Hurry Up, Please, It’s Time: Can Liberal Education Survive?

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“IS THIS THE END OF RICO?”

Like Little Caesar, institutions such as the CSU are asking themselves, “Is this the end?” The digital dons are cutting into their cloistered “hoods.” They are peddling “disruptive innovation.” They sidle up to presidents in dimly lit hallways outside convention ballrooms. They whisper, “Hey, prez, wanna mooch some MOOC?”

“If public comprehensive universities won’t hock liberal education,” they rasp, “then it might be time to push delete, if you know what we mean.”

I waver about this.

For the most part I think that it is a good idea to save liberal education from “swimming with fishes.” This is not exactly a ringing endorsement. Let’s face it. Liberal education in public comprehensive universities has been, well, a mess. Opinion shapers and political leaders shake their heads. It could, it should, transform the economy. Why can’t it churn out more bankers and engineers? Its leaders should figure out how to make it nearly universal like high school. It should be a capstone of modern democracy, symbolizing equality of opportunity and achievement.

In this chapter I explain why we view liberal education as a god and as a god that failed. To fix liberal education, I argue, we must extract it from the myth of transfiguration that enshrouds it and the fable of coherence that its authors perpetuate.

Liberal education can help students to stop to think. But not as it is organized and taught today at the university level. Guides can nurture in well prepared students the capacity to slow down—and learn. In mentored conversations, students can begin to de-mythologize. They replace magic, lore, and awe with analysis and inference, irony and tragedy.

Liberal education is the practice of ways of thinking and being. It ought not to be a set of areas or categories to be toured. That tour should happen in high school. Liberal education in college encourages us to be engaged but not enslaved by ideas. We practice “being in and out of the game,” committed yet skeptical. This seems a modest goal. However, people are easily overborne by zealots, tyrants, and message-mongers. Many of us either worship the market or make a fetish of opposition to it. We either hold public education at all levels sacred or see it as the root of decay.

INTERLUDE: STANDS A SCHOOL WITH A TALL WHITE TOWER

This chapter is neither historical nor philosophical. My views on liberal education distill my experience. I attended a “country day school,” Poly Prep, in Brooklyn, New York. The
labs were antiquated and the teaching indifferent. The rituals like weekly chapel, the headmaster’s droning sermons, and the ties and jackets for boys (there were only boys) seemed to us, in the late 1960s, like gimmicks in a hokey flick from the 1950s. But the school made available to boys, no more than a generation removed from the pickle barrels and fetid tenements of the Lower East Side, the college preparatory curriculum taken by the scions of established wealth in New England boarding schools. We were too hip to confess what we knew. We were damned lucky.

The curriculum included six years of Latin, four of French/Spanish, and six years of math and English. Each course lasted a year. We translated on sight, we wrote English essays several times each week, we acted in plays, we performed in musicals, and we played on teams. We were active learners. Most of us had middle-class parents, at least one of whom attended college. They let us choose. Go to college, or we will kill you. Uh, ok . . . I’ll go!

I grew up nominally Jewish in a Catholic neighborhood. I alternated playing stickball and getting beaten up by my Catholic friends, with playing basketball with my black friends, who also beat me up, in the schoolyard across Sterling Street. I did not take the beatings personally. That had more to do with what “Jew” symbolized. I learned early on that culture was both a fist and an open hand. My escape from the cultural and ethnic bloodletting in Brooklyn in the 1970s had nothing to do with virtue. It depended on my parents’ capital. That capital carried me to Harvard.

Well before that, it acquainted me with New York’s major museums, where I wandered every weekend. Guided by librarians who mentored me, I discovered the cavernous reading room in the New York public library and the used bookstores of 47th and 48th Streets, the Village, and the Flat Iron district. Friends introduced me to classic movies at the Elgin and St. Mark’s cinemas. Other friends dragged me to the Filmore East dozens of times between ’68 and ’71.

I entered Harvard as a skilled reader who knew language well. I had familiarity with canons of literature and film. I could cross-reference political events, history, and the arts. I lived diversity, was pummeled by pluralism. For the most part, I appreciated learning; I knew how much it could depend on privilege. None of my black friends from the schoolyard jumped from public high schools to college. A few of my Catholic friends did; few of those who did so, attended public schools.

I was prepared for a liberal education, whatever that was. Before college I believed that it would disclose important meanings and bring my studies into rounded coherence. Was I ever wrong.

