finally, the encyclopedic humanitarianism of the *Wissenschaftlichkeit* tradition, championed by Diderot, Humboldt, Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen, with its inordinate *libido scientia*: the endless accumulation of information as mankind’s *summum bonum*, conducted by an organized army of specialized researchers.

As in the case of the ancient synthesis, some tensions occasionally emerge between the various strands, especially between the “two cultures” of scientific and sentimental modernism.

These tensions are relatively superficial and fleeting. All three are united in opposition to the teleologically ordered cosmos of the ancient synthesis, with its finite, universal and moral goal of happiness (eudaemonia) through rational self-restraint. In its place, the moderns substitute the unbounded pursuit of infinite Progress, through the attainment of ever-greater technical power over nature (including human nature), through the ever-novel exercise of fantasy and the idyllic imagination, the ever-freer indulgence of whim and spontaneous impulse, and the ever more

comprehensive accumulation of information.³ Once teleology was kicked out of the domain of human reason, the *scientific* mind (to distinguish it from the genuinely *scientific* mind) could no longer distinguish between those healthy inclinations proper to human nature and diseased or disordered impulses. Reason became, as David Hume put it, the “slave of the passions,” a mere instrument for scratching whatever itches. As a consequence, modernists reduce the goal of education to the acquisition of data and scientifically grounded technique.

The modernists debunk ethical judgments as mere expressions of private sentiment or communal prejudice. In its place they erect a new ethic, an ethic of unconstrained loyalty to the modernist project. The system inculcates the new ethic in the young tacitly, by example and by immersion.

3. The Typology Illustrated in the History of American Higher Education

Higher education began in colonial America as almost a perfect embodiment of the ancient synthesis: a network of regional and confessional colleges, each prescribing a similar curriculum of ancient texts, blending together the three strands of philosophy, rhetoric and theology, with the aim of equipping a ruling class with the elevated taste, breadth of learning, and piety for tradition that support a character of virtue. The liberal arts tradition flourished here to a degree beyond even that of the medieval universities, which tended to become dominated by a form of scholastic professionalism and vocationalism.⁴

As a consequence, America at the time of the revolution possessed the most perfectly educated ruling class in the history of the world, along with the most literate populace the world had yet seen. The documents and institutions they crafted have endured longer and fostered more human happiness than any others.

The Revolution and the Founding brought little immediate change to higher education, but the availability of modernist ideas (especially French Jacobinism and Freemasonry) meant that the Republic was founded “in an unhealthy neighborhood and at an inauspicious hour” (to use C. S. Lewis’s description of the founding of modern science in *The Abolition of Man*). Thomas Jefferson’s plans for the University of Virginia embody the ambiguous character of the founding. On the one side, Jefferson insists on the classical languages of Greek and Latin as the foundation for higher learning, and he permits the formation of a periphery of confessional schools of theology surrounding the new university. On the other side, Jefferson intended to replace Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy with the study of “Ideology,” derived from the works of Bacon, Condillac, and Locke. He gave science a much greater proportion of the school’s faculty, and he foresaw the division of the faculty into diverse “schools” and “departments.” He intended to replace the prescribed curriculum with “uncontrolled choice” on the part of the students.⁵

Nonetheless, the modernist elements of Jefferson’s vision saw little fruit in American education until after the Civil War, when scholars began to import the model of the German research university. As the American college embodied the ancient synthesis, the German university typified the modern one, once modern philosophy (led by Kant) won the “conflict of the faculties” with theology. It is no accident that Germany was at the center of two world wars in the last century: the flourishing of Junker militarism and Nazi fanaticism occurred as a result of and not despite its education system.⁶ Everything we associate with German imperialism – a national consciousness, bureaucratic segmentation and regimentation, inflexible deference to hierarchy, rapid industrial expansion, technical innovation—the German university forged. As Babbitt put it, Germany demonstrated that “it was easier to be learned than to be civilized.”

From the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 until the founding of the American Association of University Professors in 1915, American higher education absorbed and digested all of the elements of the German model: the introduction of the Ph.D. (despite the admonitions of William James⁷), the division into departments, tenure, the absolute autonomy and self-government of the faculty (the so-called ‘academic freedom’ not of individual teachers but of the faculty as a whole), and the consequent elevation of research over teaching. In addition, Americans added three new elements that exacerbated the worst tendencies of the model, namely, the elective system (introduced at Harvard by Charles Eliot in the 1890s), federal funding of scientific research, and the use of standardized tests to create a hyper-selective, national system of elite universities.

