

# CHAPTER 3

## How to Answer the Utilitarian Assault on Higher Education?

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American universities are facing unprecedented pressure to adopt a purely utilitarian mission, both in the education of their students and in the research they conduct.

### GROWING PRESSURES TO ADOPT UTILITARIAN MISSION

**A**cross the country, state governors and governing boards are demanding that undergraduate education focus on the preparation of students for immediate jobs, thus promoting vocationalism above all other purposes of education, in fact, often to the exclusion of all other purposes.

- In some cases, governors suggest making state funding for public universities dependent on recent graduates' employment rates. "Are young people getting degrees in jobs that are open and needed today, not just the jobs that the universities want to give us, or degrees that people want to give us?" asks Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory is even more explicit, declaring that state funding for education should "not [be] based on butts in seats, but how many of those butts can get jobs."
- States such as Virginia have passed laws requiring universities to publish the salaries of very recent graduates, *by major*, as an "aid" to families considering their options in higher education.
- Under this highly reductive scheme, a college education becomes nothing more than short-term job preparation and students nothing more than workers-in-training.

- By prioritizing immediate employment, these governors create a hierarchy of majors, suggesting that some fields of study are more worthy than others.

Science and engineering fields often earn high praise as fueling innovation and preparing students for a knowledge economy, while the social sciences, humanities and the arts are overtly attacked. “Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so,” says Governor Rick Scott of Florida.

From this perspective, the societal benefits of higher education warrant public investment only in vocational fields. Any field of study that does not lead directly to an industry pipeline does not merit public support. Governor McCrory, again, makes it plain: “If you want to take gender studies, that’s fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don’t want to subsidize that if it’s not going to get someone a job.”

There are now clear signs that this movement has reached the national level, where new efforts are under way to measure the salaries of recent college graduates, *by major*, as well as by college, through the creation of a new national data base. The Wyden/Rubio bill in the United States Senate will probably be more broadly based than some state legislation, in the sense that it will require several measures, rather than just an economic one, of student “success”, but it is giving impetus to the trend we have noted in the states.

The argument that many college degrees are impractical, that students would be better off in vocational training programs, that liberal arts degrees are a waste of time and money is utterly absurd, even from a purely *economic*, *utilitarian* standpoint. A new, not-yet-published paper by John Etchemendy, Provost of Stanford, makes this point more cogently than previous research.

- Multiple studies have shown that the “college premium — the difference between the earnings of the average college graduate and the average high school (only) graduate — stands at record levels,” as high as 97%. The precise bump in salary conferred by a college degree varies by the location of employment, but in the United States, there is “no combination of major and state that does not see a wage premium for a baccalaureate degree” (Etchemendy). Furthermore, the wage premium exists across nearly all occupations, including many that do not require a college degree. Why should universities compromise their dedication to knowledge in favour of vocational skills when students already earn a significant — and lifelong — economic boost from their studies?
- The economic benefits of a college education also accrue to society at large. A recent report by the Milken Institute has shown that each additional year of college for the average worker in a given region

increases the region's per capita GDP by 17.4%. The wages of the average worker also rise by 17.8%, including workers with only a high school diploma. (DeVol *et al.*, 2013)

- These are hard numbers, statistics backed by large sets of data, just the sort of information that should resonate with those utilitarian governors and governing boards. If student employment is such an important outcome of university education, should we not at least acknowledge the fact that the unemployment rate for college graduates is less than half that of high-school graduates? (Carnevale *et al.*, 2012)
- In America, at least, the obsession with vocationalism stems in part from a sense that college students are not actually learning anything. Despite the economic gains to be had from earning a college degree, there is widespread acceptance of the proposition that most college students who graduate do so without acquiring the skills they will need to serve them in the workplace.

## STUDENT LEARNING GAINS AND THE RHETORIC OF CRISIS

These attitudes arise in large part from the book *Academically Adrift*, a study of student learning gains as measured in the first two years of college. The authors, Arum and Roksa (2011), famously claimed that 45% of students enrolled in a wide variety of institutions showed no significant improvement on the CLA, a standardized test used to measure critical thinking and reasoning skills.

This assertion has prompted a great deal of hand-wringing both inside and outside the academy. If nearly half of all college students are not learning anything, then surely something must be wrong!

