
The Neoliberal University and the Neoliberal Curriculum

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Without a doubt, “neoliberalism” is among the latest dirty words in American academia. In the last decade or so, a variety of scholarly monographs has criticized the influence of neoliberalism on universities in the United States. Thus, for example, the philosopher and literary scholar Jeffrey Di Leo has written about *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving Beyond the Neoliberal Academy*; the cultural critic Henry Giroux has discussed *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education*; and the philosopher Donald Nicolson even contributed a tome called *Academic Conferences as Neoliberal Commodities*.¹

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¹ Jeffrey R. Di Leo, *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving Beyond the Neoliberal Academy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Donald J. Nicolson, *Academic Conferences as Neoliberal Commodities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Other contributions to this genre include Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008); Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York and London: The New Press, 2010). Cf. David L. Kirp’s *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), which

Although they are a popular addition to the literature on higher education, such tracts typically fail to present a precise definition of neoliberalism and are often more successful at criticizing the vicissitudes of contemporary American colleges and universities than presenting a positive model for the future. The slipperiness of *neoliberalism* as a concept in recent critiques of higher learning is not a surprise: according to the political scientists Taylor Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, in scholarship neoliberalism "is effectively used in many different ways, such that its appearance in any given article offers little clue as to what it actually means."² Nevertheless, critics of neoliberalism in higher education have something common in mind when they speak of neoliberalism's influence, and if the stakes are as high as they suggest, their arguments merit careful consideration.

In short, scholars from a variety of ideological and disciplinary backgrounds have understandable objections to the dominance of what Giroux calls "free-market fundamentalism" in institutions of higher learning.³ To give just one example, the impetus to treat curricular matters as a series of business decisions appears to have had some troubling effects on U.S. colleges and universities. Newspaper reports suggest that, at all but the most prestigious institutions of higher learning, the push to regard students as little more than consumers has gained extraordinary momentum.⁴

anticipates many of the arguments to appear in such works.

² Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44 (2009), 139. Boas and Gans-Morse demonstrate that there is no consensus definition of *neoliberalism*, in part because the term, ever since its meaning shifted as a result of the economic policies of the Pinochet regime in Chile, "is used asymmetrically across ideological divides, rarely appearing in scholarship that makes positive assessments of the free market" (140). Scholars thus employ *neoliberalism* rhetorically, rather than giving it a substantive definition. Although no consensus has emerged about the meaning of *neoliberalism*, this article uses the term in the rhetorical manner elucidated by Boas and Gans-Morse; they see it denoting "a radical, far-reaching application of free-market economics unprecedented in speed, scope, or ambition" (141). The polemical value of the term for critics of *laissez-faire* policies can be detected in "the fact that economists rarely use the term" (140 n1).

³ Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, 1.

⁴ E.g., Silvio Gaggi, "Assault on Humanities Weakens Us as a People," *Tampa Bay Tribune* (Feb. 12), 15; Verlyn Klinkenborg, "The Decline and Fall of the English Major," *The New York Times* (June 23, 2013), 10; Douglas Belkin,

While students are empowered as consumers, the perplexing consequence of these arrangements may be the disappearance of the humanities altogether.

Not for nothing, then, do ever-increasing numbers of scholars criticize the rise of what they term *neoliberalism* in U.S. colleges and universities. Their work on the subject explicitly or implicitly poses questions of cardinal importance. Are students best viewed as consumers? More broadly, why should non-profit institutions entrusted with educating the nation's young increasingly be run in a manner scarcely distinct from for-profit businesses? Why should the cost of an undergraduate degree continue vastly to outpace inflation, if American colleges and universities rely on an ever-larger coterie of cheap labor to teach their classes?⁵ Is the corporate model an appropriate means for organizing higher education in the first place? Surely, recent critiques of neoliberal academia, for all their imprecision and polemical verve, resonate with readers because they highlight pressing problems in American higher education.

Critics of neoliberalism in academia raise important questions.

