

## **Academic Conservatives and the Future of Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Having largely disappeared from the humanities and social sciences, conservatives have become the Other in progressive discussions of higher education. Crucial to this othering is the ascription of personal faults, such as racism or a lack of interest in marginal student populations. This article presents an alternative view of academic conservative writers on higher education. Rather than focus on their policy recommendations, it focuses on their perceptions of contemporary higher education, and finds that academic conservatives (as distinct from many conservative politicians) argue for the same goals as their progressive counterparts: a strong program of liberal arts, critical thinking, and access to education for diverse student populations. It divides these writers into two broad categories for analysis: traditional conservatives and libertarians. Suggestions are provided for readers who wish to explore these ideas more fully.

The current crisis in public higher education is often seen as engendered by the political Right. This group of antagonists includes politicians such as Governor Pat McCrory of North Carolina who seek to reduce higher education spending and publically attack the liberal arts, corporations such as College Board or University of Phoenix that see students as profit opportunities instead of citizen-scholars, the higher-education portion of the school choice movement, and conservative pundits who attack university faculty for their political views. The cumulative effect of their opposition to public higher education prevents colleges and universities from fulfilling their mission of accessible, high-quality education.

More nuanced descriptions of the current crisis argue that it is not a Democrat-Republican divide, but the transformation of American higher education into a neo-liberal system where colleges and universities have been reshaped to serve the interests of state and corporate elites.<sup>1</sup> Processes like the commodification of academic labor and replacement of the liberal arts with occupational training for non-elite students are designed to produce useful components for elite managers, not critical-minded citizens for a thriving democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Both narratives, however, privilege some voices and marginalize others. In the same way that the first version valorizes the political Left generally, the second version limits resistance to neo-liberal hegemony to the work of progressive academics and activists. Whether intentional or not, this circumscribes the scope of potential responses to ones emerging from a particular paradigm. Other philosophies of higher education, from the Roman Catholic arguments for the liberal arts, represented by Cardinal John Newman, to beliefs in student autonomy that motivate Libertarians, all collapse into a neo-liberal Other.

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<sup>1</sup> C.W. Barrow, "The Rationality Crisis in US Higher Education," *New Political Science* 32:3,(2010), pp. 317-344.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Ginsburg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

This article encourages readers to reconsider that exclusion. After all, progressives have neither a monopoly on caring about students as human beings nor on opposing the domination of society by a political and corporate *nomenklatura*. In this time of crisis, it behooves anyone who seeks genuinely democratic higher education to find what allies they can. This article introduces readers to the ideas of some higher education reformers who promote quality education for democratic citizens but in a way that gets them the label “conservative.” As a self-professed academic conservative myself, I personally support their arguments, even if they can be overstated at times. Space limitations here, however, prevent me from laying them out for readers more fully. Instead, I hope to do two things: persuade readers that arguments they may disagree with are being made thoughtfully and in good faith, and provide curious readers with resources to explore these authors on their own.

In the previous paragraph, the term “conservative” appears in quotes because there is little agreement on what it means. Defining it is beyond the scope of this article: some say it is a personality trait, some say that it is a belief in tradition, others in individual freedom, some say it stands for small government, others say it supports an all-powerful security state.<sup>3</sup> The term itself has little predictive power, mostly useful as a self-claimed umbrella of a label, under which disparate groups gather to seek recruits and allies. This means that conservatives often pursue contradictory goals and policies, and the higher education arena is no exception. For the purposes of this article, though, conservative writers on education can be divided into two broad groups: libertarian and traditional conservatives.

In terms of their thinking about higher education, the crucial difference between the two approaches is how they respond to changes wrought since the 1970s. The story of that era’s student protests is well known: amidst the civil rights movement, the growth of feminism, and resistance to the Vietnam War, students argued that higher education

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<sup>3</sup> The best recent survey on the American conservatives is: George Nash, *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009). For a good history of the Conservative Movement, see: John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2004).

excluded those in the margins and demanded a new model. In response to these demands, academics retreated from two claims. First, they retreated from demanding that students need professors' knowledge to guide them through a broad liberal education alongside their major. Second, the claim that some knowledges and texts are more important than others became, at best, highly contested.