While there is no doubt that many improvements could be made to the American system of higher education, a more nuanced appraisal of the data behind *Academically Adrift* suggests that panic is not (yet) necessary. Etchemendy has thoroughly reviewed Arum and Roksa's claims, and come to the following conclusion:

"Once we strip away Arum and Roksa's rhetoric of crisis and look at the actual data they present, it takes on an entirely different cast. Using a methodology that is biased toward understating student progress, they nonetheless see evidence of a reassuring degree of learning across a very broad base of students attending a wide variety of colleges and universities. They see this progress using a test that targets a set of abstract reasoning and communication skills widely known to be among the most difficult to teach, and they see the improvement after only three semesters of the students' college experience.

This is not evidence of a system that is academically adrift, but evidence entirely consistent with what the economic data tell us: graduates produced

by American colleges and universities display a significant skill differential that employers reward with the most substantial wage premium offered in the economically developed world.”

### A DEFICIT IN PRACTICALITY?

Academic research has also now come under attack for a perceived deficit in practicality.

- At the national level, Congress has essentially defunded political science research and is poised to do the same to all social science research, with the justification that these fields do not produce benefits to society.
- Under the new regulations, political science research can be funded by the government only if it improves national security or contributes to economic growth. In these exceptions, our government has clearly laid out its priorities. Greater understanding of the functioning of our democracy, gained through political science research, is by this reasoning not worthwhile, but anything that produces jobs can find support.
- Even more dangerous is a new attempt in the House of Representatives to make ALL scientific research funded by the federal government pass a utilitarian test. A discussion draft of a bill called the “High Quality Research Act” would stipulate as follows: “Prior to making an award of any contract or grant funding for a scientific research project, the Director of the National Science Foundation shall publish a statement on the public website of the Foundation that certifies that the research project — (1) is in the interests of the United States to advance the national health, prosperity, or welfare, and to secure the national defense by promoting the progress of science; (2) is the finest quality, is ground breaking, and answers questions or solves problems that are of the utmost importance to society at large....”
- Thus the purpose of this draft bill is to refocus NSF’s entire program on applied, targeted research that leads to economic development or national security, period.

This trend in legislation appears to be gaining momentum during a time of budget shortages and calls for stringent accountability and oversight. It clearly prioritizes short-term, economic results and targeted research. And it clearly ignores the crucial role of fundamental research in leading, over time, to often unanticipated discoveries that enhance human life and usher in whole new industries, products and jobs.

Utilitarianism thus encompasses the vocationalization of education and the instrumentalization of research, through which technical fields of knowledge

achieve greater status at the expense of other fields. This shift constitutes the repurposing of the entire university enterprise. Teaching and research are, in this new paradigm, no longer valued for the pursuit of knowledge, for the stimulation of human curiosity and intellect, nor even for the public good of a well-educated citizenry. Instead, it is economic growth alone that rules the day.

## A GROWING TREND

Unfortunately, this trend is not limited to the United States.

- In Britain, the adoption of the Research Excellence Framework has created a new funding model in which 25% of government funding for research depends on the “impact” of previous research. That impact must extend beyond the academy and must be readily quantifiable, a difficult assessment in many fields. After all, how do you measure the impact of a study of a poem by Ovid? Even in more technical fields, predicting the impact of a given scientific study is a fruitless endeavour. Crucial advances, in medicine, technology, communications may find applications years or even decades after their first invention. Yet British researchers must now submit an assessment of the total impact of their research or risk losing government support.
- Australia is following Britain’s lead, conducting case studies with a limited number of research universities to determine the cost of requiring an “impact” assessment for future research funding.
- These various efforts represent a collective shift towards narrow utilitarianism, a shift towards evaluating universities by limited and reductive metrics — jobs for students and economic impacts of research.

As Western governments lead the way in this shift, it is instructive to observe the behaviour of universities elsewhere on the globe. Asian universities have recently begun embracing the liberal arts, in contrast to their previous focus on technical and engineering programs.

- Universities in South Korea and Japan have adopted new curricula that include the liberal arts; in Hong Kong and China, new colleges have been created explicitly for the liberal arts. Bo Ya college, at Sun Yat Sen University, even requires its students to study Latin. And Singapore is investing in a new liberal arts college on the American model, designed and implemented with Yale University.
- These new colleges and programs adhere to their own understanding of what constitutes the liberal arts, and many remain in the early stages. And they certainly do not represent a major shift away from technical fields to the liberal arts. Yet it is clear that for these Asian

countries, the utilitarian approach to higher education is no longer sufficient. As China and Singapore rise in economic stature, they see value in supporting a broader definition of a university education. We might do well to consider that stance as our governments and societies seem poised to reject or at least to devalue education as mind-expanding rather than as vocational training.

