

The Culture Wars Are Over: Debt Won

“Debt” has replaced “culture” as the concept structuring arguments about the humanities’ role in higher education. This is not bad news, inasmuch as debt encourages a sweeping reexamination of higher education’s value to students—not only what that value is, but also how to measure it, and how universities actually go about providing it.

During the reign of “culture,” discussion of higher education’s value was more narrowly conceived. Defenders and critics of the humanities tended to behave as if it could be assessed through careful attention to the syllabus. This was among the more depressing conclusions we reached in drafting a chapter on the 1980s and 90s for our book, “Mass Media U.” Turning to the turbulent academy of our youth in the spirit of mature reappraisal, we revisited aggressive defenses of the canon during the heyday of its decolonization and marvelled anew at the solution of having it both ways by “teaching the conflicts.”

A truly amazing amount of time and energy went into scolding English professors for what they were or were not teaching—amazing, because what they were or were not teaching was so largely beside the point when it came to consideration of how higher education was changing. In the period of the culture wars, a massive wave of program innovation reshaped every corner of campus and an increasing subdivision of labor rewrote the job description of “professor.” In the research university at century’s end, no one department’s curriculum could hope to succeed in doing much of anything to or for students, let alone “culture,” without forging alliances across campus.

Debt now challenges faculty to forego fighting among themselves over disciplinary turf and field-specific canons in favor of reminding themselves who, exactly, constitute the audiences for higher education. Faculty are called upon to pay renewed attention to facts such as:

- the classroom is but a small part of the experience our institutions provide to students
- there is a wide gulf separating students from the primary audience for our research
- our students' future employers are at least an indirect audience for our work

These are well established themes, to be sure, but they are given urgency by the figure of the debt-ridden student, who provides a nexus around which a whole host of systemic problems accrete: consumerism, helicopter parents, standardized testing and what it's done to K-12, the cost of a bachelor's degree amidst economic downturn, bad student financial aid policy, the rise of for-profit higher education, the proliferation of "global" satellite campuses, and investment in online education, just to name a few of the more prominent issues.

This shift from "culture" to "debt" was discernable in the 2013 "Summer of Humanities Debates," which were so notably defensive about the return on investment in a humanities education. In round one, defense took the form of a familiar argument that the humanities' social import could be found in their nonutility: they provided critical, generalist skills improving whole persons rather than narrow training designed to reduce individuals to immediately useful cogs in the machine. The idea was to stick up for arts and culture stuff that the pre-professional tracks dismissed as so much fluff: not worth funding, as North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory explained, unless it's "going to get someone a job." There was little infighting among those in the humanist camp as the conversation turned up CEOs able to endorse well-rounded

liberal arts job seekers and actual data demonstrating that humanities degrees seemed to pay off in the long run (see, e.g., [this article](#)). As a result, in round two we got to celebrate the practicality of humanities training on the job market, as if this proved the value of impracticality established in round one.

As approaches to humanities' evergreen "crises" go, this wasn't so bad. It demonstrated some attention to the problem of how humanist pedagogies plug into the pervasive system of value mediated by money (because, you know, capitalism). And it didn't fuss too much about the informational content transmitted by "the humanities" or "the liberal arts" (often misleadingly treated as synonyms).

As the summer of 2014 comes to a close, national attention seems drawn to an even broader picture, one focused on failed investment in undergraduates tout court. The reception of William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* (now in its third week on *The New York Times*' best seller list) has demonstrated that literate Americans can be roused by a critique of careerism when combined with ridicule of the Ivy League. Amazon reviewer Swish, a self-described "product of that elite education system in the early 2000s" declared that "this book has helped to bring me to life again, after the soul-crushing, or actually mostly just soul-forgetting experience of elite education." As Deresiewicz bottom-lines it in a [response to his critics](#): "The issue now is not that kids don't or at least wouldn't want to get a liberal education as well as a practical one... The issue is that the rest of us don't want to pay for it." "Debt" offers a good enough shorthand for the whole ensemble of forces that have ended up burdening individual undergraduates with all manner of higher ed problems.