In terms of higher education, today's libertarians are children of the revolution. Not only do they agree with the students of the 70s on both claims, they go one step further by taking their position to its logical conclusion. After dethroning the Canon, rejecting professorial guidance led universities to weaken their core curricula, eliminating required courses and explicitly calling on students to choose for themselves. Libertarian critics--and the non-university course providers they often support--insist that if students can make curricular decisions themselves, they should not be constrained to a particular format of class at a particular institution. Trapping students within a one-size-fits all credentialing agent (the university) holds learners--especially non-traditional students--back from pursuing a more creative and rewarding educational experience. Libertarians advance progressives' rejection of the second claim as well. After all, if reading Harry Potter is as useful as reading Homer, academic claims about the value of the traditional liberal arts are ultimately based on nothing but inherited prejudice.

Traditional conservatives, on the other hand, represent the detritus of the *ancien regime*. In contrast to libertarians, they still believe in both professorial expertise and the idea that some works are more important than others; this gives them a useful perspective, with insider knowledge of higher education and a minority's skepticism of prevailing academic culture. Ironically, they ask the same questions of modern higher education as the progressive students asked of their predecessors forty years ago: what are the limits of academic orthodoxy? What is omitted and what consequence do those omissions have?

Conservatives of both stripes argue that higher education today looks more like that of the 1950s than others would care to admit. For all the talk of openness, contemporary higher education has its own (albeit new) sacred cows, and it insists on a single format for learning, one that best suits the affluent. The irony of these critiques is, of course, that many conservatives disagree with progressive visions for academia not

because they have different goals, but because they argue progressive prescriptions will not help achieve their *shared* goals.

For the record, the authors described here are not a representative survey of conservative thought generally. Only one of them could creditably be considered a neo-conservative (the influential group of that predominated in policy positions of the Republican presidential administrations over the last thirty years). They are, instead, a sample of academic conservatives who share with progressives a belief in the value of education and inclusivity, but present alternative visions of how to accomplish those goals.

### **The Traditional Conservative Critique**

The most interesting traditional conservatives tend to be humanities faculty. Many of them are older professors who still remember teaching the pre-Culture Wars curricula, like Donald Kagan, recently retired professor of Greek history at Yale. Others, like Tony Esolen, professor of English at Providence College, consciously engage in Catholics' long history of humanities scholarship (it is worth remembering that much of our--conservative *and* progressive--enthusiasm for liberal arts education dates back Cardinal John Newman's work in the nineteenth century).<sup>4</sup> Among academic conservatives, the leading networking organization is the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), which also provides seminars for undergraduates curious about conservative ideas they do not hear at college, and a book press.

As one might expect with this demographic, one distinguishing characteristic of traditional conservatives is their abiding faith in the role of a liberal arts education for preparing citizens and developing the human spirit. Consider the following justification for the liberal arts from Kagan:

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<sup>4</sup> John Newman , *The Idea of a University* (Loyola University Press, 1987 [1873]). Prominent contemporary journals in this tradition include *First Things* (more political and academic) and *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (more theological and aimed at a wider readership).

Earlier generations who came to college with traditional beliefs rooted in the past had them challenged by hard questioning and the requirement to consider alternatives and were thereby unnerved, and thereby liberated, by the need to make reasoned choices. The students of today and tomorrow deserve the same opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

Like his progressive counterparts, he identifies the liberal arts with questioning--and being liberated from--pre-existing beliefs.

