

From Academic Freedom to Organizational Democracy

In his [July 2015 Inside Higher Ed](#) column, Christopher Newfield usefully notes that faculty have lost the ability to see academic freedom as a public relations problem. In a [follow-up post](#), he proposes that “organizational democracy” will allow us to solve this problem. We agree with both posts, although as usual a lot depends on what “organizational democracy” might mean.

The ongoing [unpleasantness](#) in [Wisconsin](#) and its [potential national ramifications](#) provide the occasion for Newfield’s intervention. Instead of construing Wisconsin as a reminder that professorial labor requires special protection, Newfield proposes that we strive to discuss the future of work in general. The demand for extraordinary privileges only really wins the day, he observes, when addressed to an audience already “inside the academic consensus that the pursuit of truth requires intellectual freedom and professional self-governance.” It is reasonable to expect that, lacking such protections in their own work lives, most people would find themselves outside that consensus and thus “wouldn’t immediately see why empowering chancellors will hurt teaching or slow the pace of discovery.”

In addition to claiming a unique ability to speak truth to power, faculty (not only at Wisconsin) also tell themselves that the market for professorial talent demands tenure. Universities must guarantee it in order to compete with other universities, or so the conventional wisdom goes. Newfield observes that the size of the reserve labor pool currently willing to work without tenure undermines this pitch. More importantly, the competitiveness meme does not meet the challenges of our moment. “The U.S. doesn’t have a

competitiveness disadvantage,” he writes, “it has a collaborative disadvantage, and universities are needed more than ever to develop new kinds of collaborative capabilities.” Developing those capacities presents an organizational and media relations challenge worth embracing.

Doing so requires unlearning the special status argument, which as Newfield suggests goes back to the earliest twentieth-century steps to institutionalize the notion of academic freedom in the U.S. One of the AAUP’s most durable claims, he explains, constructs “academic freedom as the great exception to the autocratic managerialism of American business life.” The 1915 [Declaration](#) that announced the AAUP as academic freedom’s advocate-in-chief indeed sought to distinguish faculty appointment from the relation of a “private employer to his employees.”

It equally, and even more emphatically, addressed the threat from the “tyranny of public opinion”:

The tendency of modern democracy is for men to think alike, to feel alike, and to speak alike. Any departure from the conventional standards is apt to be regarded with suspicion. Public opinion is at once the chief safeguard of a democracy, and the chief menace to the real liberty of the individual... An inviolable refuge from such tyranny should be found in the university. It should be an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate and where their fruit, though still distasteful to the community as a whole, may be allowed to ripen until finally, perchance, it may become a part of the accepted intellectual food of the nation or of the world.

At the core of the argument exempting faculty from the usual American work rules one finds a logic depicting the university an “inviolable refuge,” a redoubt shielded against groupthink, a bunker to protect the professors who would convince the nation to eat its fruits and vegetables. Selling the

university was thus made congruent with selling potentially controversial (but good for you!) ideas. This was an explicitly elitist position in the professional mode: experts served a public that did not know its own best interest.

Once opened, such a logic of exception was renewed over the course of the twentieth century by august bodies including the US Supreme Court. In 1966, Justice Brennan declared in his [majority opinion to Keyishian v Board of Regents](#) that “our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned.” As [Marjorie Heins](#) points out on the AAUP’s blog, however, this principle has met difficulty in practice, and the AAUP counsel’s guidance on “[The Current Legal Landscape](#)” asserts that “the scope of the First Amendment right of academic freedom for professors remains unclear.”

Uncertain as a legal right, tenure succeeded as institutional policy, but later in the history of American academia than faculty may think. Despite AAUP successes in the 1910s and 20s, tenure protections remained mostly informal and dependant on the will of senior administration for much of the century. When Rice University surveyed policies at seventy-eight universities in 1935, it found that fewer than half had formal rules about tenure protection. Tenure was not a standard and ubiquitous feature of American higher education before the 1970s, [Caitlin Rosenthal](#) recounts. There are, Rosenthal explains, competing stories about how this came about. Lost in the usual history of professorial advocacy, she argues, is the ready acceptance by administrators of the institutional competition idea, with tenure chalked up as one of the “practical exigencies of recruiting and maintaining excellent faculties” (16).

Before faculty could assume that a “tenure line” would mean pretty much the same thing at any institution that advertised one, a rationale in which academic freedom benefited not only

the faculty and (ultimately) the public but also the university needed to be established. Consider the landmark case of University of Wisconsin Professor Richard T. Ely. As commentators on current events including [William Bowen and Eugene Tobin](#) observe, the 1894 Ely case made Wisconsin a central example in chapter one of the American history of academic freedom that Governor Walker and company now hope to revise. In a column for *The Nation*, Wisconsin's superintendent of public instruction Oliver Wells alleged that Ely, Director of the School of Economics, "believes in strikes and boycotts, justifying and encouraging the one while practicing the other." Wells concluded that such propagation of "utopian, impractical, or pernicious doctrines" made Ely unfit for employment as a Wisconsin professor. The Regents appointed a committee to investigate and serve judgment. They not only found Ely innocent of the charges leveled against him, but also took the opportunity to question whether such allegations should have mattered to the university in the first place. Professors should be free, the Regents declared, "to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead."

The Regents committee's pronouncement, aka the Wisconsin Magna Carta, relied on the implication that such freedom would distinguish the state's great university from other workplaces. "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere," the committee wrote, "we believe the great State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone truth can be found." This past June, UW-Madison Chancellor Blank used the remark to sum up her article "[Why State Lawmakers Must Support Tenure at Public Universities](#)"—preached to a choir of *Chronicle of Higher Education* readers.

Trumpeting Badger faculty freedoms looked less defensive in 1894, when, according to the *State Journal*, the Regents committee provided the university with a successful publicity coup. "Incidentally if not inadvertently the report contains a

résumé of the good work done at the university ever since the civil war," the paper noted. "This handsome advertisement has been telegraphed all over the country."

Advertisement itself rapidly became a Wisconsin tradition. Early in the new century, recount the historians Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, administrators enlisted the English Department to write bulletins conveying to newspapers "in an attractive way, the story of discoveries, inventions, and innovations" across campus (II: 90). "The aggressive businessman does not wait for the consumer...to purchase his articles," declared Wisconsin President Charles R. Van Hise in his 1904 inaugural address. "Are we going to be less aggressive in education than we are in business?" In 1917, Wisconsin joined Yale, California, and Indiana to be among the first members of the American Association of College News Bureaus. That membership grew to 75 schools by the late 1920s.

Meanwhile, at Wisconsin and elsewhere, the faculty's promotional duties were handed off to public relations professionals. In his 1928 *Propaganda*, no less a figure than public relations pioneer Edward Bernays recognized universities as early adopters (140). "It may surprise and shock some people," revealed a columnist in the magazine *Personality*, "to be told that the oldest and most dignified seats of learning in America now hire press agents, just as railroad companies, fraternal organizations, moving picture producers and political parties retain them. It is nevertheless a fact" (qtd. in *Propaganda* 142). Working with societies like the National Education Association, Bernays noted, universities not only used publicity to promote themselves and their professors but also to redress more general concerns, like the prestige of teachers. Thus the work of promoting the public value of the university, which justified academic freedom, passed to salaried professionals who could not earn that freedom. By definition, these professionals could not remain within an academic cloister

that shielded them from tyrannical public opinion but needed, as Bernays put it, to “interpret the public for the client” in order to be able to “interpret the client to the public” (*Crystalizing* 14).

With accelerating fervor after the 1970s normalization of tenure (and job market collapse), postsecondary institutions turned to non-tenure track faculty to perform essential teaching functions, and academic freedom was also used to mark the difference between these instructors and their tenure track peers. As [widely cited National Center for Education Statistics numbers show](#), by 2009 non-tenure-track faculty constituted roughly 70% of the instructors employed by institutions of higher education. As [Jennifer Ruth](#) ably chronicles, our present tenure system distinguishes not only faculty from non-faculty professionals but also stratifies faculty into haves and have nots.

Particularly at the large public universities, the AAUP’s “isolated refuge” of 1915 now looks more like a social microcosm comprising, in addition to various ranks of teachers, researchers, and administrators, a campus police force, medical services, commercial “auxiliary enterprises,” groundskeeping and maintenance staff, and so on.

An organizational democracy in which all these university stakeholders participated would differ considerably from the currently prevailing forms of “faculty governance.” Academic departments and their traditional extensions, e.g. the “faculty senate,” do not seem well positioned to join the rest of the campus workforce in discussions that might be called democratic. The habits of (relative) departmental autonomy in employment matters such as the hiring, merit evaluation, tenure, and promotion of in-field colleagues run bone deep, almost as deep, perhaps, as faculty isolation from Human Resources interaction with their nonexempt coworkers.

Force of habit so strongly connects “academic freedom” and

departments today because the two forms grew up together: both are features of the uniquely American university that developed around the turn of the last century. As [Louis Menand](#) explains, tenure has worked to strengthen disciplinary and departmental balkanization, to protect sociology professors not only from administrative or public tyranny but also from the interference of physics professors. In their canonical 1955 *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*, Richard Hofstadter and W. P. Metzger elaborate the danger that “in fighting on the line of intramural law...the temptation is to make academic freedom coterminous with the security of professors in the guild” (457). To shun that temptation, we do well to follow Newfield in thinking about “professor” as a job among others. Hofstadter and Metzger’s argument, however, suggests why that might be hard to do.