That meme has so taken over discussion that even John Oliver has gotten into the act, recently spending a quarter hour of [Last Week Tonight](#) on HBO castigating universities, the federal

government, and above all for-profit higher ed for ripping off students. The Feds had their hearts in the right place back in 1965, when Lyndon Johnson signed the Higher Education Act into law and released what would become a flood of low-interest loan dollars to broaden educational access. Nowadays, however, Oliver describes Federal student loan policy as driven primarily by the lobbying efforts of for-profit education vendors. As for the students themselves, Oliver enthused, "You need to stop watching this show right now. You don't have time for this. Get out there, and enjoy the fuck out of your college experience, because you may be paying for it for the rest of your life."

The dangers of enjoying college and worrying about the future later are themselves the object of study in the latest book from sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. *Aspiring Adults Adrift* points to "a fundamental failure in the higher education market," according to [Kevin Carey in The New York Times](#): "[W]hile employers can tell the difference between those who learned in college and those who were left academically adrift, the students themselves cannot." A striking difference between student self-perception and the context revealed by sociological examination provides the book with its mainspring. "While almost one-quarter of the college graduates we studied were living back at home with their families two years after finishing college," the authors discover, "a stunning 95 percent reported that their lives would be the same or better than those of their parents." One suspects that reader Swish of Amazon.com might welcome this news less eagerly than she does Deresiewicz's call to reawaken her soul. Nonetheless, Deresiewicz and Arum and Roksa describe similar terrains of academic disfunction.

For the sociologists, institutions of higher education have cultivated student misprision. "Rather than defining undergraduate experiences in a manner conducive to the development of young adults, institutions today have let

themselves be defined by the preferences of undergraduates," Arum and Roksa lament. Students look to their teachers for "external signals to evaluate their performance," but find "those signals are quite weak, as decades of grade inflation have eroded the power of grades to signal academic accomplishment." In their 2011 book, *Academically Adrift*, they summarized researcher George Kuh's finding that a "disengagement compact" prevails on our campuses. Professors and students have, in effect, negotiated a situation in which relatively low levels of work by either party will suffice to earn relatively good grades. Both groups perceive that their time would be better spent elsewhere. On the faculty side, Arum and Roksa explain, this is not question of lassitude so much as an understandable response to changing student expectations, various demands on our time, emphasis on research in performance evaluation, and so forth.

Given that this situation is not only dire but systemically dire, it is surprising that Arum and Roksa offer but modest proposals for reform. To professors, they recommend more rigor in teaching and evaluation, as well as renewed emphasis on general skills (like critical thinking) and clearer assessment practices for specialized degree programs (educators in STEM and history shoot to the head of the class for identifying competencies that their majors should develop). To colleges and universities, they recommend fewer rock climbing walls and less stress on developing "interpersonal competencies, psychological well-being, and capacity for social adjustment." The "cultivation of character, grit, perseverance, social obligation, and duty" would be better goals for extracurricular activities. The Breakfast Club is out; bring back John Wayne.

Arum and Roksa portray college as a massive optimism industry peddling the pretense of development without any of its substance. Yet rather than developing their critique across various social institutions after the fashion of disciplinary

forebear C. Wright Mills (whom they favorably mention), they tailor “solutions” cut to the measure of achievable policy positions. Their prescriptions combine an emphasis on character-building (the job now primarily of student service professionals) with advocacy of performance-based assessment (which no one does terribly well or consistently, but the Federal government may soon mandate). They are among those urging us to abandon the nineteenth-century solution to the problem of administering knowledge, the Carnegie Unit or course credit hour, which made the elective system possible and rapidly grew to become a standard measure of student learning as well as faculty work time.

Arum and Roksa prefer measures like the nonprofit [Council for Aid to Education](#)’s Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which measures student “proficiency in critical thinking and written communication” by asking them to narrate responses to “real world” situations. This test confirms for the sociologists that students do not know what they are talking about when they claim to have learned in college—and neither do their professors. Arum and Roksa find no correlation between student self-assessment or grades and CLA numbers. But, they discover that lower CLA scores correlate to lower wage earning power and higher rates of un- and underemployment.

We are sympathetic to the quest for alternatives to the Carnegie Unit and the specious equivalencies it creates. We are less optimistic that healthy doses of *Bildung* and the CLA will address the problem of debt, which is less about whether students are learning what they think they’re learning than who can be convinced to pay for “college”—which has for more than a century been understood as a social experience as well as an educational one.

Relative inattention to that social dimension sometimes characterizes more radical calls for solutions to the student debt crisis, as in [this Tedx talk](#) from Nicholas Mirzoeff.