The crucial difference, however, between progressive and traditional conservative visions of the liberal arts lies in what happens next. In the former, intellectual liberation should be followed by transformative activism to end the structures of power that prevent a free and democratic society. Traditional conservatives, however, argue that breaking down walls is not enough; a liberal arts education must re-construct the individual as well. In the words of Robert George, professor of jurisprudence at Princeton and another writer in the Anglo-Catholic tradition:

If we believe in republican democracy, as we should; if we believe in the ideal of free persons, as we should; if we believe in the dignity and rights of the individual in a regime of ordered liberty, as we should; then we must dedicate ourselves to educating young people for self-mastery.<sup>6</sup>

George agrees that tearing down unjust power structures is a worthy goal, as is protecting the equality and dignity of all people, but building a *sustainable* democracy requires something more. To understand his use of the term “self-mastery” as a goal of liberal arts education, one can turn to Patrick Deneen, a political theorist at Notre Dame.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Kagan, “Ave Atque Vale,” *The New Criterion* 31:1 (2013), pp. 4-12.

<<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Ave-atque-vale-7653>>. Kagan is best known for writing the standard modern account of the Peloponnesian War, but those interested in his take on higher education should read his 2005 Jefferson Lecture for a defense of studying history for its intrinsic value, not just as a canvas on which to write modern values.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Iannone, “Our Western Heritage: An interview with Robert George,” *Academic Questions* 25:1 (2012), pp. 37-45. *Academic Questions* is a higher ed-focused journal of the National Association of Scholars, the second largest academic conservative association.

Defending the humanities against an encroaching tide of advocates for STEM studies (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), Deneen reminds us why the liberal arts were once considered important:

To understand ourselves was to understand how to use our liberty well, especially how to govern appetites that seemed insatiable. The liberal arts recognized that submission to these limitless appetites would result in the loss of our liberty and reflect our enslavement to desire...To be free--*liberal*--was itself an *art*, something that was learned not by nature or instinct, but by refinement and education."<sup>7</sup>

This insistence on self-mastery comes from two non-exclusive sources: the Socratic tradition to “know thyself,” and religious rhetoric of freeing one’s self from the “slavery” of physical desires.<sup>8</sup> The connection between those two resolves the seeming contradiction between faith and liberal education in claims made by religious conservatives, such as in the mission statement of Wheaton College (considered the most intellectually rigorous of evangelical Christian schools):

Wheaton College advances the kingdom of Jesus Christ through a particular kind of education. We affirm our ongoing commitment to the best traditions of liberal education at a time when many liberal arts colleges are in decline...

These religious conservatives insist that not only are faith and reason compatible, but in fact a liberal arts education--a questioning and liberating education like the one Kagan describes--allows one a deeper and richer faith.

In a twist that confounds those who see conservatism as a single tradition, this argument is the antithesis of Ayn Rand’s objectivism. Unbridled greed, lust, and a hunger for power are destructive; they inevitably produce exploitation and degradation,

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick J. Deneen, "Science and the Decline of the Liberal Arts," *The New Atlantis* 26 (Fall 2009/Winter 2010), pp. 60-68. This emphasis on self-*mastery* rather than self-*fulfillment* is common to religious conservatives like George and Deneen (both outspoken Catholics).

<sup>8</sup> This rhetoric is common in the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s letters, but it appears prominently in Islamic writings like Qutb’s *In the Shade of the Qur’an* as well.

diminishing the humanity of others. Overcoming these harmful (sinful) appetites, conservatives like Deneen and George insist, requires more than just pointing fingers at others, or at structures, it demands we look inside and control our own selves as well. Otherwise, tearing down one oppressive structure will do little more than free a new set of individuals to pursue their own greed and exploit a new set of victims.

The flashpoint between these two perspectives occurs in the question of how to balance critique with content. In the 1950s, university curricula were tilted too heavily to the content side, with students uniformly expected to study the Canon and Western Civilization and marginalizing others. This prompted a call for more critique, especially from previously marginalized perspectives, which emerged in the 1970s and 80s, particularly framed in terms of race, sex, and class.