But this article will show that influential analyses of the neoliberal academy, despite their strengths, pay insufficient attention to the history of colleges and universities in the U.S. as well as to the broader humanistic tradition. As a result, such works vastly post-date the origins of neoliberalism and corporatization in higher education, and foist the blame for the problems they identify on the wrong actors, forces, and even time period. Thus, although these critiques tend to view the so-called academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s as the wellspring of the neoliberal university—and consider supposedly traditionalistic culture warriors such as Allan Bloom to be particularly at fault—we shall see that neoliberalism's influence began much earlier. In fact, one must look to the curricular battles of late-nineteenth-century America to find the

Influential analyses lack historical depth.

"Liberal Arts Lose Luster," *The Wall Street Journal* (April 25, 2017), A3; Francine Prose, "Humanities Teach Students To Think. Where Would We Be without Them?" *The Guardian* (May 12, 2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/12/humanities-students-budget-cuts-university-suny>.

⁵ An attempt to answer this thorny question can be found in Robert B. Archibald and David Henry Feldman's *Why Does College Cost So Much?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

origins of campus neoliberalism. Though late-twentieth-century privatization must have helped quicken the acceptance of the business model among academic administrators in the U.S., the current literature on neoliberal academia often neglects the key and far earlier role of the American research university in bringing about campus neoliberalism. An understanding of the curricular debates of the nineteenth century will thus help strengthen scholarly critiques of our nation's higher learning, ensuring a more profitable reaction to our current predicament. It will be argued that one cannot overlook the nature of undergraduate curricula when examining the structure and priorities of contemporary American institutions of higher learning.

I

Numerous jeremiads today about American higher education demonstrate a disinclination to examine their subject in a broad historical perspective. Thus many such works seldom cast their purview earlier than the academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and see these decades as the years that inaugurated the push to treat higher education as a business. To such authors, traditionalistic culture warriors are to blame for campus neoliberalism. Indeed, contemporary critics of the neoliberal university see the conservative attacks on American academia during the highly publicized feuds of the 1980s and 1990s as a means to spread "free-market fundamentalism" in higher education.

Traditionalistic culture warriors of the 1980s and 1990s blamed by Left for campus neoliberalism.

According to Ellen Schrecker's *The Lost Soul of Higher Education*, for example, late twentieth-century critiques of the humanities caught on with the American public thanks to "a highly self-conscious and well-financed campaign to destroy the influence of the academic left, a campaign that has had serious consequences for all of American higher education."⁶ Although admitting that this contention may "smack of a conspiratorial mind-set," Schrecker believes that "the evidence for such a campaign is too overwhelming to ignore."⁷ She suggests that American corporate leaders, distressed by the unpopularity of their views, inaugurated a series of thinktanks and foundations to support *laissez-faire* policies, and hence pushed forward the

⁶ Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education*, 100.

⁷ Ibid.

neoliberal agenda—in the academy and elsewhere. Schrecker highlights Allan Bloom, author of the bestselling polemic *The Closing of the American Mind*,⁸ as just one of those to benefit from the largesse of conservative plutocrats, who spread money in hopes that academia could be made more pro-business in its outlook.⁹ Without such help, Schrecker surmises, Bloom's denunciation of higher education in the U.S. never would have registered much of an impact on the national debate.¹⁰

Christopher Newfield offers an even bolder version of the contention that conservative forces are to blame for the rise of campus neoliberalism and the corporate university. His book *Unmaking the Public University* argues that American "conservative elites who had been threatened by the postwar rise of the college-educated economic majority have put that majority back in its place. Their roundabout weapon has been the culture wars on higher education in general, and on progressive cultural trends in the public universities that create and enfranchise the mass middle class."¹¹ According to Newfield, Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*,¹² Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*,¹³ and kindred traditionalistic tracts from the academic culture wars secretly aimed to enfeeble the middle class, to ensure the continued economic and political dominance of conservative elites in American society. "The Right's culture warriors did not openly attack the economic position of the middle class," Newfield

⁸ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

⁹ Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education*, 102-107.