Obviously, the format constrains what can be said.

Regardless, one is immediately struck by a certain disconnect between the higher education sector as envisioned in Mirzoeff's explanation of the debt crisis and that imagined by the solution he proposes.

On the problem side, Mirzoeff directs our attention to "high tuition low endowment schools like NYU" which "could become the Bear Stearns and Lehmans of the tuition debt crisis." Such schools may find themselves forced to dip lower into their applicant pools to find students (i.e., suckers) willing to bear the cost of running the whole operation. If this happens, these institutions would end up becoming "overpriced schools for undersmart kids" like, he suggests, Drew University. In this portrait, postsecondary ed looks like a diverse marketplace in which institutions strive to attract "the best" applicants, while parents and students seek "the best" schools, with all the complexity entailed in arriving at ideas about what is "the best."

On the solution side, Mirzoeff proposes two kinds of schools. Publics, where tuition should be free, and privates, where he advocates the "Starbucks solution": student customers should stay away from private colleges until they refocus their attention on the core business of education and stop selling the academic equivalent of tired Starbucks sandwiches and easy listening CDs.

There is an obvious problem with the analogy—one revealed particularly by Arum and Roksa—in that administrators, faculty, and students lack consensus on what a university's core commodity is. Some of us think it's "education," others prefer to emphasize a holistic "student experience" that includes classroom education as a central, but certainly not the only, component. In other words, there's a possibility that some of those Drew students are getting exactly the iced mocha frappuccino experience they're after, in which case one wouldn't necessarily count on the severity of the post-graduation comedown to discourage the behavior. This seems to

be where Arum and Roksa come out on the question.

Free public higher education for everyone is an obviously supportable idea. As Mirzoeff notes it would entail a welcome reallocation of federal dollars from corporate welfare to public welfare. We wonder, however, whether such a path could avoid the pitfalls of Starbucks. Public higher ed is itself intensely stratified, encompassing a range of types of institutions, and a whole host of functions not directly related to classroom education (ahem, research).

The problem of who pays for higher ed is now, at publics and privates alike, a highly various and complex one in which a number of interests and audiences matter. As a lynchpin in the current solution, student debt is objectionable in that it displaces responsibility for the whole complex matter of finding a pathway through college toward a better life squarely on the shoulders of persons who, by definition, are ill-equipped to make that decision: undergraduates.

Just how a specific undergraduate experience will qualify a particular student for a life they might end up wanting is notoriously difficult to determine in advance. Debt financing ups the stakes while limiting students from changing course. It makes sense to describe student debt as part of a basic biopower risk management strategy now fully extended to higher education. Nonetheless, student debtors are not like mortgage-holding homeowners. It is far less possible for borrowers to appraise the value of the purchase in advance (as Arum and Roksa's findings demonstrate). Still, the loan is secured not by any underlying asset but by the borrower's future earnings (which the bank promises to garnish until the debt is paid). There is no "downsizing" your college education later on: repayment and death are the only ways to discharge the obligation.

Humanities professors have had plenty of practice arguing that, first, they uniquely provide a kind of educational value

that cannot be reckoned in terms of earning power alone, and, second, that “liberal arts” approaches pay off in the long run because they offer a broader base that makes students more adaptable in changing times. The various rankings and measures being propagated to help students navigate the current debt crisis demonstrate the practical difficulty of sustaining either of these two arguments on behalf something called “the humanities.”

To pick just one example, consider [a new study by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia](#) that tracks graduates from 1992-93. It comes as no surprise to discover that engineers make more money, on average, than graduates with a degree in Visual and Performing Arts. But the study also notes that salaries range, sometimes considerably, within degree categories. It further notes that the range of degree categories themselves are making easy generalizations more difficult. (More than 800 individual flavors of baccalaureate degrees are currently tracked.) Although English language and literature/letters is an underperformer (as usual), the degree associated with the lowest wages is something called Family and consumer sciences/human sciences (CIP 19, to reference the instructional program code used by the National Center for Education Statistics). The gendered division of labor, or so one might infer, may be a more powerful determinant of income than particular degree pathways. In any case, “the humanities” is not among the options in Virginia or elsewhere. One must pick a more particular flavor. This study suggests, moreover, that students and parents should pay very close attention to the flavor they pick.