If, as Newfield observes, tenure-line faculty expect and enjoy “protection from the at-will employment practice of firing any employee without cause,” it is worth remembering that some non-faculty university employees have that protection too. The campus police might have union representation, for example, although it is likely to be different from faculty union representation (if they have it), which is also likely to be different from graduate student union representation (if they have it), and so forth. Most campuses will have detailed policies defining terms of probation, evaluation, and procedures for termination of nonunion, nonexempt employees. Expect where specific statutory provisions apply—for example, in the case of overtime rules or Family Medical Leave—policies and contracts define working conditions on most large campuses. In other words, campuses in general are more “for cause” than “at will” kinds of workplaces, in which some effort has gone into making it difficult to terminate employment based on administrative caprice.

We are definitely not suggesting that “for cause” protections work uniformly or well across our campuses. We are suggesting,

rather, that a discussion of termination for cause involving all employees need not start from the habitual “have” and “have not” discussion currently surrounding tenure. It could, rather, begin from the assumptions that everyone is “special” in this division of labor because we all have different jobs and that no one deserves to be an “at will” employee.

Being in favor of “for cause” for everyone does not really explain the kind of division of labor that one might favor, however. It does not explain the institutional form in which organizational democracy might take place. More pointedly, holding out academic freedom as what Newfield calls a model for “general economic and social justice virtues” does not speak to deeply ingrained (departmentalized) academic commitments to “merit” and “talent” crucial to the faculty’s peer review, shared governance, and other workplace features that we might also like to defend.

If one wants to hold onto the value of faculty expertise, the observation that “professor” is a job like many others is as insufficient as it is necessary. From the beginnings of the American research university, the faculty’s job description has entailed producing potentially uncomfortable truths in the lab or classroom. We think it should continue to do so. But it is equally clear that the division of labor tasked with creating, maintaining, circulating, and implementing the truths faculty produce has changed considerably in the past century. Not only does the contemporary university employ more diverse types of professionals than its forebears imagined, but the mediasphere in which it addresses its publics is [noisier](#), more diverse, and [differently professionalized than it was when Wisconsin first promoted its Magna Carta](#). Newfield is right to point out that we should not expect old arguments to explain this new context. Thus, collaboration.

How best to collaborate then? And with whom? Certainly academic arrangements provide models (labs! committees!), but they are not the only ones. We share our organizational

vernacular both with a more expansive set of co-workers than we typically acknowledge and with a more expansive set of institutions. In truth, the university holds no monopoly on labs, committees, departments, and classrooms. To collaborate effectively, we need to become conversant in a broader range of organizational forms and allow that we might learn from them as they might learn from us. Alan Liu makes one such suggestion, arguing persuasively beginning with his 2004 *Laws of Cool* that academics can learn things about project-based research from the world's silicon valleys, alleys, and savannahs. The creative industries offer other models for project-based collaboration: Hollywood's includes collective bargaining.

No matter how democratic the organizational scheme, it will require a media relations strategy.

In its early twentieth century invention, tenure as a public service endowed faculty with work protections that "the public" at large did not have. Pointing out that it still lacks them is not a great rallying cry. Far better to contend that anyone's termination should have a justifiable cause. That would not only be a better public relations strategy but also require the faculty to better understand how the organizations that employ them work (a project to which Newfield has made a long string of notable contributions). It would be good for faculty to remember as well as explain that "sifting and winnowing" requires in practice many different kinds of labor from a broad spectrum of employees. This would of necessity require us to question the habit of equating "academic freedom" with departmental prerogative, to acknowledge that other types of organizations might offer interesting labor models, and to embrace the challenge of overcoming our national collaboration deficit.

The stakes of such engagement are indeed established by Governor Walker's plan for the University of Wisconsin, as embodied in the statutory change singled out by the recent

joint [AAUP / AFT-Wisconsin statement](#) on the matter. This change authorizes faculty layoffs due to “a budget or program decision regarding program discontinuance, curtailment, modification, or redirection.” It lays the ground for the very decision-making it describes, moving tenure from statute to policy, empowering administrators to do away with programs at will, and creating the occasion for them to do so by cutting \$250 million from the state’s allocation.

The combination justifiably commands attention. The question of who, if not senior administrators alone, should make decisions about “program discontinuance, curtailment, modification, or redirection” (not to mention innovation) has multiple stakeholders within the university and outside it.

If there is to be organizational democracy in the university (for starters), it will not deserve the name unless it can convincingly defend both the particular kinds of value that faculty produce and the division of labor in which they produce it.

Wisconsin Republicans may have accidentally supplied academic freedom with a new banner to replace the quaint “sifting and winnowing” of the “Magna Carta.” In 2014, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos proclaimed that he wanted the university to abandon research on “[the ancient mating habits of whatever](#)” in favor of research economically beneficial to the state. The rebuttal, of course, is not only that university research provides a tremendous economic benefit, but also that ancient mating habits are [fascinating](#), that their study offers many [practical applications in daily life](#), and that such study is potentially limitless, indeed extensible to “whatever.” What could be more worthy of a collaborative effort engaging the university in all its parts?

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[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.

The 1960s Origins of the Academic Labor "Crisis"

Annual conventions and program revisions have made talk of graduate student education, labor, and [cost](#) particularly frothy in the last month or two. Interestingly, discussions of the graduate school mess are beginning to test the familiar narrative formula in which neoliberal administration + faculty complacency + lamentable economic events = really bad times for freshly minted PhDs. As a result, it has become newly possible to discern how growth strategies of the 1960s share responsibility for the current fix. The legendary campus radicals of '68, it now seems necessary to recall, included graduate students who, as nominally temporary apprentices, assumed permanent responsibility for large chunks of the research university's undergraduate curriculum.

Although they may not identify it as such, recent developments reveal this legacy when they expose the dependency of research specialization on graduate student labor. In December, for instance, Johns Hopkins joined the likes of Stanford and the CUNY Grad Center in recasting the funding model for PhDs by

providing summer support and cutting down time to degree. To this increasingly common formula Hopkins adds the goal of chopping PhD enrollments by 25% over five years. "To compensate for fewer graduate students available to teach undergraduate course discussion sections," Colleen Flaherty reported in [Inside Higher Ed](#), "Hopkins plans to hire more teaching assistants with master's degrees." Graduate students joined faculty in protesting this approach, arguing that a "critical mass" is necessary for smaller graduate programs especially to stay alive. Debate about shrinking PhD programs at the MLA yielded similar concerns (as [Scott Jaschik](#) recounts). Looking past the familiar problem of too many PhDs or too few tenure track lines, this concern helps draw renewed attention to the long-standing dynamic in which graduate student labor provides a critical leg of the triangle connecting research specialization with undergraduate instruction. Beyond the balancing of professional inputs and outputs, fundamental departmental labor and instructional models are at issue.

A related insight comes from recent historical analyses of job market trends. For instance, the statistician known as [Adjunct Nate Silver](#) looks at PhDs in the famously beleaguered field of German. Starting from 1960-61, he notes, "the number of Ph.D.s earned each year tripled by 1966-67, and doubled again by 1972-73." Grad student enrollments went up in part to address the demand for professors predicted by growing undergraduate enrollments, but undergraduate growth was not nearly fast enough to keep pace with the proliferation of PhDs: "Between fall 1959 and fall 1969, total [undergraduate] enrollments jumped from 3.6 million to over 8 million. But a jump of 120% in enrollments didn't in itself call for an increase of over 500% in the number of Ph.D.s in German." The sense of a job market collapse in the 1970s was created not by economic contraction, Adjunct Nate concludes, but by the hyperactive PhD creation of the 1960s, combined with ill-conceived changes in the way the MLA advertised positions (or

the lack thereof). After the late 60s boom and bust, the market was relatively stable for the next 30 years, with departments cranking out new German professors in numbers roughly proportional to positions advertised. Only after 2008 does a dramatic shift in this pattern occur, due a steep decline in the number of available tenure track lines.

As Adjunct Nate Silver points out, the period from around 1960 to the present is not simply a chapter in the history of the academic job market. Rather, it *is* the history of the academic job market, at least for key humanities disciplines. As Marc Bousquet has also observed (in [How the University Works](#)), the 1960s were the period that invented the apparatus of national searches for faculty lines that allows and encourages us to perceive this labor market as one. The MLA introduced the conference-based “Job Mart” in 1955 in an effort to replace the old-boy network as the primary hiring mechanism (“Hello, Professor Jones? Professor Smith here. We’re hiring. Send over your brightest boy in Romanticism, won’t you?”). In 1969, the Job Mart system “‘broke down’ because the problem ‘was now one of locating jobs rather than candidates’” (Association of Departments of English qtd. in Bousquet 192). The MLA’s notorious Job Information List replaced it.

