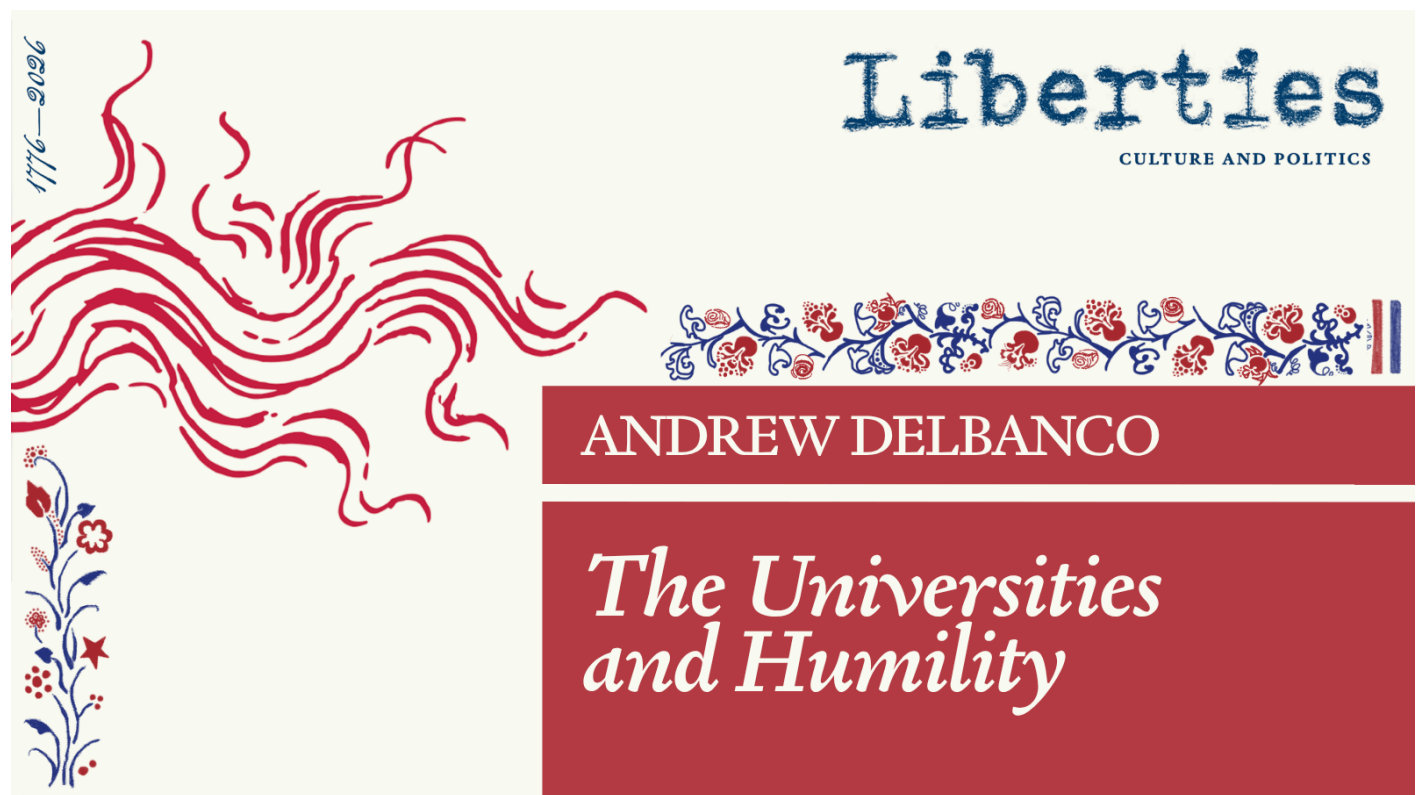


The Universities and Humility

by *Andrew Delbanco*



“The very possibility of civilized human discourse rests upon the willingness of people to consider that they may be mistaken.” Those words were spoken in June 1968 by the great historian Richard Hofstadter in his commencement address at Columbia, which had been convulsed that spring by violent arrests of students protesting the Vietnam War. Hofstadter defended the students’ freedom to “confront difficult and inflammatory things,” including “the most troublesome questions of politics and war, of sex and morals, and national loyalty.” Speaking to both the enraged left and the bewildered right he insisted, however, that the willingness to think and rethink in view of new evidence and experience is indispensable to any civilized society.

This principle is today in urgent need of revival. For those of us who make our lives in universities, it should be self-evident because anyone with a will to learn knows that the best way to do so is with zeal leavened by humility. It should be self-evident, but alas it often is not.

