The Rise and Decline of the Modern Liberal Arts Ideal in the U. S. A.

George Marsden
University of Notre Dame

The liberal arts tradition as we know it is only a little over a century old. Of course something called “the liberal arts” goes back to Medieval universities and there is some continuity in the ideal of providing a broad education suitable for free persons. But the modern version of liberal arts education, as distinguished from professional or technical training, and including not only the classics, but study of modern literature and languages, history, and the fine arts as well as introductions to philosophy, the sciences, and the social sciences is a product of the era of the emergence of the modern university. In the United States—which is the most relevant for our purposes—the modern universities were designed after the Civil War. By the beginning of the twentieth century the new universities had replaced the old-time colleges as the dominant American educational institutions. It is this context that the modern liberal arts ideal developed both as one option in university curricula and as the standard for many smaller colleges that did not become universities.

What I hope to do in this paper is to say a little about the ideology shaping the modern American universities and to reflect on how that bears on the prospects for the liberal arts ideal.

Most major American universities were preceded by evangelical colleges. Until about 1870 the typical American college was a modest affair consisting of only about one hundred to five hundred students. The private colleges were controlled by churches or boards of clergy and even the state institutions usually had clergymen as presidents and required chapel. Little distinction was made between evangelical Protestant concerns and the public interest. The curriculum was largely secular, built around the old liberal arts ideal of recitations of Greek and Latin classics with a few modern subjects added in. The college presidents usually taught a capstone course in "moral philosophy" which related Christian principles to personal and public life.

After the Civil War, leading American educators decided that these old-time colleges were antiquated and needed to be replaced by universities that could serve an emerging industrial nation. Most of these educators were New Englanders whose outlooks reflected the Yankee Republican agenda that emerged from the war—to combine superior technology with the highest moral ideals. Like their predecessors at the old-time colleges, they saw their schools not as essentially secular, but as serving both church and nation. In order to make this claim plausible, however, they had to broaden the definition of Protestantism, dropping most of its theological particulars and emphasizing its moral heritage. Especially they emphasized the ideal of freedom as the great Protestant contribution to civilization. The Protestant revolt against the shackles of Rome had led to new ideals individual freedom, freedom of inquiry, and political freedom.
The university founders designed revolutionary new curricula consistent with these ideals of freedom. Universities that were to serve a modern nation had first of all to be scientific and scientific advance depended on free inquiry. Free inquiry meant getting rid of any theological tests of the old-time colleges and eliminating the authority of churches from church-related schools. The new curricula imitated the scientific model, dividing subjects into “disciplines,” which would reflect professional specializations. Each discipline would have its own professional organization, meetings, and journals. The old-time generalist faculty were thus eliminated (1).

“Freedom” in the new curricula also had another meaning in addition to the free inquiry. Freedom also meant training students to become free citizens of the republic. The designers of the new universities, who lived in the era of romanticism after all, were well aware that a purely scientific outlook could be stifling. So at the elite schools (in contrast the new technological and agricultural land-grant state universities) they balanced the scientific parts of the curriculum with introductions to the humanities, thus establishing the modern liberal arts ideal. Almost every American university was founded with a liberal arts colleges at its center to act as a sort of moral flagship for the institution.

The liberal arts ideal claimed the classical heritage and broadly shared some of it principles, such as studying texts to prepare students to be useful citizens (2), but it was also heir to the moral and religious ideals of the old-time Protestant colleges (which had claimed the same classical heritage). The liberal Protestant leadership who designed the new universities were eager to signal that they were not at all unfriendly to religion (3). The new social sciences, for instance, as originally conceived, were to be heirs to the old courses in moral philosophy and to involve training citizens for service. They would show that the scientific method could be turned to noble purposes. A balanced curriculum including the sciences and the arts assumed a unity of knowledge and that the well-rounded citizen needed to be acquainted with all its dimensions. But the humanities, especially literature and the fine arts, would be the highest bearers of the spiritual as well as of moral principle. By studying the texts and creations that reflected the greatest human achievement, students would be imbued with the highest ideals. Thus the humanities came to function as a sort of substitute religion—a Scripture embodied in the “canon” of great literature and art (4).

Throughout the era of university building the major alternative to the universities were the independent liberal arts colleges, most of which had some denominational affiliation. While these schools choose not to try to become universities, by the early twentieth century almost all of them were following the university model, at least in part. Their course offerings were defined by the new professional disciplines and their faculty were trained in those disciplines at universities. Nonetheless these smaller schools were particularly well suited to the new liberal arts model. Their smaller sizes made them more communal and more naturally interdisciplinary than were the university colleges.

By the mid twentieth-century most of the more successful of these liberal arts colleges were following the university model in another respect—they were moving away from their religious roots. As they did so, like the universities before them, they pointed to the
moral character of their enterprise as carrying on the essential spirit of their original mission. They were still training students for service via the sciences and social science and could point to the humanities as providing opportunities for students to explore the highest realms of truth.

