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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





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

From Eternity to Here

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.”  
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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

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



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

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.

From Eternity to Here

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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

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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