The course on reading literature invoked the New Criticism, the close reading of texts, in the least context possible. The course on culture of the 1930s invoked the opposite, sociological criticism. I studied with art critic Michael Fried, just as he was rejecting
flatness (non-representational aesthetics) for historical realism (and representational aesthetics). I listened to Northrop Frye on literature and Owen Gingerich on astronomy. I learned about the power of paradigms to map meanings on an indifferent world.

I was expecting immanent coherence tied to reason. Like many other Reformed Jewish boys, I wanted more explanation than the mystifying Word in Hebrew school. I did not find it in college. I found a “heap of broken images,” fascinating splinters but not reflective of any whole. When I read The Education of Henry Adams, I found images, symbols, and temperament that, despite the rabid ethnocentrism, crystallized what I sensed.

In graduate school, I was demoralized by literary theory. It dehydrated raw literature into text jerky. We pulled apart dusty strings of signifiers that wrapped tightly around other desiccated tails. A text was a site of self-strangulation, pre-ordained by Power. I searched for something “more.” A few unfashionable professors steered me to Thomas Jefferson. I guess that they thought, “You want connections? Here . . . “

I apprenticed myself to Thomas Jefferson. Fortunately, he had no say in the matter. I read all the classical works that he read as a young man, and all the works that he recommended to the young men who studied with him.

Jefferson believed in reason and in its immanence. But he knew reason could not explain all the wonders in the world like sea shells in the Andes or displacements in the Blue Ridge. By itself, it could not bring happiness to either the heart or the state. It lifted him out of provincial life. It shaped his vision of republicanism and his sense of its fragility. Ultimately, it could not transfigure his life. It bowed to his regionalism. It was neutered by the slavocracy that he criticized abstractly.

I write this chapter sure of but not at ease with several beliefs. My liberal education was “over the top.” The general conclusion holds, though. A college-level liberal education is an interpretative act. It is not meaningful to students who, no matter why, lack ability to read complicated texts and contextualize them in several intellectual frames. A liberal education can begin as a search for coherence, but it must get over that. While a liberal education can remove blinders, it often is blind to the deepest flaws in culture.

AUDACITY

If you have anything positive to say about liberal education today, many people assume that you must be arguing out of self-interest only. It has been demolished by Marxists, denounced by ethnic/women’s studies, and dismissed by specialists and careerists. Today, we imagine “disruptive innovation” detonating it to bits and pieces. Not with a whimper but a bang.

But I begin this account with a whimper, not a bang, a kerfuffle, not a disruption.
In 2012, San Jose State leagued with Udacity. Together, they would disrupt liberal education. They augured the future. Instead, they plopped a kerfuffle. Students in online courses that the partners co-designed as a trial did not perform as well as students in regular courses.

The press pounced. The media ignored that the trial was designed poorly. The trial did not even involve MOOCs. Facts did not get in the way of a good story, however. Silicon Valley, where Moore’s law ratcheted up the pace of change in the density of information, lost a round to the stodgy classroom. The hare lost to the tortoise—a reassuring fable.

Just months before, though, the media claimed that the pact between San Jose State and Udacity signaled the beginning of the end for liberal education. Pundits and ex-presidents of universities generally agreed. Today, MOOCs and their ilk might miss the mark. Tomorrow, scarcity of resources will compel educators to embrace technology as an efficient and effective solution to increasing demand for advanced education. If educators failed to adapt, they would sentence their country to the doom that A Nation at Risk and Spellings’ Commission on the Future of Higher Education Report foresaw.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Education always has played a lead role in the American pageant. For the Puritans, dedication to the book would make them a “city on a hill.” For Jefferson and Adams, the real revolution was the change in the minds of the people before 1775. They believed that the revolution would only be complete when yeomen achieved enough liberal learning to understand the value of freedom and the means to sustain it. For Frederick Douglass, education was the Underground Railroad. For Ralph Ellison, it was a way to assert common humanity beyond everyday inhumanity.

Now, higher education was in the hot seat. Critics were skeptical that it could get the job done. That job entailed two monumental tasks.

The first task was to achieve universal higher education. According to the Truman Report as far back as 1947, it was in reach. Universal higher education would transform the privileges of a few into the rights of the people. This was higher education’s calling in a modern democracy.