During the second half of the twentieth century, however, the role of liberal arts colleges, whether independent or university affiliated, dropped off drastically. While prior to World War II over half of all students had been enrolled at private institutions prior, by the 1990s public institutions accounted for eighty percent (5). Most of the public expansion was in everything but the liberal arts. Although numerous small independent “liberal arts colleges” survived, many of these were not able to retain a true liberal arts ideal (6). Not the government but market forces pushed them in more immediately practical directions. By the last decade of the century liberal arts subjects (humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) accounted for only about one third of all B. A.s—that’s B. A.s, not counting any other undergraduate degrees (7).

There are many practical reasons for this relative decline. Higher education, especially at private institutions, has become exorbitantly expensive. I am reminded of a remark by a Duke freshman about a decade ago when education there was considerably less expensive than it is today. His parents, who were visiting for the first time, expressed concern that he was partying more than studying. “You can’t justify $100,000 just on academics” was his reply. Many students and their parents have a version of this same objection regarding a liberal arts education. “You can’t justify $100,000 just on liberal arts.” So they opt for something more practical or cheaper.

Another factor to take into account, however, is that liberal arts education was always an enterprise for a select few. A hundred years ago, when liberal arts study might have been thought of as the collegiate standard, only about four per cent of college-age Americans attended college (8). Today the figure is around forty percent (9). In the past century the number students studying the liberal arts has declined greatly relative to the collegiate population but has actually increased relative to the national population. So there still is a market niche for liberal arts that is worth competing for. At the same time it can no longer be realistically presented as though it is the norm for higher education. Liberal arts is now a specialized educational enterprise likely to have only limited appeal in the popular educational market.

For smaller colleges who are attempting to serve this market niche or to convince today’s Americans that liberal arts is a legitimate enterprise, there is another historically-related factor worth considering. Increasingly, throughout the twentieth century liberal arts colleges have followed university ideals, sometime adopting them a few decades after they became university standards. In recent decades the most striking manifestation of this trend has been to move increasingly in the direction of university standards for hiring and promotion. Less and less is there is room for the generalist who is a great teacher—even though everyone knows that such people have been the heart and soul of every liberal arts college.
The result is that independent college liberal arts faculties and university faculties are increasingly interchangeable with their university counterparts. Liberal arts faculty members are not only taught in university graduate schools, they are expected to retain the professional standards of those schools throughout their careers.

One consequence of this development relates to another aspect of my historical narrative. In the mid-twentieth century liberal arts education could be plausibly justified as the best way to create good citizens. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the case for that seems considerably dimmed—especially at schools that have adopted university ideals. The humanities, for instance, can no longer be plausibly presented as quasi-religious in their value. Rather, literature—to take the easiest example—which once was noted as the best route to the sublime, is now often seen as the road to the greatest irreverence. Or the social sciences, which originally were conceived of as moral disciplines oriented toward service and still might have been taught that way at church-related schools at mid century, no longer can command such justification. In short, if contemporary university standards are the norm, it is not at all obvious that a liberal arts education will be either coherent or especially uplifting.

So I would argue in conclusion that, contrary to much of the standard wisdom of the twentieth century, institutions with strong religious commitments will be better able to maintain liberal arts ideal than if they lacked those religious commitments. I am stating the point this carefully qualified way in order to make clear that many elite private college that are essentially secular may be able to maintain strong liberal arts traditions, simply because they have wonderful resources, traditions, and students. But I do think there is a good case that, all things being equal, a school with strong religious commitments will be in a better position to maintain a healthy liberal arts ideal.

In the era of the rise of American universities the founders of the modern liberal arts ideal assumed a coherence of knowledge. That assumption was a vestige of their Christian and classical heritage. They assumed that the arts, the sciences, and the social sciences would naturally complement each other and hence provide the basis for the best education for the well-rounded citizen. Today few secular educators hold views that provide a basis for supposing any such coherence.

Schools with strong religious commitments, on the other hand, are in a position to provide the missing basis for coherence via a shared religious faith. To do so they need not return to simplistic religious answers or to formulas of earlier generations—such as that the Western canon is the best source of the sublime. Rather they can critically engage the latest in their disciplines but from religiously shaped frameworks that attempt to bring coherence to disciplines and to provide rationales for the relationships among disciplines. They can provide communities that have some rationale for relating learning to lives of service.

Of course this all is easier said than done—and to attempt to define how that is done is beyond my assignment here as an historian. Nonetheless, I do think that the history of the past century and a half shows that the modern liberal arts ideal is an ideal that is
floundering because it no longer has its original rationale. While we can not go back to the consensus ideals that provided those rationales, religiously affiliated colleges and religious faculty at other schools are in particular strong positions for trying to develop alternative rationales for renewing whatever is best in the liberal arts heritage.

Notes


6. In schools ranked as “Liberal Arts II” colleges, for instance, the percentage of students majoring in the humanities dropped from over 25 percent in 1966 to 10 percent in 1993. “Appendix,” What’s Happened to the Humanities? 254.

7. B. A.s in the humanities alone dropped from 20 percent in 1966 to 13 percent by 1993. The percentages were only slightly higher at the Research I universities with the best university liberal arts colleges. Ibid., 245-258.

8. Marsden, Soul of American University, 288, n5.