There is more to the 1960s labor story, however, than an increase in the number (and variety) of PhDs and the development of new mechanisms for marketing them. This was the period that made graduate student teaching assistants essential functionaries of research university departments.

In a 1967 *Administrative Science Quarterly* special issue devoted to “Universities as Organizations,” research professor of sociology Robert Dubin and research assistant Frederic Beisse argued that 1960s student activism had its principal source in the position and function of graduate assistants (“[The Assistant: Academic Subaltern](#)”). The TAs were led to revolt due to a fundamental organizational “disjunction”: they had been given the teaching responsibilities of faculty

without corresponding legitimation of their authority and perquisites to carry them out (522). The authors provide an historical trend analysis involving ratios of students to faculty and teaching assistants. In this way, they demonstrate that public research universities turned to graduate students to accommodate massive enrollment growth in the 50s and 60s.

In describing increasing reliance on TAs as part of the overall growth strategy characteristic of the university during the period of booming faculty employment, confident welfare state administration, and ascendant left intellectuals, Dubin and Beisse provide an alternative etiology for the well publicized troubles of late twentieth and early twenty-first century graduate students.

In the late 90s, academic humanists began to see reliance on graduate student instructors as part of the "causalization" of the academic workforce, a centerpiece of neoliberal administrative strategies that overwhelmed higher education in the wake of the 1970s economic crises. Graduate student exploitation, on this view, was the flip side of heavy-handed administration that, in the name of budget control, also constrained the growth and authority of tenure-line faculty.

In contrast, Dubin and Beisse diagnose increased use of TAs as reprising a familiar pattern in professional divisions of labor. In their view, the phenomenon illustrated a generally accepted principle:

Whenever there is pressure on an established occupation or profession to provide more services, and the demand cannot be met through normal expansion of the supply of certified experts, then portions of the skill will be shifted, by a division of labor, to lower skilled and lower status work colleagues. (545)

They offer, for example, the devolution of skills in medicine "from doctor to registered nurse to practical nurse to aide,

or from doctor to technician" (545). This pattern is so obvious, according to the Dubin and Beisse, that we should marvel at the ability of faculty, administrators, and graduate students to avoid acknowledging that they were in the process of creating a new occupational class and deskilling undergraduate teaching. They sidestepped the issue through the idea of "apprenticeship." By understanding graduate student teaching as a temporary state leading to mature participation in the profession, 60s faculty and administrators could pretend that the division of labor had not changed and hope that graduate students would outgrow their rebelliousness.

"The collective action of the sort employed by the assistants at Berkeley, while effective, is the antithesis of professional behavior," Dubin and Beisse caution. "The long-term effects may be to produce a generation of professors whose notions of professional behavior and decorum differ sharply from those of the present generation" (546). While seeing the power of graduate student unionization, they have greater hope that undergraduate dissatisfaction will force change. Perhaps undergraduate complaints about the quality of TA-led classes would prompt administrators to reverse the trend and force faculty back into classrooms.

That did not happen. Graduate student unions succeeded at a range of public universities in the 1970s. On private campuses, however, the National Labor Relations Board refused to recognize graduate students as employees who could form unions before the year 2000. In all types of research institutions, TAs remain essential to staffing undergraduate curricula. The view of their work as apprenticeships has proven remarkably durable. It survived even the 1990s bait-and-switch that established the graduate student labor crisis as a humanities problem. In 1989, the infamous Bowen Report, "Prospect for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences," suggested that retirements and enrollment growth would create "a substantial excess demand for faculty." As a result, a

susceptible proportion of college graduates (including us) were encouraged to pursue PhDs in the humanities. Report author William G. Bowen, however, had neglected to take the growing reliance on part-time workers into account (as Denise Magner explains [here](#).) When the demand he predicted failed to materialize, many aspirants found themselves prepared for jobs that did not exist. Calls to reform graduate education and employment practices became increasingly urgent.

“It is time to say, bluntly, that graduate education is losing its moral foundation,” Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé declared in 1995 ([Higher Education Under Fire](#) 20). In light of the flat job market for English PhDs, the proposition that graduate teaching assistantships were actually apprenticeships was in peril. Rather, it increasingly seemed that poorly compensated graduate student teachers were propping up a bankrupt system, which valued research productivity over teaching. In order to maintain their privileges, humanities professors were willing to throw their graduate students under the bus. English was in a particularly perilous position according to Nelson and Bérubé, because it had been singled out in 1980s and 90s attacks on “theory” and “political correctness.” It offered the popular press, state legislators, and university administrators a convenient scapegoat for the phenomenon of non-teaching faculty that was, in truth, much more pronounced in the sciences. Where Dubin and Beisse imagine political pressure from undergraduates might bring graduate exploitation to an end, Nelson and Bérubé hope that heightened awareness from faculty and administrators will solve the crisis. Failing to generate a groundswell of substantive “top-down” reforms, the authors soon gave their full-throated support to reenergized graduate student unionization efforts.

Meanwhile, professional associations in the period tended to double-down on the idea of apprenticeship and to respond to the plight of graduate students through (mostly ineffective) efforts to defend tenure ([Doe and Palmquist](#)). The perceived

problem was not that faculty and administrators had grown accustomed to a division of labor that relied on a “subaltern” class of professionals, but rather that administrators had figured out how to control costs by shifting instruction to non-tenure earning lines. If Nelson and Bérubé saw in this dynamic a moral crisis for the humanities, other commentators like Bousquet discerned an epochal political-economic shift arising, in part, from the failures of “Fordist” management in the 1960s. Bousquet described “flexible faculty” as “just one dimension” in a post-Fordist mutation “of the university into an efficient and thoroughly accountable environment through which streaming education can be made available in the way that information is delivered: just in time, on demand, in spasms synchronized to the work rhythm of student labor on the shop floor” (44). Here, the TA provides a bellwether for the university’s sinister new project to fuel an even more alienating form of capitalism through the one-two punch of workforce realignment (casualization) and ideological warfare (informationalization).

Eschewing apocalyptic pronouncements for the comfortable neutrality of bureaucratic prose, no less an authority than the National Center for Education Statistics was, by 2009, prepared to certify the workforce realignment part of this narrative. That year, the Digest reported a 59% increase in the number of part-time faculty and a 48% percent increase in graduate assistant employees between 1997 and 2007. It also reported a corresponding decline in the percentage of faculty with tenure from 56% in 1993-94 to 49% in 2007-08 (270). In addition to indicating that the university had blazed a trail into a terrifying new era, the trend was also susceptible to description as a new type of management challenge. To address this “new normal,” commentators of various stripes maintain, faculty need to be more willing to organize, and humanities PhDs need missions other than traditional faculty appointments (see, e.g, this in the [New York Times](#)). One important variation on this theme asks us to embrace the reality that

the PhD already credentials graduates for jobs outside academe, a conclusion confirmed by a recent [study](#) by the American Historical Association.

Dubin and Beisse's largely forgotten 1967 argument suggests that insistence on the relative novelty of the trend may be one reason graduate education and employment seem so difficult to reform. When they interpret the shift of undergraduate instructional responsibility to graduate student TAs as a predictable outcome of the university's rapid postwar growth, they beg the question: How is it that this new division of labor could sustain the American research university for decades while continuing to appear temporary and illegitimate?

Read in tandem with Dubin and Beisse, Nelson and Bérubé's 1995 account provides a kind of answer. In contrast to their forebears, Nelson and Bérubé do not associate reliance on TAs with the "deskilling" of undergraduate instruction. The authors are struck, rather, by the ever-increasing demands placed on educators of all sorts, and note that newly minted PhDs find themselves required to publish more to land a job than many professors would have been expected to produce in their entire careers in the 1970s. Nonetheless, like Dubin and Beisse in 1967, they expect their colleagues to bristle at the impolite admission that a less prestigious and well-compensated professional class exists. "For decades American universities have fostered a kind of *idiot savant* academic culture," they observe. "Faculty members maintain expertise in their disciplines but remain mostly ignorant about how the university works" (Nelson and Bérubé 25). Who among us has not, on occasion, felt compelled to bemoan the ignorance of their coworkers? The particular ignorance at issue here, however, is the habitual sort. It is shared, to some extent, by those who would dispel it.

When Dubin and Beisse and Nelson and Bérubé chide their colleagues, they insinuate that the faculty have been irresponsible or incapable caretakers, unable or unwilling to

shelter their charges from administrative zeal to contain costs while increasing student enrollments. What Dubin and Beisse know about professionalism or Nelson and Bérubé know about class analysis does not keep them from recapitulating the very apprenticeship model that their arguments show to be outmoded.

In myriad ways, *undergraduate* instruction after the 1960s stopped idealizing this kind of relationship between teacher and student. Increasingly, undergraduates were treated as mature economic agents. At a relatively young age, they were expected to make life-changing choices regarding institutions, programs of study, and levels of debt obligation with a cool eye to the project of securing themselves a future. Professors and other experts would guide their choices, but not assume responsibility for their outcomes. Perhaps largely because of graduate education's critical role in disciplinary reproduction, however, professors retained the habit of imagining graduate students as charges in need of paternalistic care. While we do not seek a more callous professoriate, it seems this habit may have thwarted full cognizance of the division of labor responsible for producing and employing the vast majority of professors, graduate students, adjuncts, and administrators currently working in American higher ed.