The imperative to acknowledge our own fallibility has a long lineage. In the West it stretches back to Judaism, suffused with a dialectical spirit of self-questioning. In ancient Greece Plato subjected all claims to inconvenient questions from his teacher, Socrates, who confessed (as translated by Benjamin Jowett), “I neither know nor think I know.” Early Christianity decried the sin of pride as a mark of reprobation.

Self-doubt is an uncomfortable condition that, for many people, cannot match the appeal of ideology in politics or dogma in religion. Yet it is a necessary precondition for curiosity, tolerance, and any form of open thought. This was a central insight of the Enlightenment, from which some two centuries ago there arose a new kind of educational institution committed to what my Columbia colleague Stuart Firestein, a distinguished neuroscientist, describes as “knowledgeable ignorance” — the recognition of how little one knows and that everything one thinks one knows is provisional pending further investigation. It was on that basis, in Berlin in 1810, that the modern university was founded as a site of free inquiry and teaching in which the pursuit of truth proceeds in a spirit of skepticism toward received certitudes and brooks no interference from prelates, princes, or any authority external to the university itself.

The functional principle of this new institution — academic freedom — was slow to take hold in the United States. Through most of the nineteenth century America’s universities, such as they were, remained under denominational constraint if not control. In 1878, for example, the president of Vanderbilt University, a Methodist bishop, fired its professor of geology for teaching evolution in defiance of “the plan of redemption.” Soon the clergy were supplanted by men of wealth who had no problem with Darwin, at least not in the dubious form of Social Darwinism, whose doctrine of “survival of the fittest” flattered the thriving rich and justified the fate of the unworthy poor. But when it came to other unwelcome ideas, wealthy meddlers were ready to step in to exercise what Thorstein Veblen called “pecuniary surveillance” over “the permissible limits of learning.” At the University of Wisconsin, in 1894, two leading faculty were dismissed for “teaching socialism.”

It wouldn’t be difficult to assemble an anthology of similar interventions first by men of the cloth and then by titans of industry. In retrospect all these efforts look like rearguard actions by a regime in retreat. In 1869, speaking at his inauguration as president of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot (a chemist descended from Puritan clergy) declared that “the winnowing

breeze of freedom” had begun to “blow through all its chambers.” Arguably the most ventilated of America’s universities had been established four years earlier in upstate New York by the engineer and entrepreneur Ezra Cornell, who envisioned a new kind of university in which “any person can find instruction in any study.” Soon several new institutions — including Johns Hopkins in 1876 and the University of Chicago in 1890 — were founded on the premise that no subject or point of view should be ruled *a priori* out of bounds.

Still, the fight over academic freedom continued into the twentieth century. In 1900, the Stanford sociologist Edward Ross gave a public lecture opposing the use of Asian immigrant labor by the railroads. Jane Stanford, the widow of the railroad tycoon who had founded the university and now its sole trustee, became enraged and Ross was fired. In 1915 a group of eminent scholars led by the Columbia philosopher John Dewey established an advocacy organization — the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) — whose “Declaration of Principles” defined and defended academic freedom as its cardinal value. Two years later, the Columbia trustees, unimpressed, prevailed upon the university president to dismiss several members of the history department for holding a view — opposition to America’s entry into World War I — that was obnoxious to their own. With tacit consent from most faculty, he complied. Attempts at suppression continued during the “Red Scares” that followed both World War I and World War II, but by and large the forces of reaction grew weaker as the faculty’s role in institutional governance, bolstered by the protections of tenure, grew stronger.

The shared premise of the new universities — as well as older ones that were attempting to renew themselves — was that the only route to knowledge is through restless discontent with received certitudes. To this end, using language both descriptive and aspirational, the AAUP defined the modern university as “an intellectual experiment station.” At its best, that is what it became and what it continues to be.



From the start, however, even the most progressive academic leaders knew that universities could sustain their “searching function” (Hofstadter’s phrase) only if they won support, or at least forbearance, from the public.

As a legal matter, private institutions were answerable only to themselves. As early as 1819, the principle of self-governance had been affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court when it ruled that an attempt by the state of New Hampshire to alter the charter of Dartmouth College was unconstitutional. But while older institutions with private endowments were thus protected from government interference, by the early twentieth century they were becoming, in an extralegal sense, quasi-public. Through a series of laws enacted by Congress culminating with the War Revenue Act of 1917, the modern system of tax exemptions for nonprofit organizations and tax deductions for their donors was taking shape. The rationale for conferring tax advantage on institutions and on the philanthropic individuals who support them is that they serve the public interest. But when consensus breaks down over what constitutes that interest, tax advantage starts to look like tax evasion and politicians can be counted on to stress the resemblance.

