Does Liberal Education Have a Future?

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I tend to look at things that are happening in universities from the perspective of how they affect our students. I figure that in the long run, impact on students translates into impact on American society. Our students are eventually going to take over responsibility for all the things that the rest of us are doing now. So when a student said to me last year that he loved Harvard but had no sense of how his education hung together and what Harvard expected him to get out of it, it seemed to me we were failing him, in spite of the fact that he really did think he was learning a lot in his courses. He wanted a whole that was bigger than the sum of its parts. And I wasn't confident that it even made sense to use a university as the subject of a verb such as "expected."

Can a university any more have a meaningful, shared sense of purpose? What do we want our students to take away for the long run?

It's essential to keep reminding ourselves that we're educating, or not educating, the future leaders of American society. When I went into the polls last fall to vote for governor of the Commonwealth, I had a choice between four candidates. Three of them had graduated from Harvard College during the years I was on the faculty and in the administration. Our elected governor was one of them. I don't think the Harvard faculty can escape some of the responsibility for whatever he does, if it stems from some misunderstanding of how American government and society works, or should work. And Benazir Bhutto was also a Harvard grad. Perhaps our success or failure to inspire idealism in our students has global consequences.

So I am asking simple questions: What lessons are our students going to take away from our classrooms? What do they learn from the ways we do or do not help them grow into adulthood?

We in research universities offer wonderful opportunities. Many professors are good teachers. Students well equipped to be independent can get a very good education. But we offer little guidance or structure to suggest what is important, little suggestion that anything is more important than anything else. As a result, a college education resembles a trip to a very fine mall. If you are an informed shopper and have somehow developed a sense of taste, you can come out very well equipped for life. But getting something from every shop in the mall doesn't leave you with a very good wardrobe. The distribution requirements that are common today do little more than to compel you to buy something from every shop.

I am persuaded that our aimlessness problems are not the result of evil faculty or evil presidents, or even left wing conspiracies. Everything that is wrong with liberal education in universities is an unintended consequence of our greatest successes. In two

words, *research extremism.* We have gotten so good at research, and our research creativity has done so much good for society, that research contributions have become the almost exclusive metric on which we compete with each other. Professors themselves are goods in a market economy and respond to its demands. They move where they can do the best research, since that is the thing that determines their value. As a result of research extremism, we have lost our sense of balance with other societal roles that universities should fulfill.

It's trite to say that American research universities are the envy of the world, but that doesn't make it untrue. I spoke about higher education on a visit to Shanghai in January. The Chinese know that for all their students' extraordinary talent and discipline, their university system is not producing the kind of creativity that has made this country flourish over the past half-century. The Chinese know that their educational system has to liberalize. Whatever we do, we should not move toward the Chinese model of vocational tracking and advancement by endless testing, just as the Chinese are figuring out that they have to move in the opposite direction in order to compete with us. The Chinese university has to become more what an American university is at its best: a place where young minds can explore the possible and can create their own futures.

Fundamentally, that is what I think a liberal education is—an education designed to liberate young people from the prejudices and presumptions of their past, and to come to grips with their own future and what they can do to leave the world a better place than they found it. A liberal education teaches students what freedom itself is, and is not—that freedom is not license, and that *individual* freedom is possible only within a *social* structure on which a community or a nation has agreed.

When I explained this in China, what I was talking about was exciting but rather incomprehensible to the students—one wanted to know how anyone could get a job with such an education. An older gentleman—perhaps an administrator, but I suspect a party functionary—took the questioning in a different direction. "Isn't that what caused the riots?" he asked. I was startled, and I am still unsure whether he meant the Tienamen protests in '89 or the bust at Harvard in twenty years earlier. Either way, I had to acknowledge that freedom has its risks.

Students in the great American universities have almost unimaginable freedom. Of course they have the freedom to choose their studies—not just their majors but their electives too, except at a few places. They have social freedom, about how they choose to live their personal lives. At the top tier universities, they even have economic freedom, at least by normal standards. And without a military draft or any other national obligation, they even have the freedom to choose whether or not to serve their country.

So there is not much risk of student riots today in response to worries about their own oppression or the world's social injustices or even our lousy food. Our risk comes from a different source. It's that our students won't learn where all that freedom comes from, and what it is for. It's that we have so reified the various bastard children of freedom—choice, flexibility, electives, options—that our students don't realize that these are means, not ends. Without some agreement on ends, they won't learn the more basic

lessons, that we all have a responsibility to the future that is more important than our personal ambitions.

