Preventing Suicide by Higher Education

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From the birth of the modern conservative movement, dissidents concerned with civic and liberal education have tried almost everything to reshape America’s universities: from refusing to donate to their alma maters (as William F. Buckley prescribed), to funding tenure-track positions, forming independent centers on campuses to host outside speakers, organizing external supplementary seminars to make up for what students do not get in the classroom, and creating new academic departments. Despite 70 years of increasingly sophisticated efforts, conservatives are now begging on many campuses merely to be heard.

America’s universities have been progressivism’s most important asset, its crown jewel. For over half a century, they have served as the left’s R&D headquarters and the intellectual origin or dissemination point for the political and moral transformation of the nation, especially through the sexual revolution and the identity-politics revolution. Universities have trained the new elites who have taken society’s helm and now set its tone through the other institutions thoroughly dominated by the left: the mainstream press, mass entertainment, Fortune 500s, and tech companies. Universities have also brought to rural and suburban America these moral revolutions, converting generations of young people to their cause. Universities are arguably the most important institution in modern democracy—no other institution has such power to determine the fate of democracy, for good or ill.

Universities were meant be the one fixed place in democratic society insulated from the ceaseless motion of democratic life, with its petty
passions, consumption, and moral and intellectual fashions. They were meant to serve as the guardian of the mind and its greatest fruits. In previous eras, segments of society (especially the clergy and the aristocracy) were devoted to protecting learning and a tradition of books. But democracy does not support such classes, and it was originally hoped that the universities would assume this role. Regrettably, they are no longer animated by their original purpose of serving republican self-government or the freedom of the mind. As such, they must be treated as political entities.

That the freedom of speech is under attack on many campuses should not be surprising, given that the freedom of the mind, of which speech is the expression, is rarely understood as their purpose any longer. Without that purpose, most American universities no longer serve the public good for which they were created and for which they continue to be publicly funded. Their transformation, which in turn has led to the transformation of the nation, has taken place with the unwitting assistance of American taxpayers—and amounts to defrauding the public. If citizens are compelled to pay for others to go to college, it should be to the benefit of the entire nation—forming good citizens and advancing useful sciences, rather than teaching the rising generation that the nation is irredeemably evil. Taxpayers have funded the research, bankrolled the student loans (including generous forgiveness programs), and allowed the universities and their enormous endowments to operate without paying taxes. These funding sources are the operational life blood of universities, but they can no longer be justified. In fact, it seems likely that the nation would be better off if the vast majority of America’s more than 3,000 colleges and universities closed down.

An executive order signed by President Trump on March 21, 2019, gives administrators in 12 executive-branch agencies that issue research grants broad discretion to withhold funding from universities that suppress “free inquiry” and “undermine learning.” This is a worthwhile half-step to chastening them. But given where things stand, bolder, more aggressive action is needed. If the universities are going to be rebuilt, only external force, rather than pleading or slight policy modifications, will work. Success in this could bring generational change.

THE PURPOSE AND THE PROBLEM

Modern democracies have a special need for universities in a way that other regimes do not. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Letter to M. D’Alembert
on the Theater concludes with a scene from Sparta where three generations—the frail, those in full bloom, and the young—sing together a song whose verses articulate the place of each generation in their ancestral order. Such a people does not need modern universities, as their existence is ordered by their traditions, laws, and gods. Our Enlightenment-informed republic, however, requires the production of citizens in accord with it. We cannot be a nation of war-like men guided by ancestral gods; we need citizens capable of commerce, modern science, rights-based self-rule, and political prudence. Perhaps most critically, our universities must actively correct certain vices stemming from the nature of our regime, seeking to forfend the mass production of souls modeled on mass tastes, suited mainly for intellectual and moral conformity, consumption, and industriousness alone.

The first traditional purpose of our colleges and universities is civic education, which aims to preserve the nation by creating citizens suited to it. Through civic education, citizens are prepared for political self-rule by developing rational habits of mind, the capacity for forming political judgments, and a moral character capable of self-restraint and toleration. Civic education also teaches reverence for something beyond the very strong forces silently guiding democracies, especially public opinion, with its overwhelming capacity to determine all tastes, objects of worship, and moral horizons. Civic education thus attempts to preserve images of human greatness against the sea of intellectual and moral conformity, while instilling at least a modicum of reverence and affection for the nation and the tradition upon which it is built—its history, its greatest individuals, and its contributions. Individuals are thus trained to become parts of a whole. Our natural-rights republic does not require mindless assent but can (and should) be defended rationally.

