
Dark Satanic Mills of Mis-Education: Some Proposals for Reform

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The “higher education system” in the United States has metastasized to the point that the body politic will soon be unable to sustain it. Tuition and fees have grown at more than three times the cost of living in the last two decades, outstripping even the rise in the cost of medical care. These enormous costs reflect the burden of a tenured professoriate that is increasingly well paid and decreasingly burdened with identifiable classroom duties. At the same time, the value of the education that it provides is vanishing, even when measured in terms of the financial bottom line. Only a minority of college graduates secures a job that in any sense “requires” a college-educated holder, while total college debt now dwarfs the aggregate of consumer debt and approaches that of all mortgages. At the same time, it is harder and harder to maintain with a straight face that students are—by engaging with pop culture studies, turgid French semiotic theorizing, or left-wing activism—acquiring the intangible and ineffable values of a liberal education, as classically understood. The higher education “bubble” threatens soon to burst, with consequences more calamitous than the recent collapse of the booms in internet companies or high-risk mortgages.

1. Bacon and Rousseau: The Two Towers

It is essential to begin by examining the intellectual roots of the current crisis in higher education. To do so, we can do no

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better than to turn to the works of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the great humanist scholar of the last century. Babbitt was a professor of comparative literature at Harvard for forty years. With Paul Elmer More, Babbitt led the movement in American intellectual life known as the New Humanism, a forerunner of the American conservatism of Kirk, Weaver, and Buckley. Babbitt's 1908 book *Literature and the American College* is a searing and prescient critique of the progressive movement as it had begun to take hold of American higher education.¹

We make a grave mistake if we think that the problems of academic gigantism (Russell Kirk's "Behemoth State University") began with Sputnik or the G. I. Bill. The spiritual crisis of higher education has roots far deeper, extending back to the very opening of the modern era in seventeenth-century Europe. Babbitt saw Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) as typifying the turn from the classical tradition to the modern fascination with technology as power. Thirty-five years after Babbitt's book, the British philosopher and literary scholar C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)—whose masterpiece on the philosophy of education, *The Abolition of Man*, appeared in 1943—reached the same conclusion about Bacon's central role.

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Neither Babbitt nor Lewis was in any sense opposed to the knowledge generated by the flowering of the science of nature in the early modern period. They both noted, however, that modern science was (as Lewis put it) "born in an unhealthy neighborhood and at an inauspicious hour."² Bacon, the great promoter and propagandist for scientific research as a public enterprise, embodies all that was "unhealthy" and "inauspicious" about that milieu. Bacon asked that Nature be "put to the rack" and forced to reveal her secrets. He recommended that any thought about the ends or purposes of nature (teleology) be relegated to theology; instead, practical men should impose their own wills upon the raw material of nature by better understanding the isolated propensities of the elements and particles making up material things. Lewis sees a striking similarity between Francis Bacon ("the great trumpeter of the new era") and Marlowe's Faust. Lewis points out that science

¹ Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986).

² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 1974), 78.

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and magic were twins, born at the same time and of the same impulse, the unprincipled quest for power in service of unbridled desire. "Knowledge is power," Bacon declaims.

By displacing the contemplation of essences and final causes from the study of nature, Bacon and his followers ensured the doom of that what Babbitt called the "law for man" and what Lewis called "the Tao," the basis for objective value, the set of "practical principles known to all men by Reason."³ Inevitably, man himself came within the scope of a scientifically disenchanting (and ultimately denaturing) "Nature," a realm of blind forces subject to technical manipulation, in place of the ordered cosmos (both macrocosm and microcosm) of the classical tradition (from Plato and Aristotle to Cicero, Augustine, and the Christian Platonists and Aristotelians of the high Middle Ages). From that point on, Western man was unable to distinguish between ordered and disordered affections. Reason became, as Hume put it, the abject slave of the passions, a technically proficient ability to scratch whatever itches.