## PUTTING DOLLAR SIGNS

A great problem in the West lies in the fact that we academic leaders have often aided and abetted the movement towards utilitarianism. We trumpet research parks and technology transfer, spinoff companies and the economic impact our universities produce. We quantify our achievements, put dollar signs on much of what we do and stand for, and lobby mostly on the basis of what we can do for society in the short term. We are no longer effective or even ardent advocates of the so-called softer disciplines, such as the arts, the humanities and the social sciences.

One of the consequences of our general tendency now to emphasize economic measures of success is that higher education has come to be seen as a purely private interest, rather than as a public good. We are all aware of the seemingly inexorable withdrawal of state support from public universities in the U.S. The recession has clearly contributed to this reduction in support, but a more significant and primary cause is the loss of faith in higher education as a public good.

We need to address this problem before all others. And if *we*, higher education leaders, do not, no one else will.

## COMPLEXITIES OF A FUNDAMENTAL DEFINITION

While it is true that universities perform many functions, and that they serve society in a number of ways, and that in the U.S. land grant universities were founded to contribute to social and economic welfare, at its fundamental level the university exists for the truth.

- Acknowledging and promoting this fundamental definition — that the primary purpose of the university is the truth, is not always easy. While the economic benefits of a college degree and of university research remain as valid as ever, the fact is that, ultimately, universities are *not* practical. They do not exist to make a profit. They are concerned with intellectual pursuits that may have no immediate, practical impact whatsoever and yet still have value. How to measure that value becomes a difficult question — here is an outcome that is not easily quantified.

- How does one quantify intellectual satisfaction, the inspiration to pursue lifelong learning, the capacity and the desire to thoughtfully contribute to civil society? They are not utilitarian, but they are perhaps the most valuable aspects of a college education.
- How does one quantify humanities scholarship and basic scientific research? Citations help, as do a few other measures, but in the end, it is difficult, and often reductionist in the extreme, to evaluate quality effectively.
- For some time now we have been content to emphasize our utilitarian achievements and to view them as compatible with, even supportive of, our fundamental intellectual purpose. And this strategy has worked well for at least three decades. But we have reached the point, I am afraid, when our facile combination of utilitarian and intrinsic values has become dangerous to our enterprise. Partly induced by our own rhetoric, many politicians now view us largely through an instrumentalist lens. (And I am not even going to get into the political and social roles of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S., a domain in which the risks of conflict of interest make technology transfer look like child's play).

So we are going to have to make the case for the intrinsic value of the university in order to preserve that value in the face of the utilitarian assault. How to make that case effectively?

One good place to start is the Group of Eight's April, 2013, discussion paper entitled "The role and importance of research intensive universities in the contemporary world." Among many other good arguments, the paper identifies key "attributes of research intensive universities": openness and autonomy; detached engagement; and radical conservatism. These are three paradoxical formulations that nicely capture the university's identity: a remarkable combination of innovation and preservation. While innovation holds sway today in our hyper-utilitarian culture, it is essential for us to be just as forceful and adept in expressing our commitment to the preservation of the best thinking from the past. As we are reminded nearly every day in this interconnected world, political and scientific and military power are not enough to solve crises: culture turns out to matter more than anything else.

## OTHER RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Many other rhetorical strategies present themselves as means of making the case for the intrinsic purpose of higher education. By way of conclusion, I offer an entirely unconventional one. It has to do with pleasure.

Henry Cabot Lodge was a student at Harvard in the 1870s. In spite of his aristocratic roots (or perhaps because of them), he was an unmotivated, indifferent student. As he wrote later in life to a friend,