The second purpose of our universities is modern natural science. The origin of this goal is found in the works of René Descartes and Francis Bacon. Modern natural science, distinct from ancient science, is concerned with two different ends according to its inventors. The first is unlocking the inner secrets of material nature in order to increase human powers and thereby relieve man’s estate. The second is articulating a comprehensive opinion of the material world and thereby ridding man’s mind of reliance on natural and conventional prejudices.

The scientific enterprise requires large institutions, public respectability, and the employment of a multitude of minds that would
otherwise be badly used in what Descartes calls scholastic “disputations.” Moreover, because of the brevity of a single life, Descartes writes, “one man alone cannot perform all the experiments that can be useful.” Generations of scientists must accumulate and build up scientific knowledge in order to penetrate more deeply the laws of matter. And since no one man is sufficiently wealthy to take on this expensive enterprise, entire nations must be engaged.

The power of the new nations created on the basis of Cartesian and Baconian Enlightenment depends on the new power of science. Alexander Hamilton, second only to Benjamin Franklin in his understanding of this aspect of the modern project, discusses in the Federalist Papers the extent to which industrialization and commerce, based on science, will be America’s main comparative advantage against other nations, since conquest and empire, which contradict the natural-rights teaching, are not feasible sources of wealth and power for republics.

Science applied to industry is for Hamilton both defensive and offensive: It compels other traditional nations to compete on America’s terms — scientific and commercial — a battleground on which we have great advantages. It is defensive because the effectual truth of science and industry will weaken other nations’ attachments to traditional pieties, which can inflict harm on us. Moreover, since the genie of modern science is now out of the bottle, and other nations, some of them enemies, possess it and threaten to out-compete us, the United States has no choice but to succeed in this area.

But modern science is not and should not be the university’s highest goal. In important ways, modern science exists uneasily alongside both civic education and liberal education, the highest goals of the university. Liberal education is concerned primarily with philosophical self-knowledge, which consists in confronting our own contradictions and errors: the prejudices that come from our own times (like the authoritative opinions that order the lives and self-understanding of most), and the prejudices given to all by nature. This purpose includes the quiet questioning of the modern scientific account of material nature as the final, comprehensive view. In this sense, the university’s duty is to resist becoming merely utilitarian; that is, devoting itself wholly to serving the public’s needs or demands, and thereby becoming its flatterers.

Today, these three ends are either corrupted or on their way to corruption in the great majority of America’s universities. In their confusion
about or open rebellion against these ends, America's universities too often create students in the opposite vein: ideologues with technical skills, despisers of tradition without insight (not to mention wisdom), or scientists without perspective. These problems are hardly new and have been the centerpiece of the conservative critique of higher education for more than half a century. What is new, however, is the thoroughness of the corruption, the impossibility at this point of changing course through conventional means, and the extent of the pernicious effects of these institutions on the nation as a whole.

**DO OUR UNIVERSITIES UNDERMINE THE COMMON GOOD?**

Allan Bloom's remarkable 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, is still unmatched in its treatment of the problem of America's universities. According to Bloom, beginning in the 1940s but blossoming in the 1960s, many American academics superficially and gleefully appropriated the tenets of Friedrich Nietzsche and his followers (especially Freud and Weber) in adopting a thin relativism suitable for democracy. Moral and intellectual relativism, these academics argued, would lead to a tolerant and open social order called multiculturalism. But relativism had two effects. The first was the thinning out of all cultures and opinions to make them serve the genuine goals that guided these academics: moral permissiveness and a conflict-free existence. The second, unanticipated, though truer outgrowth of relativism—which yielded the opposite of its first goal—was the elevation of “commitment,” or unyielding moral attachment in the absence of an intelligible justification of its truth.