Thorstein Veblen summed up the new orientation in *The Higher Learning in America* in 1918:

The more emotional and spiritual virtues that once held the first place have been overshadowed by the increasing consideration given to proficiency in matter-of-fact knowledge ...this learning has so far become an avowed ‘end in itself’ that ‘the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men’ is now freely rated as the most humane and meritorious work to be taken care of by any enlightened community or any public-spirited friend of civilization.⁸

For Veblen, it was axiomatic that the primary function of the university is the creation of new “matter-of-fact” or value-free knowledge (conceived in Baconian terms), with the instruction of students limited to the training of professional scientists and scholars in research technique: “The university assumes (or should assume) no responsibility for its students’ fortunes in the moral,

religious, pecuniary, domestic or hygienic respect.”⁹ Any concern for moral or spiritual development is a mere vestige of the “barbaric” past.¹⁰

Charles W. 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.¹¹

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 is 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 observes, 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.”¹²

Although the elective system promised greater autonomy for the student, in practice it has become the worst kind of tyranny. If there are no courses that students are required to take, then there are none that professors are required to teach. It is individual professors, not individual students, who decide what shall be offered. Both training and self-interest drive professors to offer narrow courses that transmit the results of the professors’ own specialized research.

Federal funding for research began during World War II. Vennavar Bush, an engineer and the co-founder of Raytheon in the 1920s, became the head of FDR’s new Office of Scientific

Research and Development in 1940. The fateful Manhattan Project began on university campuses (especially the University of Chicago) before moving to Los Alamos. American higher education wrought this most terrible of weapons, in a perfect expression of modern “humanitarianism,” combining the technological imperative with a contempt for ancient moral constraints.

In July 1945, Bush’s panel produced a prophetic document, *Science: The Endless Frontier*, promising a New Deal for science and leading to the National Institutes for Health (1946) and The National Science Foundation (1950). During the Cold War, the NSF budget went from \$16 million (1956) to \$130 million in 1959, to \$480 million in 1966. Overall federal spending on university research increased from \$456 million in 1958 to roughly \$1.3 billion in 1964.¹³ By 2010, it had swelled to over \$120 billion. The development of military technology shaped and oriented scientific research and secured its dominance over the rest of the liberal arts. This dominance gained further strength in 1980 through the Bayh-Dole Patent Act, which enabled universities to secure patents from inventions discovered through federally funded research. The taxpaying citizen ends up paying for the research at least three times over: once through federal research grants covering the direct costs, then through the recovery of “indirect costs” by the host universities (50-60% of direct costs), and then again through higher prices for commercial products that incorporate patent royalties. Egregious cases of over-charging by universities (for example, Stanford, Northwestern, Yale, NYU, Texas, Berkeley) have appeared repeatedly.

[In the fifty years since Eisenhower warned us about the “military-industrial complex”, a new octopus has emerged in its place: a military-industrial-academic-media complex. It is not often remembered that in that same Farewell Address, Eisenhower also warned us of the “equal danger” that “public policy could itself become the captive of a](#)

[scientific-technological elite.](#)” A network of foreign policy institutes, academic centers and think tanks has taken shape, with a vested interest in perpetual crisis, in the manufacturing of threats to the national interest, and in entanglement with foreign alliances and multinational bodies (like NATO and the UN). Often ensconced in major universities, these quasi-academic centers¹⁴ supply expertise for government agencies, friendly media outlets and allied political interest groups. These centers depend for their lucrative funding on an aggressive, interventionist policy on a global scale.

Until the 1990s, competition for university admissions was largely a regional affair. The top students from my high school graduating class in 1975 in Houston went to Rice or the University of Texas. No one thought of applying to Harvard or Stanford. Today, the system is thoroughly nationalized. The most prestigious universities (the Ivy League, the Seven Sisters, Stanford, Duke, plus the public ivies like Berkeley and Michigan) are able to turn away well over 90% of their applicants, filling their classes with the nation’s cognitive elite. Wendell Berry eloquently laments the consequences of this inter-regional brain drain:

The new norm, according to which the child leaves home as a student and never lives at home again, interrupts the old course of coming of age ...the same interruption, ramifying through a community, destroys the continuity and so the integrity of local life. As the children depart, generation after generation, the place loses its memory of itself, which is its history and its culture.^{15]}

In the 1940s, T. S. Eliot foresaw this development of a national and even transnational elite through selective higher education: “In an élite composed of individuals who find their way into it solely for their individual pre-eminence, the differences of background will be so great, that

they will be united only by their common interests, and separated by everything else.”¹⁶ The new elite is rootless and deracinated, a negation exacerbated by the pursuit of a disorienting diversity.