It is not as if the faculty don't know their graduate students are employees. Rather, the problem is that they treat them as students first and employees second. What would happen if we reversed this, and treated them first and foremost as (fellow) employees? Bousquet argues that neoliberal administrative rhetoric considers graduate students rational actors while neoliberal administrative behavior reduces them to waste. To address this, he contends that graduate students should shake off their false consciousness and organize. A similar appeal rings through recent writing about adjunct labor and, as [Sue Doe and Mike Palmquist observe in the *ADE Bulletin*](#), academic

professional organizations are increasingly endorsing this approach. These efforts represent a turn towards incorporating graduates in the humanities as part of a workforce, and as such are well worth supporting. Still, it remains striking how much they lag behind the 1960s emergence of the problem they seek to address. As Dubin and Beisse point out, the graduate students began organizing when universities used their labor to supplement the professoriate, while disavowing this new division of professional labor. The narratives currently revising our understanding of the university's recent past should take care not to repeat that disavowal.

Miller's Big Lie

Dear John,

Just finished Toby Miller's breathless provocation to [Blow Up the Humanities](#). In his blurb, Bruce Robbins admires its sass. It has other virtues as well: a defense of the proposition that the humanities oughta be useful, a spirited rejection of what he calls the "Romantic elevation of consciousness" (Kindle location 1423) and, with it, of the conflation of literary studies with the Humanities, a cautious embrace of institutions, attention to humanities work, and advocacy of collaborative effort. A number of our favorite themes, in short. It's too bad that Miller launches from a false premiss:

There are two humanities in the United States. One is the humanities of fancy private universities, where the bourgeoisie and its favored subalterns are tutored in finishing school. I am naming this Humanities One, because it

is venerable and powerful and tends to determine how the sector is discussed in public. The other is the humanities of everyday state schools, which focus more on job prospects. I am calling this Humanities Two.’ Humanities One dominates rhetorically. Humanities Two dominates numerically. The distinction between them, which is far from absolute but heuristically and statistically persuasive, places literature, history, and philosophy on one side and communication and media studies on the other. It is a class division in terms of faculty research as well as student background, and it corresponds to the expansion of public higher education and the way that federal funding fetishizes the two humanities. (Kindle location 22-27).

Sound plausible, right? Media are popular! There’s money in them. And already from this first paragraph one knows which side one wants to be on. Forget the head-in-the-sand humanism of propertied elites. We, who work for a living at “everyday state schools,” have the force of numbers on our side. Those numbers suggest that “communication and media” trump “literature, history, and philosophy” any day of the week.

Or do they?

Miller’s evidence for the numerical strength of “communication and media studies” comes primarily from Christopher Newfield’s recap, in a 2009 issue of [*Profession*](#), of [“Table 261. Bachelor’s degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by discipline division: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2005-06”](#) from the *2007 Digest of Educational Statistics*. That table shows, as Newfield and Miller both report, 616% growth in “Communication, journalism, and related programs” since 1970, while English declined by 14%. Visual and Performing Arts (where, you’ll recall, the CIP for film studies is located) increased by 174%. And “Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies” (which includes fields like Peace Studies alongside Gerontology and Historic Preservation

and Conservation) grew by 404% over this same period. Miller's perception that growth in some of these areas equals growth in the Humanities may be colored by his experience at UC Riverside, where it appears that Communications and his own discipline of "Media and Culture Studies" have been lumped in a concentration called "Interdisciplinary Studies." If I'm guessing rightly how Riverside has reported this to IPEDS, the major has done well. 30.9999 Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies, Other was the fourth most popular bachelor's degree, behind Business, Psychology, and Biological and Biomedical Sciences in Riverside's 2011 completions. Although, more ominously, the [web page](#) declares that Riverside's Academic Senate has declared a moratorium on the major. Must be an interesting story there.

These comparative growth rates are red meat thrown in front of the crisis people: English is in decline! Majors are fleeing to business and media! As James English points out, however, a more meaningful interpretation of the figures pays attention to absolute numbers as a proportion of all completions (which have increased) and is sensitive to ups-and-downs within the period rather than fixing on the change from 1970 to 2006. For example, in that table from 2007, Communication, journalism, and related programs increased roughly 5 fold from 10,324 bachelor's degrees in 1970 to 51,650 in 1990. English language and literature/letters started that period with 63,914, then plummeted to less than 40,000 before rebounding to 51,170 in 1990. For most of the 1990s, English and Communication graduated roughly the same number of majors, but Communication picked up in the new century, adding another 20,000 or so completions by 2006. Twenty-first century gains in Comm, in other words, probably don't come at the expense of English, although 70s and 80s gains may have done.

More interestingly, growth rate comparisons reveal potential shifts in ways of understanding "the humanities." Miller's rhetoric indicates as much when it sweeps up mass comm—which

almost never gets counted as a humanities discipline—along with “media studies.” For Miller, it turns out that “media studies” really means cultural studies of a few particular flavors (he provides a genealogy in a late chapter). At the outset, however, we’re encouraged to imagine a wider array of endeavors, since, after all, media studies is what workaday humanists do. I think you and I are generally in favor of humanist category confusion and, with Miller, of projects that enlist scholarly collaboration across disciplines conventionally mapped as humanities, social sciences, and STEM. The growth rates in areas like Visual and Performing Arts and Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies suggest there may be increasing opportunities for scholars able to engage in these ways. As I started to explain [here](#), these CIPs can be seen as encompassing disciplinary variety and potentially productive oddball institutional configurations. There is more to say about this.

In no sense, however, can comparative growth rates anchor the claim that “there are two humanities,” that the difference between them maps onto social class, and that this great divide places English on the side of elites and media studies on the side of the people. To disrupt this sophomoric picture, one needs only to look to the [whole data set](#). In 2011, 7643 degree granting institutions reported via IPEDs—imagine Beauty Schools of America in these figures alongside Harvard and Swarthmore. Here’s a breakdown of the number of institutions reporting first major bachelor’s degree completions under specific CIPs of interest.

- 52.0201 Business Administration and Management, General – 1727
- 42.0101 Psychology, General – 1396
- 23.0101 English Language and Literature, General – 1310
- 30.9999 Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies, Other – 639
- 09.0102 Mass Communication/Media Studies – 247
- 50.0601 Film/Cinema/Video Studies – 129

Business is the great demographic leveler. Institutions offering a bachelor's degree in it range from the numerous branches of ITT Technical Institute to the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Morehouse College, and Bob Jones University. English, however is not far behind. You can't get an English BA from ITT, but you can in Ann Arbor, at Morehouse, or Bob Jones (and in fact most of the places business degrees are offered). At the other end of the spectrum, 50.0601 is a truly boutique affair. Of 129 institutions granting degrees, 40 are Research Universities (very high activity), 30 are Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences, and 21 are Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs) according to Carnegie Classification. Consideration of associates degrees tips the balance still further in favor of business: 1341 institutions reported completions compared with 168 in 23.0101 and only 12 in 50.0601. Interestingly, 30.9999 picks up some ground here with 208 institutions showing associate degree completions.

The numbers confirm what ought to be perfectly obvious to anyone who works in the postsecondary humanities. The "dominance" of "literature, history, and philosophy" is not rhetorical, but institutional. These disciplines spent the better part of the 20th century securing their claims on resources within all manner of institutions of higher education and, as importantly, beyond it, in mandatory K-12 education. The situation is in fact more nearly the opposite of what Miller suggests: a visible minority of elite scholars and experimental programs at a limited array of relatively well-funded research universities are busily mounting rhetorical and institutional challenges to the configuration stabilized by their mid-20th century counterparts. Call it a hypothesis.

Miller takes a classic vanguardist position, waving the people's banner far ahead of the masses who continue to want that old-fashioned English degree. Again, there's a lot to

like about this position, which echoes some of what we've been saying here. But it would be better to emphasize the real contradictions, fractures, and possibilities of the present than to stage a phony class war between two versions of humanist endeavor. There are not one, not too, but many humanities in the United States, maybe more than there are humanities disciplines. Their futures hinge not the sublation of supposed opposites (Miller's device) but on their ability to arrange themselves in compelling and effective new combinations.

Mark

[The Administrative Limits of Digital Humanities](#)

Dear Mark,

While you've kept working on the stats, I've been mulling a couple of our "to do" items.

Item one: Katherine Hayles's recent book [How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis](#). Item two: the midcentury founding of Mass Communications, which caught my eye doing that earlier post on I.A. Richards. I decided to write about these two items together because each presents the project of ordering a motley array of scholarly experiments as an invitation to consider the relationship between academic research and administration.

For early Mass Communication, the managerial stakes were pretty explicit. Mass media were a crucial part of the war effort and academics were charged with understanding what propaganda could do. In Hayles's account, the managerial challenges facing the Digital Humanities are dominated by a singular academic concern: how and whether digital humanists should mollify textual analysts in literature programs.