In the absence of anything that helps students give shape to their lives and their ambitions, students are likely to be guided instead by the incentive and reward structures that the university and American society do put in front of them:

First, academic excellence, the pursuit of knowledge so much for its own sake that the achievement of academic distinction becomes amoral. Second, personal financial success, the easy assumption that what capitalism means is that the world will turn out fine if we all just do what is going to make us the most money. I am going to take up these two metrics of success, but first I'd like to take a step back.

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As the Pilgrim fathers said about Harvard in 1640, what universities are supposed to do is "to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity." That still seems to me a good formula. We are about learning, and not grades. Learning, and not dogmas. Learning, and not identity politics. Encouraging students to learn more, to read more books, to talk to more people, as the way to understand and solve problems is something we uniquely can do. It seems an obvious point, but there are evident counter-forces. That we can decide who will be the best leader of America by deciding whom we like best on TV. That we should not have to read books at variance with our cherished beliefs. That it is more important to be happy than wise. Universities—at their best—are the places where students learn to respect knowledge and reason as the way toward an enlightened future.

And yet in practice, there are downsides to our particular style of commitment to learning. The *advancement* of learning, the pursuit of new knowledge, has taken precedence over the *perpetuation* of learning, culture, and values. This didn't begin in the 1960s. At Harvard it started with President Charles William Eliot's inaugural in 1869, when he said of the various subjects of learning, "We would have them all, and at their best." It was accelerated by the huge increases in science funding after the Second World War.

This hypertrophy of the research agenda happened in pursuit of scientific and engineering advances. That pursuit has resulted in economic growth, extended lifetimes, and greater leisure for us all. University research is the engine of progress and it deserves more of this nation's support, not less. The future of the country depends on it.

But overstressing research tends to dehumanize the role of the faculty. The incentive and reward structure favors expertise, excellence in a particular kind of scholarly narrowness. It favors egoism over altruism. It favors the new over the old. The wisdom of the past is easily discarded if the payoff is bigger for ideas that have little virtue except novelty (if mere novelty is a virtue at all). Uniqueness, as a humanities editor said, is not the same as excellence.

Universities compete with each other to hire the smartest professors, not the wisest. Over the course of time, the pastoral role of professors has become diminished as the capacity to take on that role has disappeared from the qualifications professors are expected to have. When we hire professors, we no longer think much about whether they are the kind of people we would want our children to hang around with. Our proliferating student services staffs play that role, not the faculty.

The pursuit of research productivity is one of the two well-intentioned forces that have put the academic agenda out of balance. Our pursuit of another social good, nondiscrimination in its various forms, has also contributed to the imbalance. We have successfully gotten past the old boy networks that used to limit the advancement of Jews, gays, and women in the academy. But the way we have done that is to set research productivity as the principal, objective measure of merit, along with teaching quality. So when we consider faculty candidates, we avoid saying things like "I think we should hire her instead of him, because I don't think he would be a good influence." We carry too much baggage to feel comfortable talking that way, baggage from the days when such phrases were code words for social stereotypes.

So instead of running the risks that come with considering our sense of professors as people, we tend to go by the book and evaluate them objectively. Or say we do, anyway. Some odd consequences can result. We value the human qualities of athletic coaches as well as their won-loss records. But for faculty there is a lot of pressure, in our effort to climb the academic league tables, to go pretty much on the scholarly equivalent of the league tables alone. That's part of the reason students so often say that their athletic coaches were their best teachers—coaches understand personal development as part of their job in a way that professors are no longer expected to do.

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This single-minded advancement of scholarly achievement blinds us to other important values, such as probity and honor. Consider the situation of Harvard economist Andrei Shleifer. Shleifer is an academic superstar, a winner of the prize for the most brilliant economist under 40.

Shleifer headed a Harvard project that was supposed to help the new Russian state set up a free-market economy. While he was at it, he and members of his family made self-serving investments in Russia that violated any common-sense standard about conflicts of interest. The United States government brought charges against both him and Harvard.

The case dragged on for years because Shleifer refused to admit he had done anything wrong and because Harvard did not divide the case and let Shleifer fend for himself. In fact, the president pressured the dean of the faculty to make sure Shleifer did not get lured away to another university. So in the middle of the investigation, Harvard promoted Shleifer to a named chair. In the end, a federal civil court found that Shleifer had conspired to defraud the government. Harvard was fined $26.5M as a result.

Shleifer paid a $2M fine of his own. He is now back in the classroom, minus his named chair but otherwise unperturbed. A colleague observed to me that the incident may

have cost him the Nobel prize, which I actually took as good news about the standards of the Nobel Prize committee.