Babbitt demonstrates that it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who first grasped the "liberating" potential of the ethical nihilism implicit in Baconian Science. If Nature (including human nature) is blind and dumb, then each individual being is free to follow its own whims, shrugging off the constraints of conventional morality as nothing more than the heavy hand of a dead past. Science has debunked the moralists of the past as superstitious worshippers of a rational and meaningful order thought to predate the emergence of the individual consciousness. Instead, human beings must be "compelled to be free," taught to treat every felt impulse within as an unquestionable authority, fully realizing Plato's nightmarish vision of the "democratic soul" in Book VIII of *The Republic*.

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Rousseau proposed a new "morality" of feeling, to replace the dying morality of reasoned self-discipline. Justice and virtue were to be replaced by an amorphous compassion, which subsequent history has revealed to be almost infinitely malleable, producing holocausts and gulags as easily as free dental plans and kindergartens. As Babbitt puts it, "Rousseau confounds the law for man with his own temperament." To

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

be clear, let me emphasize that Babbitt was no foe of either science or compassion. As he explains, "The more scientific progress and the more social pity the better. Exception can be taken to these things only when they are set up as absolute and all-sufficient in themselves."⁴

We can best understand the modern university by seeing it as built on the synthesis of these two tendencies, Baconian and Rousseauian. We now justify the hard sciences almost entirely in pragmatic and utilitarian terms, as the incubators of technology, not as observatories from which to behold and contemplate the music of the spheres. In contrast, many in the humanities, as well as most in the new fields of "communications" and "education," have abandoned the hard road of fact to become the playgrounds of "values." Since all value is the arbitrary projection and construction of liberated egos, there is no true hierarchy of value to be learned and internalized and to structure the course of learning into a true curriculum. Instead, each professor of the humanities is free to make the classroom into a laboratory of untrammelled fantasy. In both cases, wisdom and right order have been eclipsed by an absolute and unqualified love of "innovation" as such. My own university, the University of Texas, adopted as its motto a few years ago "What starts here changes the world." No one thinks to ask whether the resulting change is for the better or the worse.

Hard sciences justified almost entirely in utilitarian terms.

One additional effect of the Bacon-Rousseau synthesis has emerged in the years since Babbitt's book: the quantifying and physicalizing of research in the humanities and social sciences. The shape of these disciplines in the last fifty years has been increasingly driven by an envy of the rigorous and arcane mathematics of modern physics. Humanists speak more and more about Theory, by which they mean a mélange of pseudo-scientific French semiotics and cultural anthropology. Works of literature are treated as mere data for the theoretical gristmill. Consequently, the quality of the work is of no importance: mediocrities are more likely to provide representative samples of the "social processes."

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From such a perspective, the "core curriculum" forms neither a core nor even a curriculum in its classical sense (a well

⁴ Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 105.

defined race course). General education consists merely in those few subjects (linguistic, mathematical, and methodological) that are of general usefulness. General education is thus a necessary evil, a mere propaedeutic to the student's inevitable specialization.

Babbitt is writing near the end of the term of Harvard President Charles William Eliot (president from 1869-1909). Eliot revolutionized higher education, not only at Harvard but also throughout the country, by replacing the set curriculum with the elective system. Babbitt quotes Eliot, embodying the Rousseauist cult of individuality:

A well-instructed youth of eighteen can select for himself a better course of study than any college faculty, or any wise man Every youth of eighteen is an infinitely complex organization, the duplicate of which neither does nor ever will exist.⁵

Babbitt sardonically comments, "The wisdom of all the ages is to be as naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore."