Though the AAUP founders could hardly have been expected to foresee the crisis of trust in which higher education finds itself today, they were sensitive to the risks. They knew that American universities have always had to manage a distinctively American tension between government and private enterprise, including enterprises that do not operate for profit. They knew, too, that the right to autonomy must be balanced with some degree of deference to external forces — always a delicate balance because any true university, while ultimately dependent on public approval, must be a nursery and sanctuary for ideas that incur public disapproval.

Over the course of the twentieth century, this mutually wary relationship — now commonly referred to as a compact or contract between academia and society (Clark Kerr, the transformative president of the University of California, preferred the metaphor of a common-law marriage) — became more and more consequential, with a great deal at stake for both partners. Following World War II, the monetary value of the contract soared with the rapid expansion of the National Institutes of Health and, early in the Cold War, the establishment of the National Science Foundation, partially in response to technological and military competition from the Soviet Union. The government now invested huge sums in universities in the form of research grants, as well as grants and subsidized loans directed through the Department of Education to millions of students. And because the labor market increasingly rewarded holders of a college degree, the benefits of the compact were widely assumed to outstrip the costs.



But lately, for a host of reasons, notably the galloping sticker price of tuition, college education has come under attack as a foolish investment for young people seeking work in the trades or the service economy or even in white-collar jobs. In fact, because colleges provide significant financial aid, students are paying less on average in real dollars than a decade ago — but that hasn't changed the impression of skyrocketing cost. Some mega-wealthy entrepreneurs, almost all of whom benefited from attending college, now ridicule it as a time-wasting distraction. And despite the astonishing success of mRNA vaccines to prevent or mitigate COVID-19 infection, as well as countless other therapies and technologies developed in university labs, the reputation of academic scientists (and to some extent, economists) fell into sharp decline following the shocks of the pandemic — prolonged school closures, mask mandates, enforced isolation, along with persistent inflation triggered by shortages of staple goods and by the federal effort to stabilize the economy. Calls to “follow the science” now seem to many people to lead to perdition.

Meanwhile an even more damning narrative burst into prominence. This one says that universities, dominated by what the current president of the United States calls “Marxist maniacs and lunatics,” have become un-American or even anti-American, intolerant of conservatism and capitalism itself, ruthless toward dissenters, incubators of antisemitism, and so on.

It is mostly a slander. With humanities enrollments declining and expectations rising that the main function of universities is to train students for the workplace, the number of students sitting in classrooms discussing such supposedly subversive authors as Karl Marx or Michel Foucault or Judith Butler is small and shrinking. And even for those who are asked to read them, there is no reason to assume that they are doing so with uniform assent. “The charge of widespread ‘indoctrination’ by left-wing faculty,” writes the historian David A. Bell, a liberal centrist, “is nonsense, and, worse, a pretext being used shamelessly by the right to attack the university system and bring it under government control.”

Still, there is no doubt that universities — especially the so-called elites — have made themselves easy targets by furnishing their critics with a rich repertoire of follies and scandals that cast doubt on their professed devotion to academic freedom. They have done too little to counter the view that they have become playgrounds of “virtue signaling” — trigger warnings, land acknowledgments, compulsory statements of fidelity to a narrow conception of “diversity,” and so on. Even if this damning portrait of academic culture is an

opportunistic exaggeration, there is enough truth in the caricature that the public is hard pressed to distinguish between reality and appearance.

After the monstrous attack by Hamas on Israeli civilians in October 2023, some universities, faced with the task of distinguishing between protected free speech and poisonous hate speech, made matters worse by bungling their response to protests over Israel's ferocious counterattack. At my own academic home, whose formal name is Columbia University in the City of New York, non-students seeking to bring toxic hatreds onto campus are only a subway ride away. The situation was managed poorly. But none of us who stood on the sidelines should be confident that we would have defused it before it spun out of control.

Well before those sad and damaging events, universities had been exposing themselves to attacks in the name of outraged patriotism. In the always contested terrain of American history, college courses once likely to conform to a triumphalist story inherited from antebellum and Gilded Age historians who celebrated America's "exceptionalism" now emphasize cruelties perpetrated against enslaved, indigenous, or exploited peoples who served involuntarily or resisted America's "Manifest Destiny." This is a belated corrective to the boosterish narrative that once marginalized millions of Americans in favor of a monochrome story of power and progress. Yet as Bill Readings warned three decades ago in a prescient book called *The University in Ruins*, it is at their own peril that universities abandon their role as "producer, protector, and inculcator of national culture" in the eyes of the broader public.