In the opening section of her book, Hayles presents the Digital Humanities as a reckoning with technogenesis. Mass media have changed in the last twenty years and humanists have a stake in understanding what those changes mean. The web in particular appears to have altered our relationship to media, causing us to pay attention in different ways than we used to. For some commentators, like Mark Bauerlein, such alteration amounts to a crisis for the humanities and for the populace. Kids today can only pay attention fleetingly. They cannot read deeply. As a result, the value of closely reading literature is largely lost on them.

Many digital humanists seek to sooth their alarmed colleagues. Hayles describes a posture of "assimilation," which "extends existing scholarship into the digital realm" and "adopts an attitude of reassurance rather than confrontation" (45). Assimilationists include the journal *Postmodern Culture*, Willard McCarthy's Humanities Computing and the Center for Computing in the Humanities at King's College, London, as well as various efforts to build electronic editions of print texts. Assimilation means reconsidering "what reading is and how it works" and treating that as the chief puzzle posed by "the rich mixtures of words and images, sounds and animations, graphics and letters that constitute the environments of twenty-first century literacies" (78). If it is true that new technologies have brought about "cognitive and morphological changes in the brain," that does not mean that deep engagement with literature is no longer desirable, Hayles assures her readers (11). "The NEA argues (and I of course agree) that

literary reading is a good in itself," she writes (55). But it is no good pretending that English professors and others will be able to persuade students to deeply engage with literature if they "are focused exclusively on print close reading," she cautions (60). Instead, Hayles proposes "Comparative Media Studies," defined as a set of "courses and curricula" devoted to assembling "reading modalities—close, hyper-, and machine—" and to preparing "students to understand the limitations and affordances of each" (11). In this program, literary scholars will be able to reflect on new media while reproducing their devotion to reading.

Not all digital humanists care as deeply about reading and literature as the assimilationists, Hayles notes. Its name notwithstanding, the School of Literature, Culture and Communication at Georgia Tech privileges cooperation with engineering and computer science departments, features digital media in its curriculum, and announces its interest in "the theoretical and practical foundation for careers as digital media researchers in academia and industry." The LCC is more interested in "distinction" than "assimilation," Hayles explains, and is less concerned with reading practices than with "new methodologies, new kinds of research questions, and the emergence of entirely new fields" (45).

Hayles's account of assimilation and distinction requires her to ignore pre-digital humanities research that is not defined by textual analysis and close reading. Hayles portrays humanities scholars as capable of understanding visual media only as new and alien, as a disruptive surprise or excitingly dangerous supplement. It is only recently, she explains, that digital humanists turned "from a primary focus on text encoding, analysis, and searching to multimedia practices that explore the fusion of text-based humanities with film, sound, animation, graphics, and other multimodal practices across real, mixed, and virtual reality" (24). Hayles largely reproduces, in short, the reduction of the humanities to

literary study that we've seen in a whole parade of "crisis of the humanities" arguments as well as in the midcentury education plan called the Harvard Redbook. Only by defining the "Traditional Humanities" as the literary and philosophical analysis of print is it possible to imagine that images come as a surprise to humanists or that the technical study undertaken at Georgia Tech's LCC has a "less clear, more problematic, and generally undertheorized" relationship to humanities research (52). Certainly film and media professors have long been involved in thinking about technical processes and engineering problems—including but not limited to matters concerned with the chemical properties of film—even if they have not been making friends with computer scientists. The same could be said for any number of other kinds of humanists, especially perhaps those working with medieval and classical materials.

Since we first started discussing our project, Mark, you've been annoyed at the reduction of the humanities to literary study. Hayles is clearly annoyed by it too, which is why she wishes that literary scholars would join her in Comparative Media Studies. But to the extent that she portrays media comparison as "reading" ("reading modalities—close, hyper-, and machine—," as she puts it), I wonder how much of an advance this represents.

It should be said that managing the concerns of literary scholars "after the age of print" is not the only administrative concern in *How We Think*, even if it does dominate. Sandwiched in the middle of her book, Hayles pauses to describe an archival project focused on special collections of telegraph code books. She explains how the practices of sending and receiving code generated "a zone of indeterminacy...in which bodies seemed to take on some of the attributes of dematerialized information, and information seemed to take on the physicality of bodies" (147). This argument is science studies-esque, entirely reminiscent of

Schivelbush and early Latour, and has almost nothing to do with literature.

Where other chapters in her book seek to manage technogenesis so as not to scare Bauerlein and co., Hayles's chapter on telegraphy describes hyper-attention as "a positive adaptation that makes young people better suited to live in the information-intensive environments that are becoming ever more pervasive" (99). In this chapter, Hayles appears freed to move from the small to the large, from the "small percentage" of telegraphers and clerks who were "neurologically affected" by practices of sending and receiving code to the "wider effects...transmitted via the technological unconscious as business practices, military strategies, personal finances, and a host of other everyday concerns were transformed with the expectation of fast communication and the virtualization of commodities and money into information" (157). At no point were the stakes involved in the administration of these effects higher than in World War II, by which point "'wireless telegraphy,' or radio, had become the favored mode of communication" (155). Surveying the regulations and rules for coding during the war brings Hayles to her observation of just how far telegraphy had gone in facilitating an "historical shift," one that anticipates our era "in which all kinds of communications are mediated by intelligent machines" (156-57).

You and I have been working for some time to figure out how and when literary study started playing the part that it plays in Hayles's book. We used to argue that in the mid-twentieth century English solidified its hold on a core curriculum by opposing reading to viewing, the intellectual reflection of literary consumption to the contrastingly numbing reception of film, etc. My [previous post on I.A. Richards](#) suggests a more complicated dynamic, however. Richards helped position English at the center of the Harvard Redbook's educational program and marginalized media study in the process, but at the same time he was also experimenting with film and TV as tools for mass

education outside the academy. He received support from the Rockefeller Foundation as well as early public television.

My (admittedly superficial) research into the early days of Mass Communication in the 1930s and 40s suggests that such paradoxical allegiances were not unusual. Some of the most influential figures in that emerging field were English professors perfecting willing to stop behaving as if literature and reading were the center of their intellectual lives when they joined up with various interdisciplinary teams.

Rockefeller Foundation office John Marshall, who dreamed of a "genuinely democratic propaganda" and in 1936 first suggested that the foundation fund communications-related activities, was trained as a medievalist and taught in the Harvard English Department.

Wilbur Schramm, who organized the first Mass Communications PhD program at Iowa in 1943, had a PhD in English, a postdoc from the ACLS (in psychology), and from 1935 to 1942 directed the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

For his part, Richards was ever so briefly part of the Rockefeller Foundation Communications Group organized by Marshall. According to Brett Gary, Richards departed after his fellow group members largely ignored two of his papers on semantics. His departure, Gary argues, happened at a moment when quantitative research was beginning to dominate the group's activities.

The opposition between qualitative and quantitative analysis crops up in much of what I read on the early years of Mass Communications. Disciplinary historians believe it pinched English types like Richards and also University of Chicago sociologists, who were actively considering communications problems but whose qualitative methods meant they were largely left behind when Mass Communications on their campus started

to emphasize the tabulation of surveys.

This split between quantitative and qualitative may have been real but to privilege it occludes the truly messy collaboration in communications research and policy that was going on both before and during the second World War. The Rockefeller Foundation appears to have led the way in bringing together disparate squads, "younger men with talent for these mediums," as Marshall called them, "men interested primarily in education, literature, criticism, or in disseminating the findings of the social or natural sciences," who wanted to engage in "relatively free experimentation."

Jefferson Pooley and Elihu Katz see similarly motley group activity at Chicago, where sociology served as "heir to the rich but scattered reflections on communications and the media that characterized European thought. At Chicago, as in Europe, interests were broad: media professionals and media organizations, media as agents of social integration and deviance, media as contributors to a public sphere of participatory democracy, and media as implicated in social change and in the diffusion of ideas, opinions, and practices."

Karin Wahl-Jorgenson describes the activities of short-lived inter-disciplinary committees at Chicago that were "meant to explore, conquer, and die," "to tag onto particular research problems, linked to individuals' interests or urgent questions of social import."

Especially during the war, there were policy questions that ran through all of these experimental efforts.

Gary sums up: "Anxieties about the relation between democracy and new mass communication technologies linked the emergence of mass communication research as a scholarly field with the growth of the surveillance apparatus of the modern national security state. The contradictory imperatives of modern

liberalism—its simultaneous commitment to and fear of the expansion of the modern state, with its information and opinion control apparatus—pervaded the debates of the first generation of communication researchers....” Rockefeller researchers worked with and against governmental officers prosecuting the war. Schramm was involved in Roosevelt’s radio addresses, including the fireside chats. And so forth. As the war went on, Gary recounts, Rockefeller communications group members “regularly returned to the question of whether their focus should be primarily scientific (reliably measuring effects) or administrative (servicing the state’s probable interests in public opinion control).”

Wahl-Jorgensen titles her 2004 article on the early days of Mass Communication “How Not to Found a Field,” which seems just about right. The pods that were moving in and out of government, conducting research and shaping policy would have fit awkwardly in any department, and where Mass Communication codified itself around quantitative analysis the price paid for methodological coherence appears to have been the exclusion of a whole array of earlier contributors. If Marshall and Schramm seemed more or less ok leaving their English backgrounds behind, Richards clearly was not and the continentally-oriented sociologists at Chicago were not willing to forget their past expertise either. When Richards left, of course, he was no more homeless than the Chicago sociologists who went back to their usual corridors. There’s a familiar model here, albeit more familiar outside the humanities than inside them, of the research group or lab that does its business for a while and then disbands.