- “In all my four years, I never really studied anything, never had my mind roused to any exertion or to anything resembling active thought until in my senior year I stumbled into the course in medieval history given by Henry Adams, who had then just come to Harvard. How I came to choose that course I do not exactly know. I was fond of history, liked to read it, and had a vague curiosity as to the Middle Ages, of which I knew nothing. I think there was no more intelligent reason than this for my selection. But I builded better than I knew. I found myself caught by strong interest, I began to think about the subject, Mr. Adams roused the spirit of inquiry and controversy in me, and I was fascinated by the stormy careers of the great German emperors, by the virtues, the abilities, the dark crimes of the popes, and by the tremendous conflict between church and empire in which emperors and popes were antagonists. In just what way Mr. Adams aroused my slumbering faculties I am at a loss to say, but there can be no doubt of the fact. Mr. Adams has told me many times that he began his course in total ignorance of his own subject, and I have no doubt that the fact that he, too, was learning helped his students. But there was more than this. He had the power not only of exciting interest, *but he awakened opposition to his own views, and this is one great secret of success in teaching.* In any event, I worked hard in that course *because it gave me pleasure.* I took the highest marks, for which I cared, as I found, singularly little, because marks were not my object, and for the first time I got a glimpse of what education might be and really learned something. I have never lost my interest in the Othos, the Henrys and the Fredericks, or in the towering figure of Hildebrand. They have always remained *vital and full of meaning to me,* and a few years ago I made a pilgrimage to Salerno with Adams himself to see the burial place of the greatest of the popes, who had brought an empire to his feet and had died a beaten exile. Yet it was not what I learned but the fact that I learned something, that I discovered that *it was the keenest of pleasures to use one’s mind,* a new sensation, and one which made Mr. Adams’s course in the history of the Middle Ages so memorable to me.” (Wills, 2005, p. 89) (my italics)
- There are many points to note in this letter, but I will mark three. First, a professor does not have to be an “expert” in his discipline to be a great teacher. Henry Adams had no PhD, and very little expertise in medieval history when he offered this course at Harvard.



- Second, a good professor in the humanities, and perhaps in most disciplines, not only excites interest in his students, but encourages opposition to his own views. Learning at university is not simply about mastering material; it is about gaining the tools and the desire and the confidence to develop one's own views.
- Third, the goal of education is to discover that to use one's mind is the keenest of all pleasures. Why did Lodge finally find the will to work hard? Because work in Adams's course gave him pleasure.

### TRILLING'S ANALYSIS

This matter of pleasure was also the subject of an acute analysis by one of America's great 20th century critics and essayists, Columbia professor Lionel Trilling.

Trilling addressed the significance of pleasure and of knowledge for its own sake in his definition of what he called "contemplative experience".

- "Such, it seems, is the opinion of the great mass of people, for by *contemplative experience* I mean those pursuits in which the faculties, though engaged, are concerned with their own exercise chiefly; for the mass of people such experience takes the form of engaging in difficult sports or watching complicated games....
- "But however concerned it may be with purposive activity, literature in its essence is concerned primarily with *how* the act is done and how its own powers deal with the act. This interest in *how* and the intense pleasure it can afford are what literature has traditionally tried to create. And if we abandon the idea of literature as an independent, contemplative experience, as a pleasure,... if we continue to make it conform to philosophies of immediate ends,... and do not keep clear its own particular nature, we shall be contributing to the loss of two things of the greatest social value. Of these one is the possibility which art offers of an experience that is justified in itself, of nearly unconditioned living. Upon such experience, or even the close approach to it, we have learned to turn hostile faces; that is one of the strategic errors of our culture, for in the long run the possibility of such experience is a social necessity. The second thing we shall lose is the awareness — it is ultimately practical — which comes only from the single-minded contemplation of works that arise from the artist's own contemplation of events and objects; this is an awareness of the qualities of things. In the realm of art we call these qualities style, in the realm of morals we call them character, in the realm of politics we have no name for them but they are finally important. To these qual-

ities, especially in times of crisis, society seems to be stolidly indifferent; actually they are, after survival, the great social concern.”

- “*Contemplative experience* has dangerous connotations. We think at once of *active thought* and in our time we know which of the two is better, for we have in mind purposive, constructive action which, in a time of crisis, seems the only possible way of survival. Well, crisis requires its sacrifices, but it is a good rule to sacrifice one’s interests, if one must, by suspending them rather than by distorting them.” [Trilling, 1940, pp. 440-442]

Is this a time of crisis? The word is overworked. But we are certainly confronted with disruption in our enterprise, and at such a time, we need to focus upon the *qualities of things*, in our case, the essential qualities of the university. When education is purely vocational, and research is purely utilitarian, contemplative experience vanishes. With Trilling, I believe that, contrary to the common view, the single-minded contemplation of intellectual and artistic works, whether they be in science or the humanities, is ultimately practical: paradoxically, what appears to be abstract is in fact utilitarian. Because it is only through such contemplation that one can see the qualities of things. And such awareness is indeed the “great social concern.”

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