The charge that academia is a nest of insidious leftists has long roots. It reaches back to William F. Buckley (*God and Man at Yale*, 1951), and Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*, 1987) and has been carried on with varying degrees of subtlety by conservative writers such as Roger Kimball, Bruce Bawer, and George F. Will, among many others. More recently, it has been taken up by liberals who write in a tone closer to that of disappointed friends, including Laura Kipnis, Jonathan Haidt, and Eboo Patel, all of them warriors against the excesses of "Woke," "DEI," "#MeToo," and "Cancel Culture."

I doubt that many people on left, center, or right (with a few exceptions such as Christopher Rufo and others involved in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025) anticipated that with the second election of Donald Trump, critiques of the university — whether fanciful or well-founded or somewhere in between — would become grounds for suspending or canceling billions of dollars in research grants, curtailing the influx of international students, enforcing "viewpoint diversity" (on the weak premise, as Amanda Anderson of Brown University puts it, that "individuals occupy identifiable political positions aligned with stable and explicit beliefs that do not change over time") or

“meritocratic” admissions and hiring, as if merit were an objective quality measurable in scores and grades or by counting publications or citations.

With the full force of government behind them, enemies of the university are now employing a strategy of divide and conquer. In the absence of a collective response remotely comparable to the defense led by AAUP a century ago, this strategy has proven to be highly effective. Columbia, Penn, Brown, Cornell, and Northwestern have made their deals. Harvard appears to be defying with one hand and dealing with the other. The Board of Visitors at the University of Virginia, buckling under fear of becoming the next target, forced out the university’s president James Ryan, a person of luminous integrity. And even with hints of a truce in the air, it seems unlikely that research support will return to previous levels anytime soon. With the rise in taxation rates on endowment income and a likely decline in overhead support attached to federal grants, the damage promises to be difficult if not impossible to reverse. American universities already appear to be losing their preeminence in the international rankings, which are based overwhelmingly on research output in the sciences.



I have taken a historical approach to some of the issues now facing higher education on the premise — the premise, I think, of all historical writing — that knowledge of the past has value for confronting challenges in the present. I have focused on well-known research universities because they are the institutions most visibly under assault. It should be stressed, however, that collateral damage is rippling through the whole range of higher education — from regional public universities to liberal arts colleges and historically black colleges and universities, as well as community colleges, which collectively enroll vastly more students, including large numbers of low-income and first-generation students, than elite institutions do. Compensatory cuts in state subsidies to education seem likely to follow reductions in federal Medicaid support. Pell grants, designed to help low-income students pay for college, continue to lose their purchasing power in relation to the price of attendance. Federal funding for English language instruction, technical training, and other forms of adult education is threatened by restrictive provisions in the “Big Beautiful Bill” as well as by the dismantling of the Department of Education. In short, programs intended to help the most vulnerable students are on the chopping block.

Those mounting the attack on higher education have many rhetorical advantages. They have tapped into an ugly undercurrent of contempt not only toward privileged intellectuals but also toward people very much without privilege — immigrants, people of color, students from disadvantaged backgrounds deemed unprepared or unfit. They also benefit from the fact that the term “university” is an abstraction in which it is hard to discern the dedicated teachers, researchers, students, and support staff who do the day-to-day work in classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, recreational facilities, administrative offices, and all the rest, serving not only the academic community but neighbors as well. At my own university it has been heartbreaking to watch the gutting of Columbia’s Double Discovery Center — the original model for the federal Upward Bound program — which is mainly dependent on now-canceled grants from the Department of Education. Having served thousands of vibrant high school and middle school students in northern Manhattan for more than sixty years with tutoring, mentoring, and counseling — a magnificent exception to the rule that elite institutions hold themselves aloof from their local communities — DDC is now fighting to survive on private benefactions.

In October 2025, nine universities in varying degrees of favor or disfavor with the current administration were invited to sign a “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education.” In exchange for acquiescing to its demands (among them, a five-year tuition freeze and limitations on foreign student enrollment), the compact promised “multiple positive benefits” such as “substantial and meaningful federal grants.” To qualify for these benefits, the signatories were asked to ban anything that would “punish, belittle and even spark violence against conservative ideas.”