Eliot's elective system at Harvard was in part a curricular consequence of Rousseau's philosophy. The student is "compelled to be free" by being denied the opportunity to undertake a coherent and well-ordered course of study. As Babbitt notes, Rousseau is essentially the resurrection of ancient Greek sophism. Translated into education, the result is what Babbitt calls "the democracy of studies." The modern university is a mere cafeteria of courses, with no structure or principle of selection. Plato also predicted this outcome in *The Laws* (819A): schooling as "encyclopedic smattering and miscellaneous experiment." Babbitt observes that a bachelor's degree now means "merely that a man has expended a certain number of units of intellectual energy on a list of elective studies that may range from boiler-making to Bulgarian. . . . a question of intellectual volts and amperes and ohms."⁶

The elective system has been sold to generations of students as a charter of individual autonomy, freeing each student to devise his own education. In practice, the system empowers professors to abandon anything resembling a coherent, student-centered plan of studies, offering in its place whatever

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⁵ Eliot, *Educational Reform*, 132, 133, quoted in Babbitt, *Literature*, 96.

⁶ Babbitt, *Literature.*, 123.

narrow and idiosyncratic courses are most convenient to them, from their perspective as producers of original research. This endless quest for novelty drives professors of literature and history off of the customary highways of great works and great deeds and into the hinterland of minor works by second-rate authors, and the minutiae of everyday life in remote times and places. We professors give little or no thought to selecting subjects that elevate and enrich the moral imagination of the student, while giving much thought to subjects that elevate and enrich our own research programmes.

The modern synthesis of Bacon and Rousseau represents a Devil's bargain: humanists accepted the dominance of the natural sciences and technology in return for a protected role as junior partner, wrapping the naked pursuit of profit with the robes of academic tradition and the *artes liberales*. In turn, natural scientists protect the humanists from political pressure, freeing them to pursue Rousseauistic liberationism.

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This synthesis of scientific and romantic progressivism took hold first in the research universities of Germany in the nineteenth century. Until the early twentieth century, most American colleges continued in the ancient and medieval traditions of the seven liberal arts, with a fixed canon of texts, all in Latin. The liberal arts curriculum was the fruit of twenty-five hundred years of maturation and development, beginning with the ancient schools of Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates and the Stoics, and continuing with the Romans Cicero, Quintilian, and Cassiodorus, revived in the early Middle Ages by Isidore of Seville and John Scotus Eriugena, and institutionalized by the anonymous founders of the European medieval universities in the twelfth century. Higher learning from late antiquity until the twentieth century was organized by the seven liberal arts as foundation—the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—with philosophy and theology as the capstones. The goal was essentially an ethical one: the formation of the virtues of self-control and prudence. The method was the reading and emulation of a relatively fixed canon of literary classics, works that “embodied the seasoned and matured experience of a multitude of men, extending over a considerable time.” “By innumerable experiments the world slowly

winnows out the more essential from the less essential, and so gradually builds up standards of judgment.”⁷

As Russell Kirk noted in his introduction to the 1986 edition of *Literature and the American College*, “The aim of the oldfangled college education was ethical, the development of moral understanding and humane leadership; but the method was intellectual, the training of mind and conscience through well-defined literary disciplines.”⁸ We must not accuse the classical educators of a kind of moral reductionism, as though each reading or exercise had some alteration of character as its immediate object. First of all, the ethical purpose of education was not merely moral, in a narrow sense. The classical virtues included both the intellectual (wisdom, prudence, and understanding) and the moral (fortitude, temperance, and justice). Education aimed at the natural perfection of the whole human being, with the development of philosophical insight and aesthetic appreciation valued as ends in themselves.

Second, the classical tradition recognized that the contributions of education to morality were largely indirect and ancillary. As Aristotle stipulated, the study of ethics can do no good to one whose sentiments and habits have not been well formed by a good up-bringing. John Henry Newman cautioned against identifying the natural virtues of the well-educated “gentleman” with true saintliness, while embracing the importance of liberal discipline as a salutary habit of mind, characterized by “freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom.”⁹ In addition, a liberal education is needed to elevate those childhood habits of good conduct presupposed by Aristotle’s method, infusing them with an articulate understanding of the human *telos* to which they are ordered.

We began to abandon all this in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as American progressives started to import the increasingly positivistic German model, most prominently at Johns Hopkins, Cornell, and Harvard. The transformation of American higher education was completed under the influence of the post-war G.I. Bill and the explosion of scientific

⁷ Ibid., 114-15.

