

How to Improve Our Colleges and Universities

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Liberal education is in decline. And professors and administrators at our best liberal arts colleges are hastening its demise.

Much has been written about liberal education's skyrocketing costs, its failure to provide students with the knowledge and intellectual skills they need to succeed in a competitive globalized economy, and its burdening of students with massive debt. But these big problems are only part of the story.

As important as is its contribution to individual economic well-being and to national prosperity, liberal education's traditional and proper aim is even more comprehensive and vital to the public interest: to prepare students to seize the wide range of opportunities and meet the full spectrum of responsibilities characteristic of free men and women.

When it lives up to its own standards, liberal education equips citizens with the mental habits needed to engage effectively in political debate and cast votes in an informed manner. Moreover, by acquainting students with the rich variety of opinions within Western civilization about moral, political, and religious life and introducing them to competing opinions in other civilizations, liberal education promotes the virtues of toleration and moderation.

Liberal education is not neutral. When true to itself, it encourages gratitude toward free societies for offering the opportunity to study fundamental ideas and seminal events, and for maintaining—by means of customs, laws, and political institutions—a framework that allows individuals and their communities a wide sphere in which to organize their lives as they think best.

And liberal education enriches private life by expanding our sympathies, deepening our self-knowledge, and cultivating the life-long pleasure of learning for its own sake.

Thus, the nation has a vital interest in the quality of its liberal education. Given several recent studies, there is reason to believe America is being short-changed by its colleges and universities.

Last year the National Association of Scholars published "[What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students](#)"; Harvard University issued "[The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future](#)"; and, acting

on a request from Congress, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences produced “The Heart of the Matter.”

Together they paint a disquieting picture of general curricula without focus or form; humanities disciplines suffering plunging enrollments; a self-perpetuating left-liberal campus orthodoxy entrenched by courses offered and not offered, visiting speakers chosen and not chosen, and written and unwritten speech codes; along with disciplinary procedures that treat due process as a crude impediment to justice.

Gathering and synthesizing pertinent data from publicly available sources including academic catalogues, institutional websites, and media accounts, a cogent new report from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, “Education or Reputation: A Look at America’s Top-Ranked Liberal Arts Colleges,” confirms the dire findings. The report focuses on the “Top 25” small residential liberal arts colleges as determined by U.S. News & World Report (several ties brought the total number of colleges counted in the Top 25 to 29).

Our top-ranked liberal arts colleges have eviscerated the core curriculum. Of the Top 25, ACTA reports, “only two require an economics course. Only three require a survey in U.S. history. Only five require a survey course in literature.” Amherst College, Grinnell College, Hamilton College, Middlebury College, and Vassar College have open curricula with no requirements. Bates College, Bowdoin College, Haverford College, Oberlin College, Smith College, Swarthmore College, Wesleyan University, and Williams College do not require undergraduates to study literature, American history, the principles of American politics, or economics.

Our top-ranked liberal arts colleges, while aggressively promoting multiculturalism, have incongruously demoted language study. The majority of them do not require students to achieve even intermediate-level proficiency—the equivalent of three college semesters of study—in a foreign language.

Our top-ranked liberal arts colleges have discouraged the free exchange of ideas and free inquiry. According to a study by the redoubtable Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, incorporated by ACTA into its report, all of the top liberal arts colleges seriously impair freedom of speech. Fourteen—including Carleton College, Colgate University, Middlebury College, and Wellesley College—have in place “at least one policy that clearly and substantially restricts freedom of speech.” Several punish “offensive speech.” Some American college and universities have actually banished unfettered expression to designated “free speech zones”—a dodge reminiscent of how Russia marginalized protesters during the Winter Olympics.

Our top-ranked arts colleges have raised fees to extraordinary heights. According to ACTA, “The ‘sticker price’ of higher education has risen 538 percent since 1985—compared to a ‘mere’ 286 percent increase in medical costs and a 121 percent increase in the consumer price

index during the same time period.” At the top colleges (not including the three military service academies, which do not charge), annual tuition, room and board, and fees range from a low of \$53,318 at Grinnell to a high of \$61,167 at Wesleyan. The median cost is above \$58,000 per year.

The lowest cost exceeds the national annual median household income of \$52,762.

Our top-ranked arts colleges have substantially increased administrative costs. More than half of the U.S. News Top 25 “increased administrative spending at a faster rate than instructional spending during the five year period ending in 2011-2012, the most recent year for which financial data are publicly available.” Meanwhile, “four schools—Davidson College, Grinnell College, Pomona College, and Scripps College—each increased administrative expenditures by at least 25 percent over five years, after adjusting for inflation.”

And our top-ranked liberal arts colleges have downgraded the faculty’s traditional mission of teaching undergraduates. They have reduced teaching loads while increasing incentives for professors to devote their hours outside of the classroom to research and scholarly publication rather than to discussing ideas with students.

To reverse the decline over which faculty and administration have presided, ACTA calls on trustees, donors, alumni, parents, and students to take action. In their different roles, they can begin by persuading all liberal arts colleges to publish data on their academic standards, including results of nationally normed tests of core collegiate skills, and grade distributions each semester in each department and program.

Liberal arts colleges should also be convinced of the need to reestablish a core curriculum that provides students with a common foundation including math, science, literature, principles of American politics, U.S. history, economics, religion, foreign languages, and world civilizations.

They should be urged to protect the free exchange of ideas by eliminating explicit restrictions on free speech; by expunging broadly written campus code provisions that can be and are interpreted to mean that causing a fellow student or faculty member to feel awkward or uncomfortable is an actionable offense; and by proclaiming at every opportunity—including, for example, on the home page of their websites, prominently in course catalogues, at ceremonies welcoming freshman, and at graduation—the centrality to liberal education of liberty of thought and discussion, of intellectual diversity, and of free inquiry.

And liberal arts colleges should be pressed to improve transparency and accountability by making available data on college budgeting, and they should be pushed to restructure incentives so as to encourage faculty to devote more hours to teaching.

One should not underestimate the entrenched interests—ideological, methodological, and financial—that resist reform of our liberal arts colleges. Nor should one underestimate the threat to freedom posed by failure to achieve reform.

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