The presumption, of course, was that higher education had the power to get this done. Certainly, the project was deterred by fears within the sector that democratization would signal declension. A similar fear haunted crusades to universalize the comprehensive high school before WWI.

Unless one channeled Thomas Dewey, implementing pluralistic, equitable education was difficult for teachers. To many leaders in the field, introducing the “masses” to liberal
education was not only quixotic but contrary to modern needs for compliant workers who needed job training. Disseminating liberal education widely in a capitalist society that insisted on differentiation and that attributed it to nature, not nurture, doubled down on the difficulty. The idol of the era, Herbert Spencer, argued that advanced instruction was for the intellectually fittest.

Similar forces beyond the control of universities affected the fate of liberal education. State comprehensive universities derive much of their power to effect change from government and the people. They do not enjoy constitutional exemptions to statutes about students’ qualifications; they have nominal say about their preparation. They do not have endowments that make them independent of public funding.

The opportunity and assistance that comprehensive schools extend can never compensate wholly for the academic capital that social stratification frustrates. They do not formulate the policies that spend more on prisoners than students. They do not design the higher education systems that consign the poor without much academic capital to the lower tiers and that weigh down their rates of graduation. They do not decide to spend more on state subsidy and grants for the wealthiest students at the most prestigious public universities than on the poorest students at public community colleges, where liberal education lapses into job training.

The second task was to restore America’s economic exceptionalism. Only widespread technical higher education could produce the industrial innovations to secure dominance in the most financially rewarding fields of the global economy. In effect, America had to dust off the playbook of jingoist speeches and set theory that was popular after Sputnik. Much could be recycled for the post-industrial war to dominate the global economy.

After Sputnik, however, the government infused billions of dollars into the build-out of the sciences and universities and into student grants to increase opportunity. This new crusade for innovation was not bankrolled by government. And, in practice, it proved to be more exclusively focused on preparation in technical and financial expertise—on applied fields in engineering, health sciences, and financial services.

To accept the task was to make a Faustian bargain. Accepting the sovereignty of the market over the domain of learning, higher education could gain health and welfare for the people. This bargain, though, surrendered the people’s sovereignty to the market.

RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW

Of course, not all criticism is hypocrisy. Some is spot on, and some is near enough. Tuition-free higher education no longer can ride American industrial hegemony, as it did from World War II through the early 1970s. The GI Bill, the Defense Act of 1957, the Education
Acts of 1958 and 1965, the postsecondary subsidies built into the Civil Rights laws after 1965, and the Pell grant program are diminishing legacies.

According to what standard does a higher education cost too much? Who’s to blame, and does blame matter? Tuition at public comprehensive has spiked since 2006. But when we account for state abandonment, tuition has risen at the rate of the CPI. This increase has been amplified by the decrease in household income. Still, as a public trust, public higher education has responsibility to be responsive to such trends.

According to what measure does higher education takes too much time? Tied to actual campuses, it bottlenecks too easily. Anchored in post-adolescence, it expects too much to be learned too early. Still, the greatest retardant to time to degree is the paucity of academic capital “purchased” by relative poverty before college.

Nonetheless, there is a wide margin for improvement. All one needs to do to confirm this is to review the data at NCES, the Delta Project, the Education Trust, etc. on retention and graduation rates. Schools with similar ethnic and socioeconomic profiles report vastly different rates. Also, we have to ask seriously whether all the jobs that that we are preparing student for actually need the breadth and length of study that a four-year liberal education presumes.

These liabilities are open wounds in the jungle of commerce. Entrepreneurs pounce with killer apps—Christensen’s “disruptive innovations.” Campuses with these vulnerabilities but without a clear niche or brand will face existential decisions, according to San Jose State President Mo Qayoumi. Do their working conditions—the size of their classrooms, the rules and habits of their workforces, etc.—permit self-remedy? If not, can technology disrupt standard practice and provide a less expensive and less time-consuming approach? Can they save money on infrastructure and training by contracting with outsiders? Is it time for the university to reconsider its commitment to a broad array of disciplines and a one-size-suits-all liberal education?

TRIAD

These questions force reflection on the key elements of the postsecondary curriculum, the liberal education triad. So, we will detour briefly to explain it.