The various Digital Humanities institutes and centers that Hayles describes in the first section of her book share something of this ad hoc feel as well as a recognizable desire to work with all sorts of strange bedfellows. “The Humanities Lab at Stanford University, formerly directed by Jeffrey Schnapp, modeled itself on ‘Big Science,’” Hayles recalls

(34). Alan Liu at UC Santa Barbara asks students “to choose a literary work and treat it according to one or more of the research paradigms prevalent in other fields of study” (75). There is a “willingness” among many digital humanists, Hayles argues, to shed any “hermeneutic of suspicion...toward capitalism and corporations” and “reach out to funders (sometimes including commercial interests)” (41). Instead of departments, Hayles’s digital humanists want “flexible laboratory spaces in which teams can work collaboratively, as well as studio spaces with high-end technologies for production and implementation” (5).

In truth, the least interesting thing about the Digital Humanities in Hayles’s account is the need to manage its relationship to literature departments. Although I grasp why it is important for humanities professors and graduate students immersed in interdisciplinary collaboration to have home departments—just as it is important for scientists who join up on specific grants—it is frustrating, to say the least, that the narrow lens of literary study should so define how one values experimental humanities research.

Dipping into the history of Mass Communication teaches me that as recently as the 1940s the likes of the Rockefeller Foundation felt it entirely reasonable to empower a literary medievalist to organize media research that not only crossed disciplines but also got embroiled in governmental policy. Hayles’s book teaches me that conditions have changed notably since the 1940s. There is plenty of experiment in the humanities today, but to the extent that it must be obsessed with the purview of literary study, it seems hobbled, incapable of embracing the managerial challenges that mass media call forth.

John

3. Humanists Should Inhabit the Present, not the Early Republic

Dear John,

After too long a hiatus, let me try to pick up this thought where you left off. You wondered about the complex genealogy of this quotation and marveled at its ability to balance (which is to say manage) Jeffersonian and Jacksonian imperatives:

An ideal but not impossible vision of American society might see it as made up of myriad smaller societies representing between them all the arts and insights, all the duties and self-dedications, of civilized men. It would be in order that they might participate in some of these, quite as much as for making a living, that education would prepare young people, and this participation would in turn be the door to the good life. (98)

I think I can fill in some of the genealogy. To me the quotation highlights the some the more troubling aspects of Red Book rhetoric.

In particular, it dodges the central governance question. The idea here, I take it, is that the perception of civilized unity inculcated by general education will allow the myriad small societies to work in concert to open that good-life door. Yet all actually existing societies I know about comprise groups with competing practices, values, and

interests, even if they may be said to be united by other practices, values, and interests. The Red Book's authors may hope that general education will provide a foundation for the adjudication of competing group interests. They do not, however, envision plausible mechanisms whereby generally educated Americans might meaningfully participate in such feats of adjudication, nor is such judgment the kind of thing that general education in the humanities or social sciences seems particularly designed to encourage. The emphasis is on unifying works of durable value. If general education does not equip generally educated citizens to question what is meant by "the good life" and for whom, then "unity" and "civilization" become alibis for the status quo.

In the hope that functioning small societies might through a vague process of magnetic conduction improve the common weal, I hear the echoes of Charles Beard's college textbook *American Government and Politics*, which went through six editions between 1911 and 1931. Beard taught Arthur Schlesinger, the historian on the Red Book collective, when the later was a graduate student at Columbia in the early 1910s. It may be Schlesinger who gives the Red Book its organizing "Jeffersonian" and "Jacksonian" metaphors. His autobiography could offer a clue. In any case, in an epilog entitled "How can citizens play well their part in the development of American political society?," the 1931 edition of *American Government and Politics* confronts a problem of bureaucracy that Beard had addressed the year before in *American Leviathan*. To wit: the machinery of the state has grown too vast, and its mechanisms too sophisticated, to be susceptible to informed direction by the masses of citizens. The sorts of participation idealized in the Early Republic's vision of democracy—public debate, elections, and so on—seem feeble in the face of increasingly sophisticated public relations efforts by political parties and pressure groups, not to mention an ever-increasing number of bureaus only nominally controlled by elected officials. How could

young citizens hope to affect a political culture so obviously controlled by experts paid to control it? Beard's advice is to join "small societies"—political parties as well as business, professional, labor, and civic groups—and to hope to influence the broader direction of politics by influencing these smaller groups.

I am proposing that the Red Book marks itself as a twentieth-century work in its hope that the kind of political participation that we might think of as a hallmark of neo-liberalism will secure the type of republic idealized by classical liberalism. In the US context, probably all wishes along these lines respond in one way or another to the argument between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey inaugurated by Lippmann's 1922 *Public Opinion*. I've written about this at length elsewhere (in *Love Rules*), and I won't drag you through it all again. We may never know a more effective critic of Jeffersonian ideals than Lippmann, who treats the entire edifice as a massive PR exercise that convinced Americans to confuse the procedures outlined in the Constitution with self-governance. The PR machine was perfected under Jackson, he argues, when the political parties learned how to use Jeffersonian imagery to legitimate themselves. Henceforth, voting on agendas shaped and decided behind closed doors could count as public rule. Lippmann's overarching critique centers on the power of media to define what citizens can know about the world that they are invited to help "govern." Famously, for Lippmann media do not promote communication so much as circulate stereotypes—reductive views of the world that get mistaken for the world itself. After Lippmann, I think, any serious argument about democracy had to take on board a theory of mediation. Certainly Dewey does in his riposte, which advocates a program of continuous community-building education more radical than the Red Book authors could countenance, but that probably informs their appeal to education as an instrument of unity.

In later posts, we'll deal with the Red Book's limited treatment of mass culture as a competitor to general education in uniting American society. Here, I'll just note that the issue of mediation is a serious and indicative omission from their account of general education's supposed democratic benefit. To change how people are governed requires changing the shared signs and symbols that make modern governance possible. I think it possible that the Red Book authors know this perfectly well and see themselves as engaged in such an adventure. They just don't think that knowledge about how this works this should be part of general education. Their proposed course on American Democracy, for example, leaps over the Lippmann-Dewey debate. Students will read only defenses of classic liberalism: Tocqueville, Bryce, and Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (219).

References to Jefferson and Jackson make it seem like the Red Book authors are talking about education's contribution to a long heritage of American democracy. They are not. As they sometimes acknowledge explicitly, they are really talking about the role of expanding twentieth-century educational institutions in identifying and encouraging talent and in defining and inculcating social norms. In this project, educational institutions have a great many competitors as well as collaborators. A real commitment to democracy would require an educational program encouraging much harder questions of actually existing governance in the present.

All that said, good management must agree that education should be about more than making a living, that it should encourage people to discover affiliations with one another, and such affiliations ought to renew the evergreen challenge of "the good life."

Mark

3. Humanists Should Aspire to Balance (which is to say Manage) Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Imperatives

Dear Mark,

I've been struggling with the scale of item 3. I'd love to suggest that this was mostly your fault, but you're totally right that the Redbook authors are the ones responsible for binding matters of governmentality, normalization, and the notion of merit. We would do well to recognize that accomplishment. You wrote,

3. In claiming "the opportunity to rise through education to the level of one's merits" as a unifying force, Harpham rhetorically sublates tendencies the Red Book presents as opposites in need of balancing. Centrally, it weighs the "Jeffersonian" principle of "discovering and giving opportunity to the gifted student" against the "Jacksonian" principle of "raising the level of the average student" (27). The authors stake the nation's future on balancing these opposing imperatives: "The hope of the American school system, indeed of our society, is precisely that it can pursue two goals simultaneously: give scope to ability and raise the average. Nor are these two goals so far apart, if human beings are capable of common sympathies" (35). "Unity" thus becomes the central problem, and "general education,"

its instrument. Harpham does not err in pointing out that Red Book-era rhetoric made meritocracy, democracy, and training in the humanities appear to coincide. But he empties that achievement and reduces it, precisely, to a cliché, by underplaying the “Jacksonian” imperative. No merit without normalization, the Red Book reminds us. If the Jeffersonian principle looks to individuals, the Jacksonian considers populations. General education, in contrast to Jeffersonian specialized education, was to be a unifying instrument for populations, and not so much a meritocratic one for individuals. “Democracy” in the Red Book is not centrally a problem of “self-government,” rather, it is a question of proper training, a management proposition (see, e.g., 93).

You would make managers of us all.

Certainly, the contemporary tendency is to separate Jeffersonian and Jacksonian imperatives rather than to balance them.