Harvard, by contrast, seems to have treated the $26.5 million dollar fine simply as a cost of doing business. It was a civil case, after all. You take enough government contracts, the message seems to be, and every now and then you will incur some unexpected costs. No problem—we wrote Uncle Sam a big check and everything is square now.

Shleifer's economist colleagues gathered around him supportively. One compared a meticulously researched article about the Shleifer case to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* as though the investigative journalism was hateful anti-Semitic fiction. (You can see why we hesitate to comment on the character of a professor.) Another said, "We think about him not as the guy who was involved in the … lawsuit—we think about him as the exciting, intellectually active colleague that we've always known." Now students watch what we do and say, and try to live up to the expectations we set for them. An undergraduate who studied under Shleifer said, "He is an excellent professor and does remarkable research and those to me are the two main criteria that you should be using in deciding whether or not he's going to be a valued professor. The other stuff, that is for other people to worry about."

So there we are. *Is the "other stuff" really for other people to worry about?* Is that what we want our students to take away from their college education, the compartmentalization of ethics and morality into a space separate from that of academic achievement?

It is this sort of thinking that makes me nostalgic for the good old days when we were less apologetic about discussing the difference between right and wrong. Of course I don't want to bring back the Puritan moralists. But consider this 25th reunion statement from a Harvard alumnus of the class of 1942: He appreciated Harvard, he said, because of "the frame of mind Harvard tried to instill in us, which made me more than a bit intolerant of humbug, when exposed to it, and somewhat troubled when handing it out." Seems to me a good minimal objective for us in moral education. And yet it is one on which there would today be no consensus in the academy, even as a value for faculty—or presidents: When a professor questioned President Summers in a faculty meeting about Harvard's role in the Russian scandal, the president disingenuously claimed to be too unfamiliar with it to have an opinion.

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The emphasis on change and radical new thinking, pushing back the frontiers of knowledge, has had a wonderful effect on the progress of the sciences and engineering. It has had a less happy effect on the humanities. In the sciences, radical new theories don't replace old ones wholesale. They explain deviations from the predictions of old theories—deviations exposed by new observations. Newton's laws remained true after Einstein discovered relativity. The two theories simply apply at different scales of observation. Even at its most radical, science is inherently incremental and cumulative.

But today's tenure-seeking humanist must cause a complete change the way we think about a field if she is going to be judged a high-impact player. We have lost the role of the humanists as the scholars who remind us what it means to be human.

How can we expect the future leaders of society, who are today in our classrooms, to avoid hubris in the future, if we haven't had them read Greek tragedies? The humanists are the best positioned to force students to think about the ethical and moral issues in their lives, not by teaching the ten commandments but through great works of literature in which human souls have been exposed and explored. But there is little reward in the academy for such scholarship when novelty is the highest value. That is why we have so many unread humanistic monographs, even when press runs today are as low as 200. That is why so few humanities professors today teach, or could teach, those wonderful, sweeping views of art and letters. They have been trained to respond to the realities of the marketplace for humanities professors.

And of course the segmentation of the faculty into silos of research specialization leaves little time for discussion of what our students should know to become wise, educated citizens. We are good at academic turf wars—at insisting that no student can be considered educated unless he or she has been forced to learn a little about our particular subject. Harvard's so-called core curriculum, now finally on its way to replacement, was actually a 1970s distribution requirement, with the distribution being less on subjects than on "approaches to knowledge"—that is, the approaches of various kinds of professors. It was a curriculum designed around the research expertise of the faculty rather than the educational needs of the students. But a college education is not about *us*, the faculty; it's about *them*, the students. We struggle with language to frame any big educational objective beyond "a little bit of everything."

Many conservatives claim that the disintegration of liberal education has happened because the political liberals are in control of universities. To be sure, there are more liberals than conservatives in leadership positions and in many academic departments. But legislating "intellectual diversity" isn't right. (And no, I also don't buy the liberals' argument that liberals are smarter than conservatives, so of course you get more liberals if you hire smart people rather than dumb people.)

I believe that the liberal bias of the academy started from the process by which faculty are incentivized, selected, and promoted. There was no intelligent design by evil leftist university deans and presidents. There was simply a systematic selection bias in all research universities in favor of those who most challenge existing principles. The bias stems from the science envy that has been forced on the non-sciences. This selection bias, operating in the presence of variation in the pool of contestants for academic positions, explains my observations. Conservatives lose out in the battle for survival because they tend to be knowledge conservators in an environment that favors change. The liberal population, having now taken control of the academic ecosystem, has become self-sustaining.