This triad has accreted over time. We assume that that it has been with us forever. It consists of a core that traces back to the quadrivium and trivium. In the distant past, the practice of rhetoric and argumentative logic in the trivium called upon the natural harmonies in the quadrivium to order society. The educated person placed civic duty above private gain by governing according to such order. Over centuries, “the long, withdrawing roar” of faith in order sounded the disintegration of the quadrivium into adjacent perspectives.
Today, *general education* is the fractured remnant. Its guardians waver between crude efforts to elevate their perspective and genuine attempts to order knowledge in ways that can improve civil practice.

Tragically, the trivium has been consigned to basic skills in general education. Diced and then compressed like lunch meat into composition, communication, and critical thinking, the basic skills no longer build on each other. They rarely are linked to anything explored elsewhere in general education. Like college math, they are to be endured, mainly as tests of faith in vaguely promised utility. When dispatched, most students think, “Thank God, I do not have to do that again.”

The major mediates between academic disciplines and current occupations. It is an invention of the German advanced university in the nineteenth century; Jefferson built prototypes into the University of Virginia. Johns Hopkins, Cornell, and Harvard made a centerpiece of the major in the late nineteenth century, as did the Morrill Land Grand universities. At Ivy League college and imitators, the arts, humanities, and social sciences adapted specialization. Increasingly they turned inwards, researching their own structure and history. They severed ties with rhetoric and civic duty.

Electives, including minors and certificates, capture students’ ancillary interest. At Harvard, Charles Elliot was their champion. He argued that general education was the province of the high schools. Hutchins at Chicago agreed. But he despaired about their efficacy. As a result, he suggested that university study actually begin after two years of general study that completed what high school began.

**UNBUNDLING**

Cost, demand, and identity force many institutions to ask which parts of liberal education are expendable. Of course, odds are that the allocation of part-time faculty and the number of part-time faculty leading sections of general education indicate the answers.

UC Berkeley and edX speculated that bottlenecks, especially in non-major courses, would drive some campuses to adopt small to mid-sized online versions. Burk Smith has been on the same page at Straighterline.com. He wagered that universities will face student demand and budget scarcity by contracting with online providers. Unlike the small school, UC Berkeley and edX can leverage the scale of a national market to reduce per capita cost. The vanishing public commons coupled with the profusion of professional specializations outside the university suggest that general education is likely to be contracted out before the major at regional, non-residential campuses.

Anya Kamenetz argues that such unbundling does not go far enough; Burk Smith agrees, as does Clayton Christensen. Liberal education, they imply, is a fiction. General education is supposed to provide synthetic breadth. But local general education programs are swollen
with surveys that actually are porticos to majors and with topical courses that indulge faculty expertise.

The LEAP project, echoing previous research, laments that courses in general education usually launch directly into “content.” Rarely, do they explore the how and why of methods, definitions, and changes in a family of disciplines. Even majors can be challenged. Do they map onto careers or fields of discovery? Does the major as whole develop awareness of methods? Is the specialization justified; are the sub-specializations sensible?

How much longer can universities sustain the illusion that liberal education serves the people, these critics ask. Is its triadic organization as inviolable as the trinity? Are 120 credits necessary? According to Kamenetz, young consumers and crafty employers soon will understand that knowledge marts on the web allow a person to assemble an impressive portfolio of content at a fraction of the cost of traditional colleges. The BA will go the way of the woolly mammoth.

TRADITION, TRADITION!

This critique of liberal education is sharp, but it is not new. Thirty years ago, the most devastating critiques of liberal education came from the Right; they disproved Lionel Trilling’s claim in The Liberal Imagination that conservatives no longer had game. In The Closing of the American Mind Alan Bloom argued that the narcissism and materialism of American culture were linked inextricably with a contempt for the past, especially the Western tradition. Without enduring traditions that memorialized ideals and virtues, society became unmoored.

Today’s unbundlers are a mix of populists, utilitarians, and skeptics. In particular, they attack general education, within liberal education, as a botched effort to postulate a tradition or core. They follow in the footsteps of Francis Bacon. He attacked the scholastics for confusing idols of their own speculation with knowledge. Knowledge had to be inferred from disciplined observation. Dewey follows this path. He insisted that learning occurred only when the mind wrestled with problems directly. When Ishmael in Moby Dick declares that whaling was his Harvard and his Yale, he dramatizes the view.