⁸ Russell Kirk, “Introduction,” in Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 63.

⁹ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: 1853).

research in the Sputnik era. By themselves, these two social programs need not have accelerated the shift from small liberal arts colleges to gargantuan state universities, but the existing land-grant universities were better able to scale up their operations to absorb the swelling numbers of students.¹⁰ As a result, most professors today (whether inside or outside the humanities) have no concept of what liberal education is. Neither they nor their teachers were liberally educated.

2. *The Corruption of Higher Education*

Our system of higher education might be quite harmless, for all that. It no longer offers liberal education, but we might hope that at least it does a decent job of vocational training. However, once the academy was severed from its classical roots, it lacked the moral and epistemological foundations needed even for its base, Baconian aims. Technical and economic progress depends, not just on cleverness, but also on character: self-discipline and wisdom. As G. K. Chesterton observed, the trouble with mere pragmatism is that it doesn't work. In the last twenty years we've begun to see the inevitable unraveling of academic pragmatism.

Technical and economic progress requires not just cleverness but also character.

In short, the modern academy is morally depraved. It has become perhaps the most morally corrupt segment of our society, and this for two reasons:

1. The absence of accountability to anyone or anything. In the shift from classical liberal education to the Bacon/Rousseau model of "higher education," the professoriate claimed the right to be immune from outside control or supervision. The ideal of "academic freedom" replaced control by alumni, trustees, church authorities, and other representatives of the wider community.

2. Exploitation of a new academic underclass, due to the separation of professional rewards and undergraduate teach-

¹⁰ According to *120 Years of Higher Education: A Statistical Portrait*, by Thomas D. Snyder (National Center for Education Statistics, Washington: 1993), there were more students in private colleges than public in 1943 (584,000 in private vs. 571,000 in public). By 1948, public colleges surpassed private colleges in enrollment, opening a substantial lead by 1961 (2.56 million vs. 1.58 million). In the three decades from 1961 to 1991, public college enrollment quadrupled, while private college enrollments increased only 70 percent in the same period.

ing. We have a two-class system: a privileged, tenure-track bourgeoisie and an exploited academic proletariat (adjuncts, graduate students, and lecturers). Ironically, the place in our society to which the academy's Marxist theory may actually apply the most is the academy itself.

Universities are prestige factories. It is in the admissions office, and not in the classroom, that most of the value of the B.A. is generated. Once a student is in, all he has to do is spend four to six years jumping through a series of arbitrary and undemanding hoops in order to claim a prestigious credential. What he actually learns or doesn't learn during that period is irrelevant. There is a complete disjunction between the real business of the university (*viz.*, creating and maintaining prestige) and the teaching of undergraduates.

Why is the lack of accountability so *morally* corrosive? Professors do not think of themselves as servants of their students or their communities. This creates a culture of entitlement among the faculty, fueled by resentment of bourgeois wealth. Why, the pampered professor wonders, do mere car dealers and other small businessmen earn more than I do?

In the classical model, there was indeed hierarchy: teachers over students, master-teachers over apprentices. However, professors did not see themselves as morally or spiritually superior to their college's graduates. The Bacon-Rousseau model changes all this. For Baconians, professors are the creators of new knowledge. For Rousseauans, the academic is a secular saint, the paradigm of spiritual and intellectual freedom, in contrast to the average citizen, who is enslaved to social conventions.

In the Bacon-Rousseau model, teaching of undergraduate students serves two purposes: (1) justifying the input of resources into academic research, and (2) recruiting the researchers of the future. The vast majority of students are merely fiscal cannon fodder, units to be processed and cashed in, in support of the higher calling of scientific research and spiritual liberation.