The élites, in consequence, will consist solely of individuals whose only common bond will be their professional interest: with no social cohesion, with no social continuity. They will be united only by a part, and that the most conscious part, of their personalities; they will meet like committees.¹⁷ (p. 120)

As Eliot explains, a university community constructed along these lines might be able to study every culture but would be utterly unable to *transmit* even one. Without the transmission of culture (which must always be local, familial and religious), we must lose “a piety toward the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote.” (p.116) In the recent book *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray provides chilling details confirming Eliot’s fears about the formation of this elite, demonstrating its utter isolation culturally from the rest of America.¹⁸

A hundred years of modernist education has produced a professoriate consisting almost entirely of the “trousered apes” and “urban blockheads” of C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*,¹⁹ men and women who are technically proficient barbarians, full of information but lacking a well-tuned sensibility. They are a bundle of contradictions: Gnostic ignoramuses, antinomian Puritans, and semiliterate scholars (for proof of the last point, pick up any issue of an academic journal in “literary studies”).

Despite these transformations, the ancient tradition of the *artes liberales* is not dead. There have been a series of valiant rear-guard actions over the last 100 years, each achieving some modest success. Irving Babbitt and the New Humanists raised the alarm in the early twentieth century. The Core Curriculum movement resulted in the Core at Columbia and Harvard’s Red Book reform of the 1940s. In the 1930s, Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler

launched the Great Books movement, which has spawned a dozen colleges (including the St. John's campuses) and forty or so academic programs, mostly at smaller colleges and regional state universities.

None of these movements could fully satisfy a defender of the ancient tradition. Nearly all have abandoned the classical languages, relying instead upon translations into English. Although Hutchins was quite sound in his defense of the importance of universal metaphysical truth as the foundation of the curriculum, he and his followers were unable to articulate and defend that truth (although Mortimer Adler, to his credit, made the attempt). As a result, most teachers in Great Books programs (including the St. John's campuses and what remains of the Literature Humanities at Columbia and Directed Studies at Yale) read the text through a thoroughly modernist filter, interpreting Socrates as an impious skeptic and largely ignoring the Roman and medieval syntheses. Nonetheless, some real good has come from these efforts, and much has been preserved that would otherwise have been lost forever.

4. The Looming Crisis

Empires rarely collapse as a result of external pressures. Military defeat is normally a symptom of internal decay. Four factors contribute to this decay: imperial overreach, fiscal profligacy, bureaucratic hypertrophy, and personal vice and corruption. There are signs that America is moving inexorably toward a textbook-perfect case of imperial collapse. I will focus here on the signs of a looming crisis within its system of higher education.

The costs of higher education spiral out of control. Prices, in the form of tuition and fees, climb to stratospheric levels at the selective schools, as an ever larger pool of students strive to join the cognitive elite and as direct federal aid and guaranteed loans fuel the fire (from 1993 to

2007, tuition rose 66.7 percent in real terms, 79.4 percent at public universities). Costs rise to meet the higher prices, not vice versa, and hence there is virtually no economic constraint on how the costs will climb.

The bonanza of new wealth flows into the universities, and two groups capture it as pure economic rent: the swelling ranks of highly paid administrators, and the top strata of prestigious scholars and scientists. At the same time, average salaries for university instructors have hardly risen at all. The result is a division between academic haves (administrators, nationally renowned scholars) and have-nots (adjuncts, lecturers, post-docs, graduate students), an academic bourgeoisie and proletariat. Ironically, the only place in the modern world where theoretical Marxism has any legitimate application is within the modern university itself.

Since 1975, the number of students per faculty member has remained virtually constant (15). In contrast, the number of students per administrator has plummeted from 84 to 68 (in 2005), and the number of students per non-instructional staff from 50 to 21. From 1947 to 1995, overall university spending increased 148 percent, instructional spending by 128 percent, and administrative spending by 235 percent.²⁰ As Benjamin Ginsberg rightly observes, the majority of the new “deanlets” and “deanlings” created by this boom spend most of their time in meetings, engaged in the strategic planning of still further meetings.

Most of these administrators are grossly overpaid. University presidents, who are little more than professional fund raisers, are typically paid in the high six figures, and even the lowly, paper-pushing associate dean, who a few years ago would have been paid less than the average professor, is now pulling in at least \$200K, and even in “under-funded” colleges like Humanities or Liberal Arts.