The unbundling crowd also recalls Ben Franklin. They, too, want advanced education to focus on “everything that is useful.” But the kinship with Franklin is deeper. His Autobiography portrays his intellectual life as a series of “just in time” pursuits of specific skills and ideas to solve problems as they arose. Unlike young aristocrats, he did not enjoy an extended moratorium for learning. Rather he learned throughout life. He applied the habits of observation and inference to experience, constantly improving upon received wisdom.
The unbundlers, however, are significantly crasser. Franklin’s projects all had civic benefits. And he gave away the inventions. Also, he was interested in the empirical approach to adapting products so that they functioned more efficiently; he was not interested in training people to mass-produce just anything. For the unbundlers, learning is an adaptive response to competitive economic reproduction, not invention; Learning gets it economy from “just in time” utility that is narrowed to the job at hand. Such an education barely generalizes from training to methods; certainly, it has no use for greenswards and gothic halls.

Unbundling treats liberal education as a heap of possible certificates. General education, for example, breaks apart into basic skills, sciences, and etc. The major is reconceived as a vocational track focused on skills that are needed immediately for a job. In an era of churn, workers must repeat the process. The logic of the market supports this approach. Over 60% of degrees are in fields outside the arts and sciences; the highest salaries after college are in these technical fields, too.

The smaller scope of study manages cost. But there are hidden costs to such cost savings. When higher education becomes more like training, learning becomes more like exchanging one pair of traces for another. Without knowledge of culture, socioeconomics, science, and nature resources, the student cannot understand the context and consequences of what he does. When we remove “liberal” from education, we handicap the capacity for autonomy. Autonomy makes plans by assimilating diverse information.

STOP AND THINK

The battle between advocates of liberal education and the populist unbundlers is a fight over who has the authority to interrupt whom? Liberal education interrupts by postponing career and citizenship until an institution certifies command of basic knowledge and behavior. Unbundling interrupts liberal education by casting it as a clever but inept cultural oligarchy. Honesty, they claim, requires that we expose it as a set of commodities.

I believe that liberal education has lost its way because it, in fact, does not interrupt. It has ceded much territory to training in specializations. The anti-establishment disciplines within it exact conformity to ideology that is as preemptive of a student’s development as vocationalism.

Further, because we have relegated basic skills to a forced march in the freshmen year, we no longer know how to elevate disciplinary conclusions into public language and logic. We have improved transfer of credit between institutions. However, we have quashed the transfer of perspectives within institutions.

Liberal education is worth salvaging, only if students can learn how to make informed choices while acknowledging ambiguity, frailty, and error. Liberal education is more a
practice than a particular form of curriculum. It has less to do with distribution requirements than thoughtful interrogation. Indeed, Arum and Roska validate this view in *Academically Adrift*.

Liberal education interrupts the connection between impulse and action. This requires commitment by the learner to reconstruct the intellectual habits that fire impulses. And it requires great agility in the teachers. Skilled teachers combine insight into the learner’s psychology with mastery not just of the subject matter but of the sequence and depth with which it can be taught. Teachers ideally work together to develop students’ dexterity with methods, awareness of accomplishments in the field, and eye for consequences. Above all, the teachers aim for autonomy. Has learning been staged such that the learners gain confidence and automaticity? Do they learn how to learn so that what they have learned does not become a one-size-fits-all algorithm?

Such development takes time. It is complicated by the mass of students that must learn. It is possible that computer simulations could replace some of the reinforcements. But the range, pace, and sensitiveness that teaching-for-learning requires overwhelms programming, so far. Such teaching for learning raises questions about the stickiness of just in time instruction, as well.

Reuben Brouwer got to the heart of the matter fifty years ago in an essay, “Teaching Reading in Slow Motion.” Normally, words mastered us. They commanded or insinuated behavior; sometimes they just baffled. Reading closely was a way of fighting back. It required time, though, and other people. Brouwer thought it was practiced best on literature that supported different readings but that resisted a definitive version. He recommended that students be asked to read the work out loud. Reading aloud restored the rhetorical and dramatic dimensions that our information-obsessed culture suppressed. Voice sounded meanings that the eye could not infer.

The teacher can begin the dialectic. What do these words mean? How do they interact? Why convey sense with those sounds?

After discussions, students must commit thoughts to paper. Essays should query how their readings changed over time—and why. How does meaning change with familiarity and with bits of context? Are those changes in the text or in you? Progressively, the teacher provides the students more freedom with interpreting, until they are left on their own as individuals and groups. The teacher critiques all essays thoroughly. They, too, receive close reading.