Of course, it is impossible for universities to give *no* attention to the demands of undergraduates. In place of education, the modern university offers four to six years of much fun and entertainment, with increasingly luxurious dorms, four-star

In Bacon-Rousseau model, most students are merely fiscal cannon fodder.

eateries, swimming pools and gymnasia that would be the envy of professional sports teams. Many classroom teachers have joined the ranks of this entertainment medium, a transformation propelled by increased reliance on student evaluation of teachers. The results are predictable: falling standards, accelerating grade inflation, ever lighter workloads. This means the abolition of the ancient hierarchy of teachers and students: teachers are now afraid of their students and are anxious to gratify their every desire.

You will have noticed that I haven't yet mentioned political correctness. The leftist ideology of the politically correct serves to rationalize a corrupt system. Postmodern and multicultural philosophies justify the jettisoning of the classics of the past, making room for whatever meaningless minutiae form the focus of each professor's research agenda.

At the same time, political correctness shows that human nature abhors a spiritual vacuum. The postmodern English scholar Stanley Fish has rightly expressed skepticism about the revolutionary aspirations of the politically correct left.¹¹ In its place, Fish recommends that *scholarly communities* should seek to do merely academic work, whose quality is determined by the group's own internal standard, in a kind of group solipsism. However, Fish's deflationary vision of scholarly communities with no purpose beyond reproducing themselves and their parochial standards offers no transcendent meaning to today's scholar. As G. K. Chesterton noted, one of our primary needs as human beings is to be more than pragmatic.¹² Liberationist philosophies bring quasi-spiritual meaning to the endless drudgery of academic production. The leftist professor can convince himself that his parsing of sexist syntax or his close reading of 1950s sit-coms represents a road to spiritual and political liberation. The current obsession with sexual perversity and libertinism kills two birds with one stone: it is titillating to undergraduates while offering the modern Rousseauistic Puritan an outlet for his fanatical pursuit of salvation through liberation from sexual restraints.

¹¹ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹² "Pragmatism is a matter of human needs; and one of the first of human needs is to be more than a pragmatist." G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, 1909), 64.

3. *Beer and Circuses*

The collapse of standards generates an inordinate amount of free time for students, liberated from the “burden” of studying (reading and writing), as documented by the recent book by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.¹³ The authors found that 32 percent of the students they studied did not take *any* courses with forty pages or more of reading per week, and 50 percent did not take a single course in which they wrote more than twenty pages during the semester. The authors also report that students spend an average of only thirteen hours per week studying—50 percent less than a few decades ago, and much of that minimal studying occurs in fashionable but inefficient group settings.

This free time, when combined with sexual liberationism, preached both in the classroom and through student services, has created the hook-up culture of mandatory promiscuity, yet another instance of students’ being “compelled to be free.” The result is non-stop partying, with all of the attendant abuse of alcohol, marijuana, and other recreational drugs. Addiction to pornography and video games has also taken hold, especially among male students. Colleges have become Club Med-like resorts, encouraging hedonism, sloth, inflated expectations, and a climate of ungrounded entitlement.

The college, bluntly put, has replaced *in loco parentis* with *in loco diabolus*. I cannot imagine a system that would be more effective than the modern university at undermining character and disabling students from the tasks of vocation, marriage, family, and citizenship.

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4. *The Imminent Collapse*

Talk of a higher education “bubble” is well justified. The reasonably priced state university degree of even modest quality is no longer available. The reason for the upward cost spiral is easy to find: an arms race for prestige, which is inherently a zero-sum game, driving up the salaries of both administrators and well-published research professors. The rising costs have almost no relation to the quality of instruction.

¹³ Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

As a result of the moral degeneration of the university, the Baconian promise of economic prosperity through research and education is increasingly an empty one. Fewer and fewer American students have the self-discipline required even for degrees like engineering, natural science, or accounting, which offer short-term economic benefit. Most so-called research is next to worthless, since its value is defined in self-referential terms: good research in each field is whatever good researchers in that field do (as defined by leading journals and conferences), regardless of any benefit or lack of benefit to the wider community. This self-referential circle means that research in even the hard sciences becomes increasingly political and unrelated to reality.

Research increasingly political and unrelated to reality.