Exhibit A: pressure on community colleges to stop thinking of themselves as part of higher ed more generally and consider themselves a venue where people are trained for “middle-skill jobs.” Writing in [The New York Times](#), Joe Nocera argues that for community colleges the “raison d’être has always been to help grease the wheels of social mobility.” Once, “in their earlier incarnation,” community colleges did this by serving as “a passageway to a university degree. (They used to be called junior colleges, after all.)” Now, however, “with the skills gap such a pressing problem – and a high school education so clearly inadequate for the modern economy – the task of teaching those skills is falling to community colleges. There really isn’t another institution as well positioned to play that role.” Nocera seems fine with that. Better than fine: “Community colleges can be our salvation, if only we let them.” To think of community colleges this way brackets “training” as well as Jackson. Training here

includes, “important soft skills that the upper-middle-class take for granted, like how to interact with colleagues in an office setting.” Behave like a Jefferson, even if your average ability keeps you from attending his university. (You wrote in your last post that “The proposition that a healthy nation needs general education that includes the humanities is alive and well.” I don’t disagree, but do think we’re in the process of restricting who gets that general education beyond high school.)

Exhibit B: we are tasked with understanding how democracy and higher ed intersect every time the liberal arts college gets exported to non-democratic polities (NYU in Abu Dhabi, etc.). We are further compelled to wonder if Jacksonian principles of raising the average are in peril in the likes of Quebec, where the daily protests of French-speaking college students and would-be college students have garnered administrative/governmental responses ranging from [stick](#) (managing the blow of tuition increases with new formats for student debt) to [bigger stick](#) (new laws that criminalize protest). Much talk in the papers recently about whether and how the student strikes will shape elections in the fall. Is this the democracy the Redbook was talking about?

Your point, regardless of whether these ripped from the headlines Exhibits seem germane, was that Harpham underplays the Jacksonian side of the equation. “No merit without normalization, the Red Book reminds us,” you write in 3. And in your last post you continued the thought in claiming,

We have not arrived at a new day in which established defenses of general education, talent, and “critique” have lost all traction. What has broken down are the mechanisms conjoining these rhetorics (ideologies?) with the actual practice of humanists, who look most out of touch not in the content of our scholarship (who reads most of it anyway?), but in the institutional configurations we tend to defend. Defend is the right word. Where’s the offense? This [Chronicle](#)

headline may be relevant.

It is possible that the bond market agrees with you. [Moody's](#) not only expects "governance and leadership clashes to increase in coming years as the [education] sector's ability to grow revenues dwindles," but also argues that at UVA "the final resolution affirms the stability of the university's faculty-centric governance model that will allow it to continue to effectively compete with the nation's leading universities for top students, faculty, research grants and philanthropic support."

"'Democracy' in the Red Book is not centrally a problem of 'self-government,'" you argue, "rather, it is a question of proper training, a management proposition (see, e.g., 93)".

I agree with this and find it offers tantalizing propositions to rethink the role of faculty as managers and maybe even teaching as a form of administration. The Redbook authors urge us to "hold firmly in mind the final purpose of all education: to improve the average and speed the able while holding common goals before each" (90). That is, absolutely, a management problem. It can be difficult to think about the relationship between what goes on in the undergraduate classroom or in the curriculum with what is happening in boardrooms at UVA and in the streets of Montreal. I wonder how much that disconnect owes to the conceptual separation of teaching and service (as the administrative portion of our job is bizarrely known), and with the institutional bifurcation of managerial and professorial labor. I'll lean just slightly farther out on this branch with help from an entry to that [Chronicle](#) forum on inequality. Anthony Carnevale [asserts](#) that "College education is becoming a passive participant in the reproduction of economic privilege. Taken one at time, postsecondary institutions are fountains of opportunity; taken together, they are a highly stratified bastion of privilege." The problem here, it seems, is one of passivity as much as

inequality. Or, the problem is passivity that keeps us from thinking about the sort of inequality (we call it meritocracy) we're invested in and could be more aggressively managing.

Let me wind up this (rambling) post with my favorite passage in the Redbook. On page 98, the authors provide a vision of the America they think their model of higher education might produce and reproduce.

An ideal but not impossible vision of American society might see it as made up of myriad smaller societies representing between them all the arts and insights, all the duties and self-dedications, of civilized men. It would be in order that they might participate in some of these, quite as much as for making a living, that education would prepare young people, and this participation would in turn be the door to the good life.

There's surely a complicated genealogy behind this model, but what strikes me is how the Redbook appears to consider the movement of students among classrooms and majors as a kind of training for participation in more various large and small societies upon graduation. What a compelling balance of Jackson and Jefferson: the Jacksonian common goal of Jeffersonian differentiation both organizes the Redbook university and the Redbook society.

John

[2. A Jeffersonian Matter?](#)

Shrinking colleges, shifting dollars to K-12.

Dear Mark,

Your question 2. about [General Education in a Free Society](#) reads as follows:

2. In Harpham's account, the Red Book seems of a piece with the good old days of taxpayer supported higher-ed, but by far the strongest funding argument happens in chapter 3, where the authors note that inadequacies in state funding for what we would now call K-12 education mean that "out of every hundred young people between six and nine are good college material but do not reach college" (88). The argument here is not "college for all" but "America needs talent": it is wasting youths that could succeed in college if only their parents could afford to get them through high school. Has Harpham considered that reclaiming midcentury clichés might logically mean shrinking the number of college students and, perhaps, shifting dollars to K-12?

I am going to treat this as a Jeffersonian question, leaving the Redbook's consistent counterpoint of normalization and the Jacksonian goal of "raising the level of the average student" (27) to our discussion of 3.

I'll speak to my sense of Harpham on this in a moment, but in general I would say two things about the status of "America needs talent."

First, I think the conventional wisdom today outside academia is very much "college for all," with considerable disagreement on how to fund that goal and whether you get a residential experience to go with your course credits. Populists on the

left and right privilege “accessibility.” This term morphs according to the user. A Fox News [editorial](#) supporting the ouster of UVA President Sullivan propounds, “Simply put, high-quality universities have become too expensive and increasingly inaccessible because their presidents and other top leaders have failed to recognize and address the challenges and opportunities posed to their institutions by new technologies.” On the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Morrill Act, the Carnegie Corporation has put out a [press release](#) concerning new poll data that shows “3 out of 4 Americans Feel Higher Education Should Be a Right.”

That may be how Americans feel, but will they pay for it? In California at least K-12 funding is what gets people to the polls. Or so our Governor hopes. He’s using a [threat](#) to cut K-12 spending as a stick to encourage voters to support tax hikes. Meanwhile, we may soon have a state budget that [boosts](#) funding to higher ed if the UC and CSU systems don’t raise tuition any more.

It appeals to me to think of this question of “college for all” v. “America needs talent” in terms of broader thinking about meritocracy. Has college stopped seeming like an engine for generating meritocratic hierarchy? And is that a good thing or a bad thing? There is, I’m hoping, a Chris Hayes [“America After Meritocracy”](#) angle to the question of how humanities cliches relate to the politics of academic funding. Hayes argues that universities have gotten worse at talent spotting as test prep and application coaching programs blur the good and the great (and leave those who cannot pay for test prep and application coaching out in the cold). He goes further, contending that the ideal of meritocratic mobility “runs up against the reality of...the Iron Law of Meritocracy. The Iron Law of Meritocracy states that eventually the inequality produced by a meritocratic system will grow large enough to subvert the mechanisms of mobility. Unequal outcomes make equal opportunity impossible.”

For Harpham's part, I confess to not having finished his *The Humanities and the American Dream* yet, but so far the closest he gets to this question is in a chapter adapted from a talk he gave at the University of Richmond. There, he rehearsed the cliches of liberal arts education with its "critiquing, probing, testing, speculating" (132). He ties those skills to professionalization but not to meritocracy per se. The "liberal arts faculty," he contends, "was brought into being by the desire to professionalize knowledge" (135). He has his eye, I presume, on the mid-century field-definers we talk about too in our work in progress. For liberal arts faculty alarmed about the rise of the professional schools, he argues, "the glass is half-full. For if the liberal arts are already professionalized, then the intrusion of professional education into the curriculum does not constitute a second fall of man, and a productive collaboration may be feasible without either side's having to capitulate" (136). Of the examples he offers, the executive training team [Movers and Shakespeares](#) is especially intriguing. "A two-person mom-and-pop company," in Harpham's characterization, "founded on the premise that in order to be a good leader, one must understand people, and that Shakespeare understood people better than anyone" (139). So many thoughts come to mind. Among them, reflecting back on your post from a couple of weeks ago: here's Shakespeare as an example for you. Certainly, the humanities in this usage (or English in this usage, lest you accuse me of conflating the humanities and English [perish the thought]), are on the side of professional-managerial differentiation.

As for the Redbook, as you say the authors of this volume see high school as a sorting mechanism, and hope that it makes clear who has the talent to attend college and who is but one of those "young people of average intelligence...not suited for the traditional college," rather capable of profiting from "training in agriculture or nursing" (89). Everybody should have the "chances to perfect what is in them," but what is in some is not in others (98). I think of Althusser here, and of

an education apparatus that boots people out into vocational / specialized training as their aptitude allows. The Redbook authors imagine general education as “the trunk of a tree from which branches, representing specialism, go off at different heights, at high school or junior college or college or graduate school—the points, that is, at which various groups end their formal schooling” (102). The smarter you are, the longer you remain general in your education. When you shift to vocational training, you are finding your place on the great tree of merit.