Traditional defenses of the humanities, we submit, are paralyzed in the face of this project of directing students to one major as opposed to some other. In the moment of doing so, they invariably cease to be defenses of “the humanities” and become arguments in favor a particular discipline (often the speaker’s) or else they resort to the chestnut that students

should follow their interests (in which case, why not agronomy, business management, or physics?).

Nor have humanities professors succeeded in working out amongst themselves a division of labor capable of distributing important tasks across their disciplinary divisions, in the way that a biology degree might require certain competencies taught by the Chemistry Department or Computer Science might require completion of coursework in Mathematics. (Interestingly, we sometimes do better at this in PhD programs: humanities graduate programs at John's school encourage students to secure the additional credential of a "Designated Emphasis," a graduate minor in effect requiring coursework in a humanities subject area that resides outside the home department.)

Similarly, evidence suggests that "liberal arts" breadth is increasingly hard to come by amidst the array of approaches to "general education" on campus. [Numbers](#) from the Baccalaureate and Beyond survey crunched by the Academy of Arts & Sciences Humanities Indicators project suggest that undergraduates, overall, take more credits in the humanities than they do in the STEM disciplines. STEM and humanities students constitute barely overlapping audiences, however, with few majors in STEM disciplines pursuing humanities coursework beyond the core general ed requirements and vice versa. It's all well and good to argue that "the humanities" should have a place in general education, but we have plainly not succeeded in fine-tuning this argument to a moment *after* gen ed has been reconceived in terms of distribution requirements scattered over an ever-increasing number of departments and across a wildly differentiated array of schools.

Here again "the humanities" as a rubric may be part of the problem. Do we really imagine that the history component of general ed should plug into biology in the same way as, say, the literary studies component plugs into sociology, or the media studies component connects with physics? Do any of these

“humanities” disciplines need some quality that can be obtained equally well from chemistry, earth science, and math? Mixing up curricular divisions and giving them new names, as Mark’s university among others has [done](#), helps a little by estranging the problem. But it does not go to the fundamental issue: how to assemble a puzzle composed less of general areas than a large number of highly particularized pieces.

For most students, help in assembling that puzzle and thereby making “the most” of their education comes not primarily from professors but from student services employees (some of whom are students themselves). The faculty in John’s department, for instance, have largely outsourced undergraduate advising to various Dean’s offices and to a highly capable advisor for English majors. This frees professors up for other kinds of service as well as for research, but it also mandates they think more about how to coordinate their curricular efforts with the counsel being offered by administrators—particular if they wish to articulate their courses with those offered by other parts of the university. Humanities professors can describe their classes as cultivating critically thinking citizen subjects all they want, but to actually do this in a systematic way, they need to collaborate with the administrative personnel empowered to direct students to courses emphasizing such skill—and not just any such courses, but those most likely to propagate “critical” effects across the rest of the student’s educational experience.

It is not enough to defend the humanities as if one size fit all. It is not enough, moreover, to speak of the humanities as if that category meant the same thing to every audience, to the students trying to satisfy distribution requirements and choose majors, to the student services professionals helping them do so, to the faculty in various departments shaping their disciplinary curricula in relation to offerings across campus, to the faculty committees and administrative staffers overseeing that process, to the sociologists correlating

degree completions to salaries and standardized test results, to the policy makers turning sociological studies into talking points and governmental initiatives, to the comedians and columnists weighing in, to the students and parents who currently foot the bill.

Debt provides us with the chance to address these varied audiences and to perceive why such a varied address is necessary. Debt encompasses the whole student experience, including but not limited to the classroom. Debt, and the related metrics for measuring the “value added” by diverse majors and schools, reveals that a very wide array of disciplines are currently subsumable under the term “the humanities”: the referent is sometimes as narrow as “English” and sometimes as wide as “everything not STEM.” Each has a place in the student experience that can, and should, be described in ways that relate the question of audience—who cares?—with the question of value—who pays? By embracing the challenge posed by these two questions, we might hope to alter the complex and ethically dubious institutional situation that defers too much responsibility for figuring out college to students’ future selves.

We must engage a conversation about “the humanities” that is prepared to embrace the diversity of its approaches and audiences, even if this means that “the humanities” will disappear into all manner of discrete fields and new combinations. If we can’t do this, we might as well go back to the 80s, back to teaching conflicts in which we have a smaller and smaller part to play.