The contemporary manifestation of commitment is called “identity,” and it is expressed especially through race and sexuality. Identity, as it is broadly understood today, is an unfalsifiable, self-created opinion of oneself or one’s group that others must recognize, accommodate, and celebrate. Identity has become sacred, placed beyond questioning or criticism. But the sacredness of identity applies only to allegedly oppressed or marginalized groups. These are allowed to possess an identity, while the alleged oppressors must not only be denied an identity but must perpetually atone for the oppression stemming from it. Herbert Marcuse’s goal of getting universities to teach that “history was the development of oppression” has not only succeeded—it is now publicly financed.

These doctrines stand in stark contrast to natural rights, the foundational teaching of America. Natural rights mean that human beings
belong to a common humanity, not to an identity group. As such, all human beings have the same rights, which can be grasped rationally. Since all human beings possess rights, a political common good is possible, as is mutual understanding and rational persuasion. Deep commitments, to the contrary, imply real conflict.

A generation after Bloom’s writing, identity fanaticism, having first gained institutional support in the universities, and now in the Democratic Party, has turned to demanding conformity and punishing dissenters. The next logical outgrowth of identity politics is suppression of free speech, as speech is the expression of a free, questioning mind. An example of this fanaticism is captured in a letter written by Williams College students to faculty members who supported the adoption of the University of Chicago statement in defense of free speech on campuses. For these students, enforcing the freedom of speech is merely a reflection of “white fragility” and “discursive violence,” and is thus primarily supported by “white faculty,” the oppressor group. This letter reflects beliefs widely held by faculty and students across the nation’s universities. If universities once understood their purpose as seeking intellectual clarity, now rational questioning of identity theories is itself an act of violence.

In fact, raising the basic contradictions of dangerous and anti-republican theories in the spirit of honest intellectual inquiry has become impossible on most campuses — perhaps the only place in American society where such thinking could take place. How it is, for example, that deeply meaningful identity can emerge from an act of will remains unanswered. Nor can one ask why marginalization itself leads to a special knowledge of justice, rather than to distortion; and if marginalization grants access to the truth about justice, marginalization would then imply superiority in terms of human goods like moral purity and knowledge. Nor can one ask how meaningful identity can be present during the struggle against identity-denying oppression without identity being defined exclusively in terms of opposition and therefore lacking positive content. Finally, as these doctrines are applied to politics, should one conclude that the rights of the oppressor group should be taken away?

Without the moderating force of reason, fanatical identity attachments often terminate in anger and the desire for punishment. Since rational inquiry (or perhaps religious belief) could have once openly moderated these passions, in its absence, the new identities become these
passions, and come to dominate the nation. The net effect is fanatical group attachments without a common good.

Writing in the late 1980s, Bloom’s book presumed a high concentration of scholars devoted enough to seeking the truth in their fields — scholars whose minds were sufficiently open to the value of truth — so as to care about liberal education. These regrettably have largely disappeared. And Bloom did not witness the radicalization of university administrators, beginning in the early 2000s, who have doubled down on the identity-politics project. Indeed, the purpose of such university administrators, now found on nearly all campuses, is to forcefully secure the dogmas of identity politics and spread them to the nation by teaching students obedience to them.

Not only students’ minds but their characters are formed by these new doctrines. Liberal education should cultivate the capacity for self-criticism, the opposite of self-satisfaction, which coheres with republican citizenship or opens them to philosophical self-knowledge. But teaching that all of history is merely oppression has the opposite effect: It creates the sense that the allegedly liberated individual or group is somehow on the cusp of history, and therefore possesses deep knowledge and insight, and it promises that rebellion leads to inner wholeness and honor. This spirit forecloses the capacity for subordinance to higher reason or belief in a political common good.

Moreover, asserting that human happiness is gained through non-rational identity creation — rather than self-exploration, attachment to one’s nation, family, or romantic love — creates no wisdom for life, let alone philosophic wisdom, and leaves many young adherents confused and unhappy. Future citizens, statesmen, and free minds cannot emerge from such teachings. For instance, neither love nor families form as a result of teachings about a global patriarchal conspiracy against women. What forms instead is a war between the sexes, an ethic of using and being used, which, in turn, fails to form the virtues of character that are the groundwork from which love grows. Having destroyed any sense of belonging to a just order, what remains is anger and vengeance, the satisfaction of which determines one’s self-respect. Students are often left to understand that there is no nation, love, or even gender — only open self-creation and, ironically, dogmatic conformity to this doctrine.