¹⁰ This conclusion vastly underemphasizes the role that the Nobel-Prize-winning novelist Saul Bellow, Bloom's friend and colleague at the University of Chicago, played in ensuring the success of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bellow, who encouraged Bloom to write the book in the first place, composed a foreword for it. He also persuaded his literary agent to represent Bloom. These efforts on Bellow's part surely helped convince the trade giant Simon and Schuster to publish *The Closing of the American Mind*. On Bellow's role in this process, see James Atlas, *Bellow: A Biography* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 531-32.

¹¹ Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, 5.

¹² Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

¹³ Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

asserts, “but they did attack the university. In doing so, they created the conditions for repeated budget cuts to the core middle-class institution. More fundamentally, they discredited the *cultural* conditions of mass-middle-class development, downsized the influence of its leading institution, the university, and reduced the social and political impacts of knowledge workers overall.”¹⁴ Although they did not intimate as much, then, Newfield argues that the authors of the traditionalistic academic jeremiads of the 1980s and 1990s ultimately had a surreptitious motive: to thwart the economic mobility of the masses. Their means of doing so, he contends, involved hastening the arrival of the neoliberal university.

II

Conservatives abhorred treating universities like businesses; progressives more accepting of the trend.

These sorts of arguments must possess an emotional appeal for some academics. After all, they blame traditionalistic culture warriors for wrecking American higher education—and thereby exonerate other potential offenders for their role in shaping the contours of contemporary colleges and universities in the U.S. Nevertheless a careful examination of the academic culture wars of the late twentieth century demonstrates that the propositions of Schrecker and Newfield about the origins of the neoliberal university are untenable. As it turns out, critics such as Bloom abhorred the impetus to treat American institutions of higher learning like businesses; their anti-traditionalist foes, by contrast, appear to have felt far more at home with the American multiversity.¹⁵

In this sense, as Tom Hayden, a formative member of Students for a Democratic Society, recognized, Bloom’s criticisms of the university actually had much in common with the radical student critiques of the 1960s. Offering his take on *The Closing of the American Mind* in an interview conducted in 1988, Hayden argued that Bloom “is right to say that specialization goes too far, that objectivity masks a moral neutralism, that the teaching and counseling of undergraduates is often underemphasized.” To Hayden, these and other flaws in American

¹⁴ Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, 11 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁵ The term *multiversity* was coined by Clark Kerr, the president of the University of California system, in his book *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

colleges and universities that Bloom pinpointed “were among the very causes of the early student movement.”¹⁶ Bloom briefly noted this correspondence of views in his book: “The first university disruptions at Berkeley,” he wrote, “were explicitly directed against the university smorgasbord and, I must confess, momentarily and partially engaged my sympathies.”¹⁷ Of course, no one would mistake Bloom for a student radical. *The Closing of the American Mind*, in fact, catalogues Bloom’s abiding disdain for the New Left’s takeover of the university—a takeover he combatively likened to the Nazi destruction of German higher education.¹⁸ But this does not imply that Bloom was a shill for corporate interests. He too felt discomfited by the American multiversity and its priorities.

The key to recognizing this similarity is that the academic culture wars were principally fought over the American undergraduate curriculum. Among other things, Bloom and his fellow traditionalists disdained the free-for-all course of studies that was (and is) dominant in U.S. higher education. In its place, these reformers plumped for the Great Books—an approach mandating required coursework devoted to the masterworks of Western culture. Above all, the traditionalists hoped to end the curricular buffet, which presents no vision of what it means to be an educated person. Bloom’s jeremiad, for example, explicitly rejects this buffet, viewing it as the curricular embodiment of democratic capitalism. To balance their souls, Bloom contended, American students must experience a university that is non-democratic and non-capitalistic. Hence Bloom demonstrated paramount enthusiasm for prescribed coursework focused on transcendent authors of the past.¹⁹

Traditionalists disdained curricular buffet characteristic of neoliberal education.