Meanwhile, this conspicuous consumption at the top is being paid for by astronomical increases in tuition, combined with the cost savings involved in hiring non-tenure-track instructors. In 1969, only 3 percent of college instructors were off the tenure track; now that percentage has grown to over 70 percent. Non-tenure track instructors teach roughly twice as many students at roughly a third or a quarter of the salary of their tenured “colleagues.” The system enables this exploitation by consistently over-producing Ph.D.’s by very wide margins, even in the “hard” sciences. As Ginsberg documents, “Each year about 45,000 PhD degrees are awarded each year, and about 15% of each year’s degree recipients can expect to be unable to find jobs in their fields.”²¹ Has this massive increase in societal investment (including the over \$30 billion collected each year in private gifts) resulted in a substantial improvement in the quality of education? Quite the reverse. Even if we apply the pragmatic and materialistic measure favored by the modernist, the higher education system fails to deliver the goods. Jon Sanders has documented that higher state spending on higher education is associated with negative economic returns in the long run (over five years).²²

That this is so should not surprise us, given the results of evaluating instruction reported by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in their recent book, *Academically Adrift*.²³ Over four years, the average college student has improved in writing, critical thinking and problem solving by only seven percentiles (0.18 standard deviations), a gain about one-quarter as great as was typical a generation earlier. Nearly 45 percent of students show no measurable gain whatsoever.²⁴ This lack of progress follows predictably from grade inflation and the collapse of standards. Students reported spending on average less than twelve hours a week outside of class studying, with 37 percent spending less than five hours a week. Fifty percent had not taken a single course in the prior semester that required more than twenty pages of writing. Despite this lack of effort, the

average collegiate grade point average was 3.2. This deflation of standards begins at the top: the percentage of grades that were A or A-minuses was 45 percent at Duke, 44 percent at Dartmouth, and 46 percent at Harvard.²⁵

The “required course” has become extinct. In a 1996 study, the National Association of Scholars found that only 14 percent of universities required a literature course, 4 percent required philosophy, 34 percent required a natural science course, 12 percent required a traditional mathematics course, though another 32 percent mandated “quantitative reasoning” taught outside the math department. Even within each specialized major, few require any specific courses beyond a single semester’s introduction.

The “hard” sciences, which most resist such dumbing down, rely more and more on the tuition of foreign students for their survival. Fewer than one-half of scientific Ph.D.’s and fewer than 40 percent of Ph.D’s in engineering earned in the United States are now awarded to citizens, and the percentage of citizens falls to virtually zero in the most demanding fields. For the first time in history, Americans are under-producing scientists and engineers, in proportion to their relative population. This is a result of opening university doors to the elite of other countries, crowding out our own students, and discouraging them from the futile attempt of competing with the top one-tenth of one percent of the rest of the world. The *Wall Street Journal* contains monthly jeremiads about the shortage of H1 visas, arguing that we are losing the students we educate to their native countries. Of course this begs the question—why are we educating them here in the first place? Why are we educating the work force of countries that are our economic competitors today, and possibly threats to our security tomorrow?

As G. K. Chesterton noted long ago, nothing is so impractical as pragmatism. By cutting itself off from five thousand years of civilized morality in favor of a “whatever works now”

philosophy of expediency, the modern world lacks the resources of character needed for its own maintenance. Teachers pretend to teach and students pretend to study, with the hapless taxpayer, parent or philanthropist picking up the tab. A rising tide of vice threatens the enterprise at its very core, with cheating and plagiarism (by students), and plagiarism and fraud (by scholars and scientists) reaching epidemic proportions. When one can no longer trust what is published in respectable scientific journals, the entire Baconian and *Wissenschaftlich* house of cards must collapse.

The higher education system has become, at best, a form of corporate welfare, a component of crony capitalism, with corporations off-loading much of their R&D expenses and the burden of sorting and stratifying its job applicants onto the universities. Relatively small corporate donations are thereby massively leveraged by taxpayer subsidies and student loans. However, the budgets of both governments and households are nearing the breaking point, and the upward spiral of wealth redistribution must come soon to an end.