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Now at the same time as the professoriate has become more expert and more splintered, the student body has become more representative of American and even world society. That is one thing that universities have done right, if too slowly to satisfy some of our critics. We are better because we are drawing from a larger cross section of society—better not only because the talent pool is deeper, but because the perspectives with which our students arrive are more interesting. And yet the changes in the faculty and in the student body have been almost at right angles to each other.

We in research universities now teach the best students from the best schools in America, and also the best students from the worst schools in America. With the condition of American high schools, universities can't assume that as our selectivity has gone up, so has the intellectualism of our students. It is quite rare for a student from a household without books on the shelves to come to college with a fully developed sense of the life of the mind. We actually have to teach the importance of history, of aesthetics, of political philosophy, of moral reasoning more now than in the past, because more of our students now come from families where such things were not discussed over the dinner table. The students we are bringing to the universities tend not to have read novels and plays and poems that probe the troubling recesses of the human soul, the way students did when more of them came from top secondary schools.

We too often just complain that our students are unmotivated to learn what we are teaching. They just want to make money and play sports and have a good time, goes the faculty line. It is easy to blame the materialism of students on a general decline in American civil society, and there is probably something to that.

But shouldn't we have expected, when we started admitting lots of students who grew up with very little money, that more students would see earning money as an important goal of college? Shouldn't we have expected that we would have to motivate them to fall in love with the world of ideas? There is an increasing divide between the faculty and the students, with the faculty incentives increasingly based on narrow scholarly excellence, and students, talented and ambitious as they are, increasingly unready to enter the scholarly world at all without our explaining and motivating it to them.

And the changing student body has also created an increasing political divide between students and faculty at places like Harvard. Professors at top universities are teaching more and more students from the red states, while we ourselves seem only to be getting bluer.

In the absence of any motive force behind our undergraduate programs, students fill the vacuum with the motive for economic success and high grades. Students seek out easy courses and complain about their grades because we don't any more have a ready vocabulary about what makes a good education, if not one that gets you an honors degree and a good job. Our cyclical panics about grade inflation constitute another effort to control a symptom without dealing with the cause. Curing grade inflation would be like giving acne medicine to a cancer patient, on the rationale that acne is the disease we know how to treat.

As our costs have gone up and we have trouble explaining what a liberal education is really for, a separate, consumerist economy has developed in the academy, displacing the economy of ideas. Students want better parties and better pillows, and we provide them. We rank teaching by student satisfaction surveys, having lost sight of the fact that the things from which we learn the most are sometimes the things that make us unhappiest in the short run. We indulge students' narcissism in the name of wanting

them to be happy, as though happiness were an intelligent metric of the quality of undergraduate education.

The reification of student happiness is one of the oddest trends in the university. In fact, one of our largest courses at Harvard is about how to be happy. I find this very peculiar. Now hedonism I at least understand as a value in college. In fact, my generation created it. The pleasure principle makes sense in college because it acknowledges that life is miserable if you are in despair about yourself and your place in the world. Misery is a corollary of leading the examined life, so hedonism, whether we like it or not, is a natural byproduct of a good education. But happiness is something else. It's educationally pernicious to give students little yellow smiley buttons as freshmen and to judge the education you provide to be unsatisfactory unless students are cheerful as they leave every class for four years. Who learns anything by being happy all the time?

We have had some pretty sad examples of the confusion we create by responding to students' expressed demands and feelings rather than their maturational and educational needs. Giving them what they want rather than what they need. At Harvard we instituted a program of buying booze for dorm-room parties so students without personal resources would not be denied equal access to alcohol. Of course we were running anti-alcohol programs out of a separate budget. Closer to home here, what more can be said about the Duke faculty's response to the lacrosse case? What lesson were the professors teaching students by siding, quickly, publicly, and unequivocally, with the alleged victim in this case? That instinct is better than deliberation? That we should act on our intuitions rather than on observation and reason, even if human lives are destroyed in the process? That judicial processes should defer to political convenience and public relations? Shame on those professors, all devout critics of prejudice, I'm sure, who tripped over each other in their rush to prejudge those male students.

So the split in the academy, between the faculty and the students, looms large. The faculty are responding to the reward structure with which they have been presented. Students, except for those who are exceptionally well prepared to handle the freedoms they find in the university, or those bent on academic careers, find the institutional structures and requirements a game, largely lacking in meaning and taking them nowhere.