This skill at close reading, especially if reading is understood as decoding, is essential to many disciplines and jobs. The skill opens the door to communities of practice. It requires mastery of technical terms and techniques of analysis. It also builds on historical understanding of how usage has changed over time; and it develops sensitiveness to
nuances because of context and juxtaposition. James Madison wrote extensively about this in “Federalist 57.” He insisted that the skill was at the center of law; and he implied that the practice of determining meaning was actually a process of negotiating among readers and texts. This process was essential to the balancing of power in government. Factionalism ensued when the process broke down.

Judge Anthony Scalia, as an example, illustrates how essential reading closely is in a republic. Consider his theory of “originalism,” as illustrated in Heller vs. D.C. Unlike the New Critics, he is confident that a strong reader can establish the literal meaning of an artifact. That, surely, is open to question. But the critical role of exploring possible meanings word by word is not.

Scalia’s originalism results, in part, from professional hubris. The world conforms to one’s ideas about how it should function. In How Doctors Think Jerome Groopman insists that the skill that is least developed in most doctors is the ability to think outside the box, Specialization teaches doctors to follow decision trees in reaching diagnoses. They operate as simple conditional algorithms. If x is true, then explore x1-3. If x2 is true, then explore x2y1-4, etc. The financial pressure to make decisions quickly, relying on big data, leads to the treatment of individual cases as if they were treatable by averaged solutions.

How do we educate doctors so that they can see the paradoxical detail and ask the patients open-ended questions? With such interpretative skills, they can test diagnoses for completeness. Do doctors, first as undergraduates and later as clinicians, learn the value of taking time to think?

Thomas Kuhn understood that decoding in the sciences was complicated by aesthetic preferences. Observation and inference occurred in larger frames of hypotheses and paradigms. Experiments and even confirmed hypotheses were tested by new facts and new ideas. They pushed old frames to the point of paradox. Of course, there were no “algorithmic decision procedures” for weeding through the new approaches to arrive at the most likely explanation. There were agreed upon principles of accuracy, coherence, reach, consistency, and simplicity. But often competing approaches, given the current array of facts, claimed supporters. Idiosyncratic experiences, not science itself, drove these interpretations. Do we have the time and skill to see these prejudices in ourselves, as well as in others?

READING, WRITING, AND ARITHMETIC

How deeply and how far liberal education can take us in developing these abilities depends on several conditions. First, do the students come with the syntax, vocabulary, and awareness of genres to “read” and in how many fields? Second, do the faculty see themselves as guides to learning or sources of answers? Third, is the program designed for
stopping and thinking, for consciously reconstructing old habits and for pushing toward automaticity that self-corrects?

It is very difficult to generalize about student preparation across all public comprehensive institutions. Nonetheless, I hazard these estimates. Remember, motivating these estimates is the hesitant stumbling that I encountered when students read aloud. There are the socioeconomic realities. These colleges teach more students from low-income families than attend research universities and private universities. Often, neither parent is college-educated; less frequently neither parent finished high school. According to PIAAC, these characteristics correlate with low reading ability, even for those who go to college. Indeed, the best readers in American high schools are, on average, below the average skill levels in other developed countries.

Making sense of the data is complicated by different perspectives. Faculty will tell you that the quality of students is worsening. That is, of course, what faculty always say. The view is contradicted by increasing high school and college GPAs. In turn, these trends are dismissed as inflationary. Remediation rates remain high, though in California the proportion needing help has decreased to one-third from nearly 50% over two decades ago. On the other hand, in both California and the nation, SAT score have been flat for nearly thirty years, with a slight decline in reading scores.

For three decades, NAEP scores have been inching up in significant ethnic and socioeconomic categories. And as California has increased its graduation rate, the proportion of students who qualify for UC and CSU by completing a college preparatory curriculum has increased, too.

Overall, the tide is rising. But the uncomfortable fact is that proficiency is still low. Rates on the NAEP suggest this. As remediation continue to confirm, upwards of 30% of the students who enter public comprehensives do not have the literacy and numeracy basic skills to engage in meaningful interpretative acts. Unfortunately, this does not represent a meritocracy propelling itself to the top. Rather, it reveals a socioeconomic undertow dragging many under. Others are lifted by the buoyancy of privilege.