5. Recovery and Restitution

Historically, America's great strength (as observed by Alexis de Tocqueville) has been our ability to form voluntary associations in response to necessity. There are signs that this is beginning to happen once more. Dozens of new colleges have sprung up in recent years, mostly evangelical, conservative Reformed, or traditional Roman Catholic in affiliation. Many of these colleges are Christianizing the Great Books tradition, correcting its typical Roman and medieval omissions, and often requiring proficiency in Latin.²⁶

These new colleges are building on the remarkable success of the home schooling movement and the “classical Christian” schools, which have effected the revival of the seven liberal arts called for by Dorothy L. Sayers in her salutary essay, “Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning.”²⁷

Unfortunately, these new communities face a number of challenges: accreditation, visibility, the establishment academic standing and reputation, the development of gifts and grants, and the placement of graduates. New technology has, however, created the opportunity for overcoming these obstacles through the establishment of a new institutional arrangement, duplicating the successful formation of Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the thirteenth century. On the one side were the halls of residence or “colleges,” and on the other side were the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The colleges retained their autonomy, both financial and academic, and specialized in the instruction of students through tutorials and seminars. The universities provided the final examinations for all degrees, as well as public lectures, libraries and other shared resources. In a similar way, using the internet to pool resources and to provide common examinations would enable today’s new colleges and programs to achieve public recognition and to compete successfully for the best students, offering honors credentials of higher quality than Ivy League degrees. The key to success will be balance: balancing the small and the large, the parochial and the cosmopolitan, the standardized and the eccentric.

Turning now to the universities, I need not recommend a drastic reduction in government funding, since that will happen of necessity, as the costs of caring for the aging and improvident Baby Boom generation drains the nation’s coffers. We may hope that what funding remains will go directly to students in the form of scholarships, and only to the most needy students. For the most part, students must content themselves with an education they can afford.

One reform that is vitally needed is an end to the hyper-selectivity of the elite universities. Students who gain admission certainly benefit from the exclusivity of their schools, since it enables them to stand out from their peers and to make personal connections with others destined for power. [These](#) are all negative and not positive externalities: they come entirely at the expense of others. Since society does not benefit from such selectivity, it should not afford hyper-selective universities the benefits of tax exemption and tax-deductible contributions. Selectivity at tax-benefiting institutions should be capped at 50 percent: if a university attracts applicants in numbers more than double its capacity, it should resort to a lottery. This will help return higher education to a regional system and to mitigate the widening of the economic and cultural gap between the cognitively gifted and the general populace. It will also put a cap on the infinite escalation of tuition at the top, relieving the upward pressure on costs at every level.

¹ See Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teacher College Press, 1986).

² Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986).

³ For more details, see my “The War of the Three Humanisms: Irving Babbitt and the Revival of Classical Learning,” *Modern Age* 52 (2010): 198-207, and “Dark Satanic Mills of Mis-Education,” *Humanitas* (2012, forthcoming).

⁴ [See James J. Walsh, *Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic: Scholasticism in the Colonial College* \(New York: Fordham University Press, 1935\).](#)

⁵ Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁶ See Carlton J. H. Hayes, *A Generation of Materialism 1871-1900* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1941).

⁷ “The Ph.D. Octopus,” in *The Heart of William James*, edited by Robert Richardson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 248-246.

⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918), pp. 10-11.

⁹ [Ibid., p. 12.](#)

¹⁰ [Ibid., p. 34.](#)

¹¹ [Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, p. 96.](#)

¹² [Ibid., p. 123.](#)

¹³ Jennifer Washburn, *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 44.

¹⁴ A very short list includes Stanford’s Hoover Institution, the Center for National Security Law at the University of Virginia, Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis at Tufts, the Mosher Institute for International Policy at Texas A&M, the Center for Defense Journalism at Boston University, the James Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice, the Security Studies Program at Georgetown, and the Center for International Security and Strategic Studies at Mississippi State.

¹⁵ Wendell Berry, *What Matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth* (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 2010), pp. 151-152.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Notes toward the Definition of Culture,” in *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), p. 115.

¹⁷ [Ibid., p. 120.](#)

¹⁸ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on the State of Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

²⁰ Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 28.

²¹ [Ibid., pp. 162-3.](#)

²² Jon Sanders, “Does Spending on Higher Education Drive Economic Growth? 20 Years of Evidence Reviewed,” Goldwater Institute Policy Report No. 18, May 12, 2003.

²³ Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²⁴ [Ibid., p. 36.](#)

²⁵ [Ibid., p. 77.](#)

²⁶ A partial list: Thomas Aquinas College (California), Thomas More College (New Hampshire), College of St. Thomas More (Ft. Worth), Wyoming Catholic College, New Saint Andrews College (Idaho), C. S. Lewis College, Patrick Henry College, Yorktown University, John Paul the Great University, New College Franklin, Magdalen College (New Hampshire), St. Gregory’s University (Oklahoma), George Wythe University (Utah), Gutenberg College (Oregon), Torrey Honors Institute, Biola (California), Great Texts, Baylor (Texas), Great Books. Mercer University (Georgia), Ignatius-Angelicum Liberal Studies (California), Honors Program, Franciscan University (Ohio), Honors Program, University of St. Thomas (Houston).

²⁷ <http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html>