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We simply have to find a way to lift the level of discourse in the academy at every level beyond personal and material concerns on the one hand, and the pursuit of scholarly achievement on the other.

Pluralistic as they are, the great universities have an important role in restoring a sense of purpose in the larger society. But it is a hard task for universities because of the fragmentation of their faculties into research specialties. We hesitate to provoke arguments about common ideals when our differences are so much more apparent.

So the quest for educational purpose comes down to a question of whether there is anything at all on which most of us can agree. If not, the best we can do is an elective or distributional curriculum—the very fine shopping mall with which I opened.

I'd like to make a modest proposal: that human freedom itself be taken as something on which everyone in the university community can agree, as an enduring value we want our students to take away. Of course I am proposing that not simply as a convenient organizing principle, but also because it is so threatened and so important. I am suggesting we try to remember the lessons of the Harvard Red Book, *General Education in a Free Society,* Harvard's dignified and wise post-Second-World-War response to the horrible realization that civilization itself had almost been wiped off the face of the earth.

For two or three decades, the Harvard faculty actually achieved something extraordinary. Without a rigid great books requirement, and proceeding from a bunch of those now-discredited big lecture courses, professors actually talked to each other and then to their students about big issues, and taught as though the future of the world depended on it. As though they actually believed, as I believe today, that if civilization is going to survive, it will happen only because of the knowledge and wisdom and ideals that our current students take away from the education they receive during the four crucial years we have them under our wing. And that the American democracy, and the other products of the Western Enlightenment, can't be taken for granted. They will be preserved only if we transmit them.

It is a big challenge to know how to structure a curriculum with these motives in the background. Maybe some places have already succeeded. In my own institution it is hard even to have the faculty talk together about such questions. There simply is no incentive to have the conversation, and most of us were not brought up to think about these things.

The hardest thing is to get faculty to undertake the teaching of broad courses with themes that are of permanent importance to future citizens. Instead, our incentive structure is all about the intellectual preservation of our own academic disciplines. The only way to get past our self-defensiveness is for university leaders, from trustees on down, to talk regularly about our common goals and values, and to hold the faculty responsible for working to fulfill them. And if trustees don't realize this, then the alumni should make them understand. Especially in private universities, alumni serve as the public conscience of the university. Which means that in my opinion, governance reforms aimed at marginalizing alumni voices should be resisted.

It would be easier to get students to take courses about the nature of free societies than it will be to get the faculty to teach them. A course at Harvard on the American presidency is very popular, even though it satisfies no general education requirement. Students want to know how this country works. It's the faculty who have to be goaded into teaching them that.

And however we solve our curricular problems, there is a parallel agenda with respect to student life. We are not offering a true liberal education if we teach courses on the nature of liberty and then repeatedly indulge in students the myth that they are not

responsible for the consequences of their own behavior. Old fashioned as it sounds, students need to learn in college that actions have consequences in real life. We are not educating them if we teach them that every bad grade is due to circumstance out of their control. That every sexual encounter gone bad is entirely the fault of the *other* one of the two people who were tangoing. Or that adolescence is a mental health issue to be managed medically, a reassurance that prepares our students for lifetimes of excuse-making and psychopharmacological dependency.

We are never going back to the world of dress codes and parietal rules. But we do have to remember that college students are young, passing through a difficult developmental stage called adolescence, which is not a pathology to be treated by clinicians. It's a well-understood period of life about which we sometimes seem to have no sense educationally. The way to develop graduates whom we can trust to take responsibility for society is to begin by making them take responsibility for their own lives while they are in college. If we annoy some of our students by doing so, we will gain the respect of far more.

No simple prescription about how to fix things will work unless it addresses the root causes. And since the root cause is the nature of the faculty who have been appointed in deference to research extremism, that model has to change if we are going to make enduring progress on our complaints about the university.

Somehow we have to re-introduce, at the level of our trustees and presidents, the notion that faculty are responsible for the human development of human beings and the preservation of civilization as a whole. Merely rewarding "teaching" is not sufficient. One can be a great teacher of art history without being able to have an intelligent conversation with scientific colleagues about the meaning of undergraduate education as a whole. We have to figure out how to re-humanize the role of professor, without paying a price in the enormous contributions our universities, as knowledge production engines, make to society. It can't be done all at once; it will take a gradual and deliberate reform. But only by making a start on it now will universities move toward holding up their end of their social contract with the nation.

[Quotations concerning the Shleifer affair are from the *Harvard Crimson.]*