For individual students, the economic return on an American college degree is in free fall. Fewer than 30 percent of graduates secure a job that “requires” a college degree (in any sense). Median salary of college graduates last year: \$27,000 a year. Average debt burden: \$21,000. As a result, we have begun to see the emergence of the Uncollege movement (www.uncollege.org), with a growing number of young people joining the ranks of the higher education refuseniks, following in the footsteps of entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, Michael Dell, and Michael Zuckerberg.

5. What Needs to be Done

Let us look at the long-term view, and let us free ourselves to imagine the best possible future.

There are in fact some encouraging signs: namely, the proliferation in recent years of great-books programs, some with strong emphasis on classical languages (Latin, Greek). These are found mostly at religious institutions, both Protestant and Catholic, including Thomas Aquinas College, New Saint Andrews College, Wyoming Catholic College, C. S. Lewis College, the College of Saint Thomas More, Ignatius-Angelicum, and over thirty other colleges and programs. This trend needs to be accelerated. Some steps that might help:

1. Disassemble the existing system. De-fund state universities. Instead award scholarships for academic merit that are usable at private, religious, and for-profit colleges, and give tax deductions for tuition.

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2. Eliminate or ignore accreditation. The regional accrediting bodies are little more than higher-education cartels, ensuring that students can go to any college they like so long as they are all the same. They discourage competition and are sustained by the power of the federal government, which denies all federal aid to students in non-accredited institutions. We should replace “official” accreditation with private companies that provide impartial, third-party assessments, as Moody’s or Standard and Poors does for the bond market.

3. Encourage the development of small residential colleges that collaborate through the Internet. We need more collaborative networking among existing schools and programs and more encouragement of the formation of new ones. Low overhead: nothing but teachers and students.

In the medium term, there are several things that could be done to mitigate to some extent the damage done by the present system:

1. Create disinterested, double-blind evaluation of student learning.

Require state universities to offer benchmark exit exams to their graduating students (like the final degree exams at British universities), with individual results appearing on transcripts and with comparative statistics available to the public. These results can be used to measure the value added by instructors and courses to different cohorts of students. The exam standards, old exam questions, and grading rubrics should be made public. In addition, we can supplement local exams with standardized benchmarks, like GRE Subject exams or the College Learning Assessment, once again making results public.

2. Abolish distribution requirements, the pseudo core curriculum of the present system, and replace them with a true core curriculum. This would eliminate most of the politically correct hurdles students face: requirements in multiculturalism, social justice and global learning, for example. Instead, require all undergraduate students, regardless of intended career path, to immerse themselves in a well coordinated sequence of courses focusing, as Matthew Arnold recommended, on “the best which has been thought and said,” together with the best that has been done in the history

of our civilization. The fostering of the pursuit of wisdom by individual colleges and universities could be encouraged and supplemented by establishing a core curriculum foundation, a national, non-profit society that awards liberal education certificates to students based on coursework, special exams, interviews, and submitted work.

3. Decentralize power. Break the monopoly of faculty senates and administrators.

(a) Tie funding of departments to number of students taught (within the limits of a grading curve). Programs that succeed in attracting more students, while maintaining high standards, should be rewarded with more resources. The bulk of the power of deans and presidents is the power to shift resources to politically favored programs, like ethnic and gender studies. Real competition would enable academic entrepreneurs to create new, student-centered programs, including sequences of courses focusing on the Western canon. In addition, permit departments to compete for students by discounting their tuition rates, creating an intra-university free market, thereby applying some real restraint to the upward spiral of costs.

(b) Introduce “charter colleges”: permitting free associations of scholars to offer both courses and bachelor’s degrees without requiring faculty senate and administrator approval.

(c) Following the model of Oxford and Cambridge, break each Behemoth State University into a cluster of independent colleges, each with no more than 2,000 students, and each offering the full array of the liberal arts and sciences to undergraduates.