Do “conservative ideas” include such features of the American past — which some people, it seems, hope to see restored in the future — as segregation, the prohibition of “mixed” marriages, and literacy tests at the polls? Do they include superseded conservative ideas such as free trade, limited government, and an independent judiciary? Its incendiary incoherence notwithstanding, the proffered compact, in the words of Erwin Chemerinsky, the dean of Berkeley’s law school, amounts to a brazen attempt at “extortion, plain and simple.” So far, thankfully, it is an offer that the invitees have been willing to refuse.

But universities continue to be under surveillance by Big Brother, who has demonstrated his willingness to punish transgressors and to do it again anytime he doesn’t like what he sees. Meanwhile, state legislatures dominated by his followers — notably in Florida and Texas — have banned the teaching of “divisive concepts” and granted new powers to administrators and trustees to review, discipline, or even terminate tenured faculty. Students with grievances about course content or grades or disciplinary procedures now have allies outside the university itching for a fight — conservative media, watchdog organizations,

legislators, even governors — to whom they can appeal and thereby threaten faculty or staff by whom they've been offended. We face the prospect, as Suzanne Nossel, the former director of PEN America, writes, of professors “walking on eggshells for fear of not just a viral video or student complaint, but one that triggers government reprisals.”

What should we make of the charge that universities have brought these furies upon themselves? For the most part, comparing instances of intellectual intolerance on the left to the wholesale assault from the right amounts to an egregious case of false equivalence. Yet there are elements of truth in the backlash against “identity politics,” or the sweeping claims of “Critical Race Theory,” or the instinctive deployment of the term “social justice” as if everyone agrees on what it means, or the excoriation of “settler colonialism” as a proxy for antisemitism. Despite the current administration's mobster tactics, we in academia should consider that once we get through the current crisis, some of the shocks may prove salutary, and that serious self-searching is overdue.

To that end, the AAUP's “Declaration of Principles” remains a valuable resource. Its authors understood that universities, even though liberated in the previous century from control by the sects that founded them and from coercion by the governments that chartered them, bear ultimate responsibility for regulating themselves. In a society where hostility toward intellectuals is always latent and sometimes virulent (Hofstadter wrote the key book on this subject, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, in 1962), they knew, too, that universities would always remain suspect. On the core issue of academic freedom, as the legal scholar Robert Post has remarked, if faculty were to construe that freedom as the right “to research and publish in any manner they see fit,” it would not be long before public support “would vanish.” Post made that comment sixteen years ago. Today we seem to be approaching the vanishing point.



Anyone concerned about the future of higher education would do well to recall that even as the authors of the “Declaration of Principles” defended academic freedom as essential for the search for truth, they devoted a section (cited much less frequently than its clarion call for freedom) to its “corresponding duties” and “correlative obligations.” But what, exactly, did — and does — such a call for self-regulation mean?

In the natural sciences it has meant that hypotheses must be tested by experiment and experimental results put to the test of replication. In the so-called social and human sciences — where the line between argument and opinion is often thin and work can be ideologically tendentious — it takes the form of peer review of journal articles, book manuscripts, and nominations to tenure. These quality control methods are by no means immune to error or to abuse, but they do ensure that propositions and theories, to be taken seriously, must have something more than the status of unfounded claims.

But when most people think of the university, they don't think of the lab or the academic journal or the scholarly conference. They think of the classroom. When it comes to teaching, what can one say about how universities have been doing at monitoring themselves? Here is a frank answer from Leon Botstein, longtime president of Bard College and dauntless champion of liberal education, who has denounced Big Brother more fiercely than all but a very few college presidents while at the same time holding universities to account in a spirit of loyal opposition:

Universities have retreated shamelessly from their obligation to teach, particularly undergraduates. Higher education has become a matter of lecture halls, seminars taught by graduate students, standardized testing, fully remote learning, and obscurantist pseudo-professionalism, notably in the humanities and social sciences. Universities have abandoned the act of serious teaching and learning and settled for anonymity and routine.

One need not agree in every particular with this list of indictments — in my experience graduate students can be very good teachers — but every honest observer of higher education knows that there is a lot of truth in it. Fifteen years ago, in their data-heavy book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, the sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa argued in depressing detail that too many universities have been complacent as “students’ academic effort has dramatically declined in recent decades.” They made that argument long before the advent of artificial intelligence, which now invites students — at least those who wish to evade responsibility for their own learning — to substitute prefabricated writing and research for their own work.