It is fortuitous that Harpham has a tree as well. The faculty in the professional schools, he suggests, have long looked out of their well-appointed offices and asked of the university, “Why aren’t the English teachers treated as the marginal ones, the ornaments rather than the tree?” (135). Who is the tree and who the ornament at UVA if, as some commentators anticipate, the Board of Visitors decide to un-oust Sullivan?

Trees aside, who if anyone has interest in funding meritocracy these days, and how much do our cliches of critique, etc. depend on their capacity to mold the “talent” those Redbook authors think America needs? To answer this question might well tell us how out of sync our cliches really are with the tenor of contemporary conversation about the university.

John

1. The scope of the project is vast.

Dear Mark,

I say “Yes!” to your proposition that we write a series of posts dealing with each of the five problems in your framing of [General Education in a Free Society](#).

On to problem 1., with acknowledgment that I’ll necessarily touch on issues you have categorized in other problems. You wrote,

1. The scope of the project is vast. It surveys high school as well as college, charts the development of these institutions since the 1870s, considers problems of funding and staffing, and confronts squarely the issues of differential ability and meritocracy. The authors situate their argument for university-level general education squarely within an analysis of the educational system as a whole. Unless I am much mistaken, such an awareness of the big picture is almost totally absent from the current alarmist rhetoric about “the humanities in crises.” It does show up, however, among those thinking about the digital revolution (e.g., Davidson’s, Now you See It). Does the Red Book warrant description of the “humanities crisis” people as reactionary defenders of an increasingly narrow and rapidly obsolescing point of view?

There are a bundle of issues in this item that I care about. Let me drift my way towards one answer to your question. Warning: my answer will take the form of another question.

For the authors of the Redbook, the humanities are most important as the focal point for a general education curriculum. “While the Redbook never explicitly identifies the humanities as the first among equals in the divisions of knowledge,” Harpham writes in *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, “their primacy is strongly implied, not least by the fact that whenever the divisions of knowledge are treated serially, the sequence is humanities, social studies, and science and mathematics” (157). As both you and Harpham note,

no humanities discipline receives more attention in the Redbook than English. More on this in posts regarding Problem 4.

To the extent that the humanities feature so importantly in general education, they are agents for the Redbook's effort to de-emphasize specialization in both high school and college study. "[A]s modern life has come increasingly to rest on specialized knowledge, the various fields of college study have in consequence appeared simply as preparation for one or another position in life. They have become, in short, for many, though by no means for all, a kind of higher vocational training" (38). The challenge or problem the Redbook sets out to resolve with a revised curricula "is how to save general education and its values within a system where specialism is necessary" (53). The "aim of education," the book's authors declare, "should be to prepare an individual to become an expert both in some particular vocation or art and in the general art of the free man and the citizen. Thus the two kinds of education once given separately to different social classes must be given together to all alike" (54). Not only does the education system envisioned by the Redbook have both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian aspects, but also the subject of that education system has a more specialized and generally human qualities. The humanities are, by and large, important in the Redbook for their special capacity to help a person develop the general side.

Different humanities disciplines contribute to this "general art of the free man and the citizen." English is a unifying force, its great books are meeting points, and serve as tools for illuminating "norms of living as they are presented to the eye by the best authors" (107). You've noted this normalizing component, which English shares with the other humanities disciplines. The arts "bring delight," and they also "train the emotions; they develop understanding." "Foreign" language training is primarily important in high school and college

because it can help you understand better how English works. Philosophy's contribution is imparting "the habit of self-criticism" and "perspective, the capacity to envisage truth synoptically, from the standpoint of 'all time and all existence.'" More on the contributions of "New Media of Education" under Problem 5.

From the perspective of the Redbook, the only crisis of the humanities worthy of the name would entail a breakdown of these complementary functions.

A crisis of general education, in other words, is what the Redbook authors might mean if they said the humanities were in crisis.

It is tempting to suggest that they would be alarmed in just this way by recent events at the University of Virginia. [The Washington Post](#) was among the news outlets to report that Teresa Sullivan was forced out as President because some members of the Board of Visitors felt she "lacked the mettle to trim or shut down programs that couldn't sustain themselves financially, such as obscure academic departments in classics and German." Combined with the Board's appointment of [Carl Zeithaml, Cornell Professor of Free Enterprise](#) and head of the UVA McIntire School of Commerce as Interim President, what is going on in Charlottesville seems to be putting pressure on the Redbook version of the university. The neoliberal recentering of the university on the business school certainly looks like a reversion to exactly the sort of vocational training that the Redbook authors rail against. But is this what is at stake in the suggestion that Sullivan was canned because she wouldn't exercise the authority of her office to defund Classics?

(The fact that UVA is a public university makes it different from the Redbook's Harvard. Still, given the private donors in play what is happening at UVA touches on yet another matter for yet another post, namely, Harpham's good and bad

philanthropists. Good ones from mid century and a few remaining like Richard Franke, discussed in *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, think that the humanities are useful for businessmen, public policy experts, and all sorts of other specialists. Bad ones are impatient types exemplified by Peter D. Kiernan, recently resigned chairman of the Board of Trustees for UVA's Darden School Foundation, who wrote the much-quoted [email](#) in which he claimed that "the governance of the University was not sufficiently tuned to the dramatic changes we all face: funding, internet, technology advances, the new economic model. These are matters for strategic dynamism rather than strategic planning.")

(Related too, Chris Newfield's [analysis](#) of the UVA matter, which hinges on his insistent opposition of managers (bad) and professionals (good), where the former favor dynamism and the latter planning.)

(Also: my friend [Andy Lewis](#) thinks we should consider mid-century innovations in general education in concert with *Brown v. Board of Education*, a rough contemporary of the Redbook.)

Back to where we started. You asked: "Does the Red Book warrant description of the 'humanities crisis' people as reactionary defenders of an increasingly narrow and rapidly obsolescing point of view?" The suggestion that Sullivan was kicked out because she wouldn't crush Classics and German makes me ask the perhaps obvious follow up, What part of the administrative turmoil at UVA and elsewhere turns on the humanities contribution to general education?

This sort of question was invoked by an apposite series of tweets appearing yesterday in response to a comment by the columnist Matt Yglesias. He tweeted: "I like mocking MBA-speak as much as the next guy, but is there really a sound case for taxpayer-funded German language instruction?" A film blogger (!!!) named David Robson responded with the vocational position: "German's 'the language of the dominant economic

power of Europe.’ Learning it’s good for economists.” Swarthmore History Professor Timothy Burke asked, “Is there really a case for any subject once you start putting it like that? Or is the only case narrowly vocational?” Mike Konczal, a Roosevelt Institute fellow who writes a blog on finance and politics, asked, “Isn’t it just a subset of the general case for humanities education?”

John

The Fallaciousness of Time to Degree plus the Conflation of Humanities and English

Dear Mark,

Wielding “fallacious” like the weapon it is, you wrote,

The rhetoric of “relevance” allows readers to imagine that nebulously defined social goods (“meaningful,” “productive,” “rewarding”) can be appraised by means of metrics like time to degree, job placements, and starting salaries. The equation is obviously fallacious. As numerous PhDs, JDs, and MBAs of our acquaintance will testify, one can complete one’s degree on time, immediately find a well paying job, and still not be engaged in activities one regards as particularly “meaningful,” “productive,” and “rewarding.” It has been the job of the humanities to consider such questions of value. They will undo themselves by treating job placement stats as equivalent types of questions. This doesn’t mean that humanities disciplines shouldn’t contemplate a shorter time

to degree, just that they have to stick up for the difference between such metrics and questions of social value, lest they lose their professional distinction.

You're clearly right. I am thinking about time to degree adjustments as a potentially salutary shock that would require us to engage in the kind of curricular overhaul that for whatever reason the crushing job market has demanded. I agree that nothing necessarily follows from it. I love the simplicity of the thought, "flood the market." It may smack of desperation, in fact it surely does, but it would force so many issues. I realize that this may be a kind of exacerbate the crisis thinking, for better and worse. I may have too much of a soft spot for "jolts," as you call them.

You also wrote about Menand's story concerning what happened in the 1970s to the humanities/English,

Note the indicative collapse of the difference between "humanities" and "English." Note also that disciplinary hyperspecialization increases the number of credentialed professionals while decreasing their market value and interest to undergraduates. We think that—despite the culture wars—this is because English was obsessed with defining its object rather than explaining what its object does. Right? What changes about this picture once other humanities disciplines are admitted to it?

There are two big questions here.

Re: the first, English was and remains obsessed with defining its objects. And yet, I find that this argument or ours is greeted with blank stares or opaque nods of the head. Maybe because some wings of English think they are so over any concern with literary objects, maybe because these matters of what an object is and what it does don't seem distinct? I think, for instance, about the current wave of interest in

realist novels, which comes from different quarters but seems to hinge on the supposed critical potential of this particular breed of print fiction.

Re: the second, Is there a comparable concern with, and can you even say this, realist film? I'm new enough in video game studies not to have a firm grasp on the status of realism in that field (although I do know that nothing says "artsy" like [8-bit graphics](#)).

John