Institutions that aggressively advance such teachings and form young people on such a model are intensely hostile to the core ideals
of American life. And such institutions should not be supported with public funds. Universities’ tax-exempt status, we might recall, is granted only on account of the promise that they serve the public good. By this criterion, it is time to reconsider that status. The condition of our universities has degenerated to such a degree that action is required. Those still concerned with civic and liberal education have two specific levers of power at their disposal at the federal level: Federal research money can be revoked, and student loans can be returned to the private domain.

RESEARCH FUNDING

A nation that publicly funds institutions must obtain something beneficial from them. America surely benefits from some of the scientific research and discoveries produced by our best universities. But the sciences give many of America’s flagship universities public respectability and thereby allow them to hold hostage public funding that supports their other, anti-republican, elements.

Total research funding given to universities is around $40 billion annually. Despite this large sum, there is currently no accurate and reliable publicly accessible online database that accounts for all money issued to all universities from all government granting agencies. Detailed designations of the money, to whom it goes, and exactly how it is distributed, are difficult to trace.

Moreover, since money is fungible, it is not unreasonable to suspect that a portion of these federal funds goes toward the administrators that serve as the ground forces of the identity-politics revolution. Nationwide, the number of university administrators increased by roughly 60% between 1993 and 2009. And universities collect overhead fees from research grants: The base rate averages 52% nationwide, and is far higher at some places, including 67.5% at Yale University. Distribution of these overhead fees is not publicly traceable, though one can presume they support the diversity administration, among other uses.

Just as identity politics has undermined civic and liberal education, so too are taxpayers funding “research” that may undermine science. For instance, as Elizabeth Harrington has documented, the University of California, Berkeley, received $1,999,886 from the National Science Foundation to “zero in on the ways in which students’ stigmatized identities may be particularly sensitive to structure and belonging” in STEM concentrations. The University of New Hampshire received $999,752
from the National Science Foundation to “create systemic institutional change by scaling up the levels of awareness about and interventions used to address implicit bias in scientific research and learning settings.” California Polytechnic State University received $570,890 from the National Science Foundation to systematically conceptualize “how labor segregation may relate to an ideological hierarchy between the social and technical dimensions [in Engineering and Computer Science] and influence cultural exclusions along intersecting vectors of gender and race.” Iowa State University and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University received $368,695 from the National Science Foundation to study building “a gender and race microaggressions psychometric scale” that offers “An Intersectional Perspective to Studying Microaggressions in Engineering Programs.” Similar examples abound. While it is easy to snicker at such studies (the costs of which amount to relatively little in the larger scheme of federal spending), one detects their underlying aim: enforcing identity politics in the sciences. The moral purification of the sciences may become more important than scientific progress itself.

Should the identity revolution fully impose itself on the sciences—among the last places in universities where the freedom of the mind still excels and is celebrated—they will wither on the branch as have the social sciences and the humanities, with untold losses to our national wealth, power, and prestige. This corrosion will be slow and hidden from the public eye, but likely irreversible once it is visible to all. Tocqueville foresaw this possibility and used the image of China as a warning to America. The Chinese, he says, long ago had refined arts and sciences:

The nation was industrial; most of the scientific methods had been preserved within it; but science itself no longer existed.… The Chinese, in following the trail of their fathers, had forgotten the reasons that had directed them. They still made use of the formula without seeking the sense of it; they kept the instrument and no longer possessed the art of modifying and reproducing it. Therefore the Chinese could not change anything. They had to renounce improvement.

We should not assume that science will prosper forever in the absence of the right intellectual conditions.
What suicidal nation would continue to publicly fund institutions that intentionally or even semi-consciously undermine the strength and unity of the society that protects them? To set an example, President Trump (or future presidents) could use his March 21st executive order to remove federal research funds from a single university for a violation of students’ freedom of speech. That money could then be given to a university that does fulfill its public purpose, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to use one example. The federal government could even pay to transfer the laboratories and scientists—or fund the creation of new national laboratories.