Unfortunately, academia's loudest critics are generally concerned less with meeting the needs of unconfident or underprepared students and more with the putative problem of radical professors browbeating students with “woke” ideas. How credible is this charge? The University of California sociologist Steven Brint, another sober critic of academia from within the academic world, put it this way in a recent interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Those who are ‘woke,’ or social-justice oriented remain a fairly small part of the faculty, let’s say twenty percent as a kind of rough approximation. . . . In some disciplines like gender studies and ethnic studies it approaches fifty percent but, in self-description at least, never gets to be a majority even there. So it exists, but it’s not a majority tendency.

But even if most teachers remain open to a range of perspectives, less sanguine observers will say that students whose thinking does not align with “progressive” norms nevertheless feel compelled to censor themselves or risk ostracism by their peers. My impression, based on many conversations with students, is that they are less likely to feel constrained by teachers than by other students. The classroom thus gives itself up to “the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling” by which a majority — more likely, an imperious minority — seeks to “impose . . . its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them,” and thereby to “fetter the development and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own.”

Those words come not from a contemporary writer but from the greatest exponent of free speech in the Anglo-American tradition, John Stuart Mill. In *On Liberty*, in 1859, Mill sounded the alarm at “a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression.” Today it is an article of faith among anti-academic pundits that even if teachers don’t browbeat their students, universities are aiding and abetting the habit of self-censorship, which inhibits both faculty and students from saying — or even thinking — what they wish.

The “soft power” of conformity is impossible to measure, but it does exist. I confess that I have done a little self-censoring myself. In my course on early American literature, I had assigned for many years Benjamin Franklin’s “Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress,” from 1745, in which he advises a young friend on the sexual advantages of older women. Ribald and deliberately outrageous, it guaranteed raucous laughter when I read it aloud, which I did partly for comic relief after a week of theological tracts and hellfire sermons by Franklin’s contemporary Jonathan Edwards, but also because it illustrates the split (Edwards would have been scandalized had he read it) between pietism and rationalism in eighteenth-century America. Then, around a decade ago, the laughs died down and gave way to a few nervous chuckles or silent stares, so I decided to drop it from the syllabus. The last time I assigned it and read it in class, the only hearty laughter came from the one older student in the room, who asked me afterwards for the full citation so she could share it with her ex-husband.

I am still not sure where my decision falls on the spectrum between cowardice and good manners. One reason I appreciate the AAUP authors is that they advised continual self-monitoring. “The teacher,” they wrote, “ought also to be especially on his guard against taking unfair advantage of the student’s immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher’s own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters in question.” Then they added the admonition that professors should “refrain from intemperate or sensational modes of expression” not only in the classroom but in their extramural speech as well.

In fact, cool disinterest in the classroom is rarely desirable, especially when the subject entails judgments of value. Such detachment is a prescription for bland, dull, and bloodless teaching. Good teachers exemplify what it means to care passionately about whatever subject they are teaching — an idea or a historical episode or a work of art or any aspect of human experience. But good teachers also exemplify the habit of self-questioning, of taking seriously arguments that run counter to their own convictions, beginning with the obligation to make students aware that such arguments exist.

I find another aid to reflection in *The Education of Henry Adams*, that brilliant memoir and cultural history, from 1907, in which Adams recalls his brief stint teaching medieval history at Harvard and wishing that he could have “seated a rival Assistant Professor opposite him, whose business should be strictly limited to expressing opposite views.” Owing to its prohibitive expense, team-teaching is rare even at lavish Harvard, so most of us are left without the benefit in class of a contrarian colleague to question our assertions. This means that teaching any subject that entails ethical, aesthetic, psychological, political, or historical questions — any subject, that is, that falls under the rubric of “the humanities” — requires an honest effort to argue against oneself. That is the surest way to instigate what Adams called “conflicts of thought” not only among one’s students but within the mind of each.



Recent attacks on academia have taken on a tone of hot indignation, and though they have been met with reciprocal outrage — most of it well warranted — there are also signs within universities of chastened self-reflection. The strategically self-flagellating Yale “Report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education” has been received warmly by commentators on the right as a sign of *mea culpa*. Another such sign is the sprouting up of organizations with the irreproachable aim of encouraging students to regard adversaries as interlocutors

rather than as enemies. Some are campus-based, such as Duke's "Civil Discourse Project" or Vanderbilt's "Collaborative for Campus Dialogue." Others are consultants-for-hire with irenic names — "Braver Angels," "Interfaith America," "Constructive Dialogue Institute" — all of them intended, as the latter explains, to "equip the next generation of Americans with the skills to bridge divides."