Bloom, Kimball, and kindred traditionalists—whether aware

¹⁶ Tom Hayden, “Our Finest Moment,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 4.4 (Winter 1988), 20.

¹⁷ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 338.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 221, 314.

¹⁹ For a helpful explication of Bloom’s thesis in *The Closing of the American Mind* and its Platonic bona fides, see Susan Dawn Wake, “The University and Democratic Life: Allan Bloom’s Platonic Attack,” *Interchange* 22 (1991), 66-78. For useful criticisms of the philosophical foundations of *The Closing of the American Mind* (a topic often ignored or misunderstood by reviewers wishing to laud or condemn Bloom), see Claes G. Ryn, “Allan Bloom and Straussian Alienation,” *Humanitas* 25:1-2 (2012), 5-19.

Free elective system had origins in nineteenth century.

Demise of classical curriculum a victory for capitalistic, Darwinian course of studies.

of it or not—were engaged in a longstanding war against the pedagogical principles of Charles W. Eliot. Eliot (1834-1926) was a chemist and longstanding president of Harvard University. He became the most tireless and prominent advocate of the so-called free elective system.²⁰ Disdaining the prescribed curriculum of the old classical colleges, Eliot aimed to offer unparalleled choice to undergraduates when selecting their classes. In his 1869 inaugural address as Harvard's president, Eliot pronounced, "The elective system fosters scholarship because it gives free play to natural preferences and inborn aptitudes, makes possible enthusiasm for a chosen work, relieves the professor and the ardent disciple of the presence of a body of students who are compelled to an unwelcome task, and enlarges the instruction by substituting many and various lessons given to small, lively classes."²¹

Although supporters of curricular free election have often championed it as a victory for student-centered progressive education, Eliot's system had other important intellectual inspirations. The historian W. B. Carnochan explains: "However sanctified the ideal university of Eliot's imagining, the reality implied a competitive, evolutionary model of knowledge. In the environment of free election, the fittest would survive best: the fittest students would succeed, the fittest teachers and the fittest courses would attract the best students, the fittest subjects would dominate the intellectual scene."²² Eliot openly explained his pedagogical philosophy with this sort of evolutionary vocabulary. "In education, as elsewhere," he

²⁰ Eliot was not the founder of this system, however. One can trace its origins in America back to Thomas Jefferson, whose attempts to reform the curriculum at the College of William and Mary and then at the University of Virginia are often seen as the first inklings of free election in the U.S. On Jefferson's educational ideas and their influence, see, e.g., R. Freeman Butts, *The College Charts Its Course: Historical Conceptions and Current Proposals* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 64, 88-97; W. H. Cowley and Don Williams, *International and Historical Roots of American Higher Education* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991), 116; Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 6, 21-35, 72.

²¹ Charles William Eliot, *A Turning Point in Higher Education: The Inaugural Address of Charles William Eliot as President of Harvard College, October 19, 1869* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 11.

²² W. B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 14.

proclaimed in an address on the nature of liberal education, “it is the fittest that survives.”²³ The triumph of free election and the concomitant demise of the prescribed classical curriculum in American higher education amounted to victory for a capitalistic, Darwinian course of studies.

Eliot was a major figure among a group of nineteenth-century American academic reformers who shaped the modern university movement. This group, whom the historian Andrew Jewett has labeled “scientific democrats,”²⁴ aimed to reorient American higher education around the natural and social sciences. They believed that the scientific method could supply the necessary tools to maintain a cohesive and robust democratic society. And thus they aimed to reduce the roles of the classical languages and Christian theology in the American colleges. The first generation of scientific democrats, advancing their case in the 1860s, proved deeply influential in American culture, especially in the realm of higher education. In the late nineteenth century, these scientific democrats created the American research university, ultimately making the production of new knowledge a paramount goal of higher learning in the U.S. In the years following the Civil War, such reformers also managed to jettison the prescribed classical curriculum of the antebellum American colleges in favor of free election. Moreover, they managed to reorient higher education in the U.S. around the physical and social sciences, thereby sidelining the humanities.