Really, there are three choices, if we presume a liberal education has value. Raise the admission bar and force the issue of preparation back onto the high schools. Route more students through the community colleges. Compel these schools to squeeze out vocational and adult programming in order to become more college-preparatory.

I prefer a third way. Institutionalize but improve what already exists. Make the first year of college for under-prepared students a totally non-baccalaureate year, with appropriate programming to build skills, resiliency, and academic capital. Frame the effort not as remedial, but as a “leap” year. Then, let the students enter university-level work, if they demonstrate preparation. At the same time, to reduce overall credits, eliminate elective
credits outside of the major, as well as inside the major as a necessity for graduation. Students can decide to take electives, but at full cost of the state subsidy plus tuition.

This approach does not rely on miraculous changes in other systems. Yes, it takes more time and money than the latest remedy. This remedy attaches a remedial module to existing courses, so that everyone advances together. But the leap year would permit what is rarely recognized: the careful development of reading skills. Also, it unbundles electives. It fundamentally changes the shape of liberal education. And it calls for a social investment of moderate proportion to compensate for the effects of stratification.

THE COMMONS UNBUNDLED

University-level work in liberal education begins with general education. However, it is difficult to sustain general educations programs. Because they are transitional between high school and the college major, they are the front line between clashing expectations. Rarely do departments embrace them. They leave much of the instruction to part-time faculty. Tenure-track faculty are rewarded mainly for narrow expertise. They cultivate acolytes who soon will swell the army of perpetually under-employed Ph.D. students. A few faculty rise to the developmental challenges of marginal, transitional students; every campus has a teaching and learning center. Some have participated in LEAP, the Freshmen Experience, and/or the Center for Academic Transformation. They are not the rule.

Public systems complicate the effort to synchronize readiness to learn with appropriateness and sequence. Imagine the ideal general education in a university as a commons. It is one-third the size of the departments around the perimeter. Everyone signed a covenant for behavior. People are to behave selflessly. They are to show interest in one another’s work. They are to present themselves as representatives of extended families.

But then law requires you to lease half the space, near the entry, to the community colleges. They agree to the covenant but retain the right to judge on its execution. Then the state and federal authorities claim authority over 10% of the land. They build exhibits on their workings (courses in government and the Constitution).

Finally, you learn, several clever faculty have smuggled into the charter for the commons a special clause. Departments can claim the slip of commons before them as their own, provided transients can double-count their stay in the major and general education. In the end, the commons that is truly commons is quite small.

In effect, a university has little space—or time—in its curriculum for students to gain much benefit from general education. That benefit, I think, is compromised further by the urge to make the program comprehensive and balanced.
We no longer believe that there is a canon of beliefs, artifacts, and practices that unify general education. Nonetheless, it is difficult to justify random explorations of “a tramp and vagrant world, adrift in space, with neither elephant nor tortoise to plant the sole of its foot upon,” as William James wrote in “On Pragmatism.” So, we concoct a design, a symmetrical distribution of bounded subjects that serves as an intellectual map of a “diffused and distributed” multi-verse. Through general education, the CSU claims, we “impart” this design, converting the student into a “truly educated person.” We want from college the faith in design that is properly the pursuit of religion.

Eat these books, and ye shall be saved. The pulpit becomes the lectern as the Word becomes words and the Book books. The congregants are the people. It is a poignant vision but at odds with the learning that, as I implied earlier, general education instructors should encourage.

The CSU’s distribution requirements are much like those at the core of LEAP; they are central to the visions of Boyer and the Carnegie Commission. In one form or another, they trace back to booting out the classics and recasting the quadrivium into the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. They also are an attempt to reign in the elective chaos unleashed by Eliot at Harvard at the beginning of twentieth century.

But there are several problems. Rarely do departments think about the category. They contribute courses that are surveys or methodological introductions of a discipline. Each broad category is attenuated further by the disparate class sections that faculty devise to represent the courses. Exceptions to this practice are more common at the residential non-profit colleges. Students experience the curriculum in cohorts. Columbia and Chicago paved the way with thematic versions years ago. Western Civilization became a staple after the cataclysmic 1930s-1940s.