Most of these initiatives have a flavor of sensitivity training that is reminiscent of the heyday of DEI. They tend to be long on method ("we host skill-building workshops," explains "Dartmouth Dialogues") but short on content. And to the extent that they are peripheral to the academic work of the university, they are likely to be ephemeral. Surely the best constructive dialogue institute remains the classroom itself, where students, under the guidance of a teacher with earned knowledge of the matter at hand — the history of the Middle East, or the First and Fourth Amendment rights of noncitizens, or any contested issue past or present — learn the difference between informed argument and instinctive opinion.

We are also seeing the proliferation of centers, institutes, and schools of "Civic Thought." The first such center, the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, was founded long before the present fraught moment, at Princeton in 2000, by the conservative political philosopher Robert George. More recently, driven by the implausible panic that tenured radicals have seized the universities and by the plausible concern that few students graduate with a basic understanding of the founding principles of the American republic, the "civic thought" effort seems poised to become a movement. So far it has been making headway mainly at public institutions in red states. It picked up speed in 2016 with the establishment by the Arizona state legislature of a School of Civic & Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University under the direction of the historian of political philosophy Paul Carrese. Since then, other centers and schools have been created by legislative fiat at state flagship universities, including the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Florida, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Ohio State (now one of five such programs in Ohio). Three other states (Iowa, West Virginia, and Utah) have passed legislation to create similar programs in the past year alone.

For the moment, these schools and institutes enjoy considerable independence and run on separate budget lines not generally subject to shared faculty governance. Writing in the *Washington Post*, George F. Will has hailed them as agents of salvation that are "reviving universities' civic seriousness . . . reinvigorating the humanities, inspiring students eager to grapple with big questions, and reversing academia's forfeiture of its prestige." But this seems overheated and premature.

For one thing, many faculty regard them with suspicion, for good reason, as fronts for conservative state legislatures seeking to influence university hiring and decision-making. The historian Timothy Messer-Kruse, who points out that “civics” can mean anything from learning good behavior to “teaching the structure of government,” describes the movement with cutting irony as “a New Deal jobs program for conservatives.” It is also true that any program originating from outside existing institutions rather than arising organically from within risks becoming — to use the prevailing term of opprobrium for the territorialism of academic life — just another “silo” in which faculty and students seek solidarity in the company of like-minded peers. Most of the new centers depend, moreover, on a scarce supply of faculty qualified to teach, say, constitutional law or Middle East history. They also depend on funding streams from legislatures that may become less friendly with a shift in the political winds.

Still, we seem to be witnessing a determined and, one hopes, good-faith effort to renew something first attempted some two hundred fifty years ago by the nation’s founders, who tried but failed to establish a new academic institution explicitly designed to prepare young people (exclusively young men, at the time) for citizenship in the new republic. Distrustful of the old sectarian colleges with roots in this or that Protestant denomination, the founders envisioned a federal university whose mission would be essentially secular — to teach what Benjamin Rush called “the principles and forms of government, applied in a particular manner to the explanation of every part of the Constitution and laws of the United States.” George Washington told Congress that such a federal institution would teach “the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority” so they will obtain a “temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect for the Laws.”

In the twentieth century, similar motives animated the creation of general education curricula such as the Columbia Core, which began as a “War Issues” course during World War I, and the Harvard “Red Book” curriculum, conceived as an “education in a common heritage and toward a common citizenship” following World War II. The authors of these curricula anticipated an influx of students from outside the prep school pipeline — students of lesser means (thanks in part to the G.I. Bill) and more varied backgrounds, including Jews (despite strenuous efforts by Ivy League presidents to keep them out) — who would break the homogeneity of even the most venerable and clubby institutions. It remains to be seen whether the new twenty-first-century civic thought institutes manage to adapt and advance those erstwhile attempts at civic education, or whether they devolve into just another cluster of battle stations in the culture wars.



Whatever the future of these interventions, one thing is certain: reading and discussing challenging texts — once at the core of a college education — has been disappearing from the experience of most college students. This is an inestimable loss: whether the text on the table is concerned with public life such as *The Federalist Papers* or *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, or a meditation on private life such as *The Beast in the Jungle* or the poems of Sylvia Plath, there is irreplaceable value in confronting privately (reading) or publicly (discussing) any work that pushes readers to grapple with the kinds of antinomies — law and justice, majority rule and minority rights, altruism and ambition, love and desire — that sooner or later confront us all.

I am tempted to say that the task before us is to Make the Classroom Great Again. I mean this not in a spirit of nostalgia for some mythic past when universities had their values straight and academics lived by them. I mean it to celebrate the countless teachers in the present who — under hostile surveillance and often without the protections of tenure — are determined to give their students an experience larger than mere credential acquisition.