While this sounds radical, and although there is disagreement among conservatives, it is less radical than tolerating what is already taking place. While it is bad to interrupt scientific research in such a way, it is worse and more dangerous to maintain institutions working to sink the nation while hiding behind the prestige of science. The goal, again, is to make universities serve their fundamental purpose, which at this point can be done only by rebuilding them after they are significantly weakened.

STUDENT LOANS

America’s taxpayers also continue to fund the corruption of the nation by footing the bill for student loans. Federal student-loan funding pays for the indoctrination of students and builds up the wealth, reach, and prestige of these institutions. Cumulative outstanding student-loan debt currently sits at over $1.5 trillion. Today, the federal government originates and services 90% of all student loans.

As the quality of education gets worse, the price of college tuition increases. It has grown almost eight times faster than wages over the last three decades, and there is no natural limit in sight. Will the government resist lending to students when, in 15 years, universities offer an even worse education, on campuses with even larger diversity infrastructures, where the cost is $150,000 a year? In no reasonable world is money lent in such a fashion. But currently the U.S. government, which represents American citizens, does not say “no” to students—no matter how frivolous or corrupting the education they will receive, and regardless of how underqualified the students may be. The present arrangement of limitless lending has become a kind of scheme for universities. They slowly build up their administrative staff and their faux-educational facilities, thereby falsely justifying rising costs, all to create students hostile to the nation.
America’s taxpayers lend out money to many students who simply are not suited for college. Among the incoming class of 2010 entering four-year institutions, the four-year graduation rate was 40.6%, the five-year rate 55.8%, and the six-year rate 59.8%. At some universities, the six-year graduation rate was below 10%. Though the decent goal behind allowing everyone entrance into college has not been achieved, the universities have greatly profited. But the students, for whom universities have deflated the entrance requirements with a view to their own enrichment, leave without a degree, indebted, and often humiliated. Since the university does not hold the debt, it has an incentive to let almost anyone in, and thereby gives students the impression that they can succeed, even if they are clearly unqualified.

The federal government must get out of the lending business, which means a return to the pre-1965 system where private lenders fund the education of those whom they believe will be able to repay their loans. Specifically, Congress should end the direct-loan program and the PLUS loan program, which provide federal loans to graduate students and the parents of undergraduate students. It should also, as was the case before 1965, not guarantee private loans. No private lender would give money for a degree in grievance studies that costs $300,000.

One solution for preserving liberal education for the best students is currently being employed by Purdue University. Purdue lends money directly to students whom it believes can successfully complete their educational programs; the university therefore has a stake in the students’ success. That Yale’s $30 billion endowment goes untouched while students borrow from taxpayers is unconscionable.

If we were to end the federal lending programs, as fewer and fewer graduate from colleges, the employment ecosystem and America’s moral horizon would change for the better. Most practical degree programs can return to apprenticeship models. One does not need a four-year college degree to pass a Certified Public Accounting exam. Furthermore, the shortage of working-class labor in America is used to lobby for the importation of immigrants. Few Americans want to hang sheetrock after attending college. While having learned very little in classes, they have, however, often acquired a classist snobbery (and massive debt) that looks down on such labor—even if the wages for it might be higher than for the white-collar jobs to which they aspire.
RENEWAL BY FIRE

Reforms like these would be catastrophic for key elements of the existing model of higher education in America. But they could be enormously helpful to forms of higher education that actually serve the nation and fulfill the purpose of the university.

Addicted as they are to federal funding, the administrators of our flagship universities may become more obliging, while mid-tier schools, having enriched themselves for too long from student loans, will close their doors.

If large parts of the current system collapse, donors can regenerate colleges in new forms. From the ashes, the best faculty could be plucked to teach in new institutions devoted to liberal education. Hillsdale College, for example, has raised nearly $1.3 billion over the past 20 years, entirely from private funds, and it does not accept federal student aid. It is likely that such private funding will be found to buy bankrupted colleges in order to make them anew.

The purpose of such proposals is not punitive. It is simple sense. Universities that spread poisonous doctrines no longer believe in the purpose of the university. While it is their right to disagree with this purpose, they should not be the beneficiaries of public funds. No society should be expected to subsidize its own corrosion.