4. Abolish or reform the Ph.D.

In the liberal arts, replace the Ph.D. with the M.A., or a new doctorate in Liberal Arts, dropping the requirement of “original research.” Instead, require the doctoral candidate to prepare and deliver a series of lectures on classic texts, demonstrating a mastery of understanding, reflection, and articulation.

5. Ban the use of temporary, part-time, and non-tenure-track teachers.

Eliminate the distinction between tenure-track and non-tenure-track instructors. Give everyone who has the responsibility for teaching students equal status in departmental

and college decisions. Every instructor should be equally eligible for tenure: hired with a presumption of permanence, but with the real possibility of being discharged for cause.

6. The Power of the System to Resist Change

Our higher education industry is powerless to educate, and the vast majority of its so-called research is worthless, ignored even by the specialists who generate it (as Mark Bauerlein at Emory has demonstrated). However, there is one thing that the system does to perfection: defend itself against political pressures to change. Universities have assembled the most impressive parallelogram of political forces in modern history. Here is a partial list of their strategic assets, both tangible and intangible:

1. Deeply ingrained habits within the public at large, and among political and business leaders, of deference to supposed scientific experts and humanistic elites (both Baconian and Rousseauistic).

2. The totemistic loyalty of vast alumni networks to athletic teams and symbols, sustained by the energy of nostalgia for lost youth.

3. The claims of the “research university” to be engines of scientific progress and economic growth, endlessly and uncritically repeated by media and the press, despite growing evidence to the contrary. Supposedly great research universities in Berkeley or Ann Arbor have done nothing to prevent the financial meltdown of California and Michigan; indeed, they are arguably crucial contributing factors, having undermined the remnants of classical and Christian culture.

4. Statistically fallacious argument about the economic value of a college education (the mythical \$1 million premium in lifetime earnings), which is associated in the public’s mind (without statistical basis) with the supposed “quality” of one’s university, as defined by prestige and selectivity.

5. The sunk-costs fallacy: the millions of Americans who have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in their own college education and that of their children find it painful to take seriously the possibility that this investment was wasted.

6. Well-oiled public relations machinery, including alumni organizations, publications, and lobbying offices, as well as

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a revolving door between academia, politics, and media that ensures an endless supply of uncritically deferential press and sycophantic political “leaders.”

7. Toward an Effective Counter-Strategy

To counter the above-listed forces of inertia will require strategic use of information and alternative media to convince the public that the system is broken. To reprise, we must emphasize the following five points:

1. The system is expensive and wasteful, with billions of dollars in unjust privilege for those at the top of the hierarchy.
2. Students are not intellectually challenged, improved.
3. Character and citizenship are undermined rather than strengthened.
4. Most research is useless by any objective measure.
5. College degrees have been oversold on economic grounds. For most students, there is a poor return on the investment of both funds and time.

In closing, let me return to the long-run perspective. Since the higher education system is no longer up to the task of perpetuating our Western culture, other means must be found. Fortunately, information technology is a great generator of means, if we can summon the will and find the discipline to use it rightly. The whole of classical literature is available on web sites like the Perseus project (both in the original languages and in translation). The study of Latin in secondary schools has been experiencing a revival in recent years. Great Books societies are forming across the country. Many of the new colleges with classical curricula offer courses through the Internet, with ample opportunities to interact with tutors and small seminars.

In order to rebuild our foundations, we need to create a national society or collegium of scholars, backed by the resources of far-sighted philanthropists. The society would offer bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the classics of Western civilization, based on a battery of formal examinations and interviews. We would invite the graduates of traditional colleges and Internet universities, along with those who are self-taught or who have acquired their education through informal networks and private tutors, to seek these formal

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qualifications. The new degrees soon might gain national recognition as a gold standard of intellectual and aesthetic excellence, shaping the national conversation and encouraging the further growth of classical education at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. We must realize in our time the sort of synthesis of unity and plurality that the founders of the great medieval universities achieved, with many small platoons of sanity cooperating in a large-scale campaign that gains widespread notice and response.