Most distribution schemes like the CSU’s turn on a paradox. On the one hand, they tolerate a bedlam of classes to fulfill courses in categories. On the other hand, the clarity and partitions of categories actually constrain learning. For example, it is common to separate composition from communication, although in practice the two overlap. In turn, their focus on language as symbolic interaction and rhetoric is separated from logic in critical thinking. Implicitly these skill must be churned together and reused in the analysis, research, and reporting that the “content” areas require.

The scheme disambiguates humanities, social sciences, and sciences from each other. Courses for freshmen and sophomores are specific to disciplines; interdisciplinary courses are presumed to be more difficult intellectually. They are rare; and they are designated for juniors and seniors. Four boundaries mark these categories, according to the descriptions. Categories can be primarily subjective or objective in point of view (personal judgment vs.
expert consensus). They can be mainly synchronic or diachronic in the chain of correlation/causation (systemic, historical):

- Humanities (subjective, diachronic)
- Social sciences (objective, diachronic)
- Natural sciences (objective, synchronic).

Of course, each category has exceptions. But the message that the university imparts through the design of general education is that order prevails. Success in the program follows as a syllogism. For example,

- adepts understand humanities as subjective in method and content, diachronic in explanation.
- So does the good student.
- The good student is becoming an adept.

And here is why so many students fail to become adept. These tendencies are not inferred. They do not develop out of maturing interaction with others who are struggling to understand, as well. The students are not nudged patiently by a mentor. A mentor can help them to understand how they understand. Rather, the design is implied in lectures and course materials. Excepting lab courses in the sciences, the primary modes for learning are listening to lecture and writing echoes on exams and essays. Not much has changed since the recitations that were lauded in the Yale Report in 1828.

General education in the university would serve liberal education more effectively were it less focused on imparting coverage unified by design. High school is charged with coverage. And orderliness can serve as training wheels.

If the liberal education in the university concentrates more on “reading,” doing, and decoding actively, students would secrete the mental stickiness to which information adheres. This approach entails rethinking the virtue of separating the basic skills. How much time do we waste, how much confusion do we sow, by pre-empting how we normally think and communicate with detours into academic specializations?

This approach legitimates taking the excess air out of general education. Each student should experience at least three strands of activities that develop interpretative communities. Guided by a faculty mentor, groups of students speak, write, and think critically as they wrestle with broad, representative problems. Teachers choose broad problems carefully. The problems reward but exceed the perspectives of individual disciplines. In latter stages, students experience ambiguity and incompletion; they learn how to formulate and act on probability.
REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

A reformed liberal education will not right the wrong of hyper-capitalism and the new globalism. It will not single-handedly repair the inequities in our democracy. Narrowing the scope of general education in particular, we can valorize the habit of stopping---slowing down—to think. However, we must acknowledge that social inequities have distorted primary and secondary education. Compensating for this distortion will require a “leap year” of basic skills, filling academic gaps, and developing resiliency for at least a third of the students who enter public comprehensive universities. In turn, we can make up for some of this change by heeding the unbundlers. Do not require electives for graduation; tighten the organization of basic skills.

I see the short-term gains in time and money if we dismantle liberal education. The long play is hard to understand. Society as a whole has abandoned a deliberative commons for faux dialogues between known antagonists. Dialectic has given way to staged antagonism. At the same time, a narrow careerism obsessed with wealth has emerged from the marriage of technocracy with invidiousness.

Proponents of liberal education have not made compelling public arguments about how liberal education should engage with pecuniary culture. Culture today is saturated with commercial cues that manufacture both wants and goods. Liberal education itself is peddled as a certificate that increases the likelihood of sizeable advantages in salaries and employability. We feel inadequate because we do not have a rival riveting account. But if we ask, whenever it is appropriate, what are the consequences for the next generation if we conclude X, we might forge that rival account.

We would not be the first to think this way. Inhabitants of republics always have been concerned with the fragility of the state due to factions, especially economic concentration and educational disarray. Polybius, Harrington, Hume, Rawls, and recently Piketty have been concerned with this theme.

On the campus, the loudest advocates of liberal education speak smugly about “business.” Because transactions like paying tuition occur at a distance from where they teach, they believe that they are above crude exchange. Therefore, everything that they teach has a disruptive purity about it. This is delusional. Ultimately, “the truly educated” person must account for his own limitations. He frees himself and others by acknowledging that there is no ultimate authority in this world. There is only the interminable disruption of critical reading in slow motion.