Although various progressive reformers ultimately took the leadership role in advancing scientific democracy in American higher education, many of the original proponents of this movement had different political and pedagogical inspirations. Its financial backers included numerous vocational reformers, who helped add an array of pragmatic disciplines to the undergraduate curriculum. The telegraph magnate Ezra Cornell (1807-1874), for example, esteemed the idea of a science-centered university, but his chief goal in helping to found a land-

²³ Charles William Eliot, *Educational Reform: Essays and Addresses* (New York: The Century Co., 1898), 120.

²⁴ Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

grant institution in upstate New York was to grant a greater sense of status to vocational subjects.²⁵ More important for our purposes, Jewett writes that “the early scientific democrats thought that the lessons of modern history favored the Whig-Protestant combination of *laissez-faire* governance, Christian charity, and technological industry.”²⁶ According to the Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840-1910), for example, the growth of economic inequality fomented by minimalistic state intervention in the economy was a sign of greater justice.²⁷ Such scientific democrats thus took the lead in crafting a new undergraduate curriculum inspired by free-market capitalism.

III

Irving Babbitt
bemoaned
introduction
of vocational
coursework.

Well before the academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, educational traditionalists detested free election. According to Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), a Harvard professor of comparative literature and the chief thinker associated with New Humanism, in Eliot’s system, “The wisdom of all the ages is to be naught as compared with the inclinations of a sophomore.”²⁸ Babbitt lamented the demise of the prescribed classical curriculum, bemoaning the introduction of vocational coursework and capitalistic imperatives ushered in by free election. In an homage to Babbitt, his former student K. T. Mei related an anecdote that reveals Babbitt’s attitude toward curricular capitalism: “As we were sauntering together one fine spring afternoon along the farther side of the Charles, he stopped to admire the symmetry and impressiveness of the newly completed buildings of the Harvard Business School, and, when I suggested that these might fittingly house the

²⁵ Ibid., 30-32.

²⁶ Ibid., 48. Jewett adds that many of “the early scientific democrats felt strongly that the state should stay out of economic affairs, and that the student could learn no more valuable lesson from collegiate study.” Herbert Spencer, a major influence on the early scientific democrats and the progressive education movement, supported *laissez-faire* economic policies and social Darwinism. On Spencer’s influence on progressive education, see Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressive Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), esp. 11-13, 19-21, 23-24, 34, 48-49.

²⁷ Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University*, 69.

²⁸ Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 96.

more humane departments of Philosophy and the Classics, he chuckled, 'You are a Utopian.'"²⁹

Although in many respects the specifics of their arguments differed, the traditionalists in the academic culture wars repeated Babbitt's disdain for curricular capitalism. Thus, for instance, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom grumbled that "Premed, prelaw, and prebusiness students are distinctively tourists in the liberal arts. Getting into those elite professional schools is an obsessive concern that tethers their minds."³⁰ Elsewhere in the book, he explicitly contemns the reduction of curricular decisions to *laissez-faire* principles: "When a youngster like Lincoln sought to educate himself, the immediately available obvious things for him to learn were the Bible, Shakespeare and Euclid. Was he really worse off than those who try to find their way through the technical smorgasbord of the current school system, with its utter inability to distinguish between important and unimportant in any way than by the demands of the market?"³¹ Similarly, in an opinion piece in *The New Criterion* from 1999, Roger Kimball averred: "Higher education cannot be a popularity contest without compromising its very essence: to strive for the best. When top university administrators start using words like 'commodification' and 'marketing,' the game is up. They might as well be in the business of selling widgets."³² It seems clear that reputedly conservative endowments such as the John M. Olin Foundation, which gave grants to Bloom, Kimball, and other traditionalistic culture warriors, did not do so for the reasons Schrecker and Newfield contend. Why would corporate leaders, aiming to bring free-market ideology to American academia, bestow grants on such thinkers, whose views on the relationship between pedagogy and economics are so opposed to those attributed to their patrons?