At stake in the present moment is nothing less than the fate of such an education — one that requires wrestling with contradictory claims to truth — which is properly called a liberal education. Such an education is best advanced in a classroom that is a place of genuine diversity in every sense of the word (now, alas, a taboo word) in accord with Mill's conviction that "the only path to knowledge of any subject — including that most mysterious subject, the self, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind." No one has stated better what a good classroom in a good university should be.

No one, that is, unless it was Philip Roth (who did a good deal of teaching through his career) in *The Professor of Desire*, in 1977, a novel both raunchy and tender about a professor who introduces his students to such masterworks as *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Death in Venice*, in which tormented souls struggle to reconcile social norms with the imperatives of their inner lives. For the first meeting of his class, he drafts some remarks by which to prepare his students for what they are about to encounter. The result is a homily that might once have seemed mawkish but that now, to anyone familiar with what goes on (or doesn't) in our universities, will sound wistful, even elegiac:

There is nothing quite like the classroom in all of life . . . Why? Because once you have left here people are rarely, if ever, going to talk to you or listen to you the way you talk and listen to one another and to me in this bright and barren little room . . . I doubt that you know how very affecting it is to hear you speak thoughtfully and in all earnestness about solitude, illness, longing, loss, suffering, delusion, hope, passion, love, terror, corruption, calamity, and death . . . because, oddly and sadly, this may be the last occasion you will ever have to reflect in any sustained and serious way upon the unrelenting forces with which in time you will all contend, like it or not.

Over the half century since Roth wrote those words, reading and discussing vital texts has become a puzzling rumor for most college students, including those at our most exalted (now reviled) institutions. Literature — characterized by Hofstadter’s colleague Lionel Trilling as “the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty” — now tends to be marginalized in college as a subject of arcane or eccentric interest. This is a terrible loss for students who will never discover that writers who differ from themselves in gender, race, religion, class, or any other confining category can open their minds to the commonality of human experience, including the self-doubt and even the self-loathing from which no honest young person is spared in their own lives.

To restore this form of education will require overcoming many countervailing forces. These obstacles include incentives and rewards that drive faculty to focus on research and relentless publication at the expense of teaching; a growing truancy problem, by which students regard class attendance as optional; the incursion of AI into every aspect of life, which leaves students unprepared for the low-tech methods of reading closely and speaking carefully; the contraction of graduate education, in which teaching is regarded as a tiresome obligation rather than a calling; the budgetary challenge of preserving small classes that can never deliver the economies of scale provided by online instruction or big lectures — not to mention the need for inexperienced faculty to learn how to conduct a discussion that has both spontaneity and structure.

Against all odds, there are signs of progress. Institutions ranging from Purdue, Stanford, and Vanderbilt universities to SUNY Onondaga and Austin community colleges (full disclosure: all are grantees of the Teagle Foundation, which I lead), are restoring major literary and philosophical texts to the “gateway” experience for most if not all incoming students. The Yale report laments that “there is no single course, book, work of art, or scientific experiment that every Yale student is guaranteed to explore before graduation.”

The revival of interest in core education is not being driven by ideologues of any political stripe. At the institutions I know best it is being carried on — in the words of Roosevelt Montás, a legatee of the Hofstadter-Trilling tradition, longtime director of Columbia's Core Curriculum, and now director of the new Chang-Chavkin Center for Liberal Education and Civic Life at Bard — with the aim of “complicating the answers” and “unsettling the certainties” proffered by any closed mode of thought, and to make this experience available to as many students as possible.

I want to conclude these reflections in the same way I began them, with somebody else's words — this time not from a renowned historian but from a current college student who wrote a column last year in my university's student newspaper, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, about the tone and the atmosphere that he values when in class with a good teacher and engaged peers. It was written by Salvatore Mannella, a college senior and officer of Columbia's chapter of College Republicans, in the wake of the assassination of Charlie Kirk: “We are students. Every day, we sit and listen to those who know things that we do not. But something changes when we leave the classroom: suddenly we have all the answers.” He then offers the modest suggestion that “we should approach our discussions with one another with the same openness and humility with which we approach our studies.” This, in substance, is the same plea that Hofstadter made on the same campus nearly sixty years ago.

However much we may disagree on who or what is to blame for the fractious state of our universities, surely if the norms of the well-led classroom, the open classroom, the liberal classroom — taking hard questions seriously, thinking before speaking, honoring the right of others to speak and be heard — were to supplant the hissing and howling that now pass for public discourse, and such a classroom were to become a model for a whole society, we would all be better off. Who can argue with that?



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