²⁹ Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard, eds., *Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), 118. Babbitt even proved suspicious of the entire discipline of economics, which he associated with a trivializing and wrongly directed humanitarianism. See Irving Babbitt, *Spanish Character and Other Essays* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 214.

³⁰ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 370.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² Roger Kimball, "Notes and Comments," *The New Criterion* 17:6 (Feb. 1999), 2.

Although the traditionalists' progressive opponents articulated similar reservations about the triumph of vocationalism in American higher education, their hatred for the Great Books helps demonstrate that such thinkers had made their peace with Eliot's curricular capitalism. Throughout the academic culture wars, progressives such as Lawrence Levine pilloried Bloom for supporting a model of undergraduate general education based on required coursework on important and influential authors of the past. In *The Opening of the American Mind*, a book-length riposte to Bloom, Levine wrote, "Fears of an eroding hierarchy and the encroachment of a democratic society into the academe, as reflected in both the curriculum and the student body, are at the heart of many of the critiques of contemporary higher education."³³ Through such means, Levine and kindred progressives vouched for Eliot's Darwinian and capitalistic curriculum.³⁴ Levine, unlike Bloom, wanted the university to offer a "democratic" curriculum, a capitalistic course of studies that compels undergraduates, like consumers, to choose those subjects most appealing to them in accordance with their individual preferences.

IV

In sum, then, we cannot blame the traditionalistic culture warriors of the 1980s and 1990s for curricular capitalism. These days, unfortunately, conservative critiques of higher education have taken on an increasingly libertarian character. Thus, for example, Charles Murray's *Real Education* supports the scrapping of the B.A. degree altogether in favor of a vocational approach to education.³⁵ Perhaps no better example of the new turn toward market-oriented criticisms of the university among American conservatives can be found than the drastic change of course in William Bennett's work on higher education. In 1984, as Ronald Reagan's head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Bennett wrote the report *To Reclaim a Legacy*, which

³³ Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11-12.

³⁴ On the progressive embrace of curricular free-election during the academic culture wars, see Eric Adler, *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), esp. 35.

³⁵ Charles A. Murray, *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008).

deemed the crisis in the collegiate humanities a threat to American culture writ large. "The nation's colleges and universities must reshape their undergraduate curricula based on a clear vision of what constitutes an educated person, regardless of major, and on the study of history, philosophy, languages, and literature," he wrote.³⁶ A few decades later, a despondent Bennett co-authored a book openly questioning the very value of a college education.³⁷

Crisis in collegiate humanities a threat to American culture writ large.

If American colleges and universities have any chance of retaining their erstwhile dedication to the humanities in the face of such criticism, analysis of the neoliberal university must relate the realities of contemporary higher education to the undergraduate curriculum. A curriculum, after all, is not merely a list of coursework or a convenient agreement brokered by various academic departments. On the contrary: an institution's course of studies provides the philosophical blueprint for the sorts of citizens it aims to produce. In the nineteenth century, thanks to Eliot and other first-generation scientific democrats, that blueprint fundamentally altered, in an effort to reduce the influence of a semi-aristocratic tradition rooted in the classical humanities in favor of a conception of students as democratic consumers. This new conception of the undergraduate curriculum contained the roots of the corporate university. Although traditionalistic culture warriors such as Bloom were wrong to reduce the humanities to occidental confines, their insistence on required classes devoted to the masterworks of culture was, *inter alia*, a blow against this conception of higher education.³⁸ This should be a lesson for critics of American higher learning today: If we aim to reform the neoliberal university, we must fight against its neoliberal curriculum.

³⁶ William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984), 2.

³⁷ William J. Bennett and David Wilezol, *Is College Worth It? A Former United States Secretary of Education and a Liberal Arts Graduate Expose the Broken Promise of Higher Education* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

³⁸ In this regard, Bloom had much to learn from the thought of Babbitt, who promoted a far more capacious conception of humanism. See, e.g., Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 33-34, *The Dhammapadam: Translated from the Pāli with an Essay on Buddha and the Occident* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1965), 65-121, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), esp. 148, 343.