Looking back at the lessons from thirty years under the new curricular regime, traditional conservatives argue that the pendulum has swung too far, replacing the old orthodoxy with a new orthodoxy. Professors in the ancient regime insisted that learning Western Tradition was crucial, but today's professors have their own imperative. Alan Kors, professor of history at Penn and founder of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) writes:

Academics, in their own minds, face an almost insoluble problem of time. How, in only four years, can they disabuse students of the notion that the capital, risk, productivity and military sacrifice of others have contributed to human dignity and to the prospects of a decent society? How can they make them understand, with only four years to do so, that capitalism and individualism have created cultures that are cruel, inefficient, racist, sexist and homophobic, with oppressive caste systems, mental and behavioral? <sup>9</sup>

This is not so different, conservatives insist, from the old worry that four years was not enough time to learn all the important history and arts of the Western Tradition. In the same way as student radicals objected with claims about the topics that curricula omitted in their desire to spend so much time on the Western Tradition, contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Kors, "The Sadness of Higher Education," *New Criterion* 26:9 (2009), pp. 9-14.

conservatives object to today's curriculum with claims about what it omits in its desire to spend so much time critiquing structures of power.

Unfortunately, this argument is often explained away with accusations of racism, sexism, or an assumed bitterness about how academia is "being taken over by people who aren't like me." Buras offers an example of this tendency, asserting that conservatives act out of "...a fear of subverted power and undermined cultural authority."<sup>10</sup> Similar comments are a perennial favorite at online forums like InsideHighered.com or the Chronicle of Higher Education. Those criticisms may be true of some on the Right--this article makes no claim to be fully representative--but the authors cited here make a different argument: over-emphasis on sex, race, and class undermines the very goals that progressive education claims to pursue.

A mild form of this argument comes from the National Association of Scholars (NAS), a group of conservative historians who left the discipline's main association during the Culture Wars of the 80s and 90s with the goal of maintaining the Western intellectual tradition. Since that time it has focused on promoting greater structure in general education, particularly the use of survey courses instead of narrow seminars. Its position is often misread as simply accusations of "leftist indoctrination."<sup>11</sup> In recent years the organization has produced two studies documenting what they call an outsized role for race, sex, and class in the history curricula at Bowdin College, the University of Texas, and Texas A&M.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, they argue that there is too much important history to spend so much time on any one focus. The Texas report reads:

As RCG [race, class, gender] emphases crowd out other aspects and themes in American history, we find other problems setting in, including the narrow tailoring of "special topics" courses and the absence of

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<sup>10</sup> Kristen Buras, *Rightist Multiculturalism: Lessons in Neoconservative School Reform* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2010), p.43.

<sup>11</sup> Cary Nelson, *No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York, NY: University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Wood and Michael Toscano, "What Does Bowdoin Teach? How A Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students" (2013), <[http://www.nas.org/projects/the\\_bowdoin\\_project](http://www.nas.org/projects/the_bowdoin_project)>.

significant primary source documents...Teachers of American history should take race, class, and gender into account and should help students understand those aspects of our history, but those perspectives should not take precedence over all others.<sup>13</sup>

The report takes a list of one hundred important documents in US history compiled by the National Archives and finds that eighty nine percent of faculty teaching introductory US history classes did not assign a single document from the list. Instead, the authors find that seventy one percent of course readings in introductory US history courses emphasized RCG topics, but only two percent emphasized scientific, technological, or environmental topics. Is it racist to suggest that a university in the American West should spare time to teach how technology and the environment shaped the region?

This version of the problem suggests that when every teacher wants to spend their classes training students to ask critical questions, students have no opportunity to learn the what and the why of structures they are to question. The NAS argues that enabling students to think critically requires they learn content first, not just criticize it. In my own introductory international relations classes, for example, I often encounter students who know that McCarthyism is bad, but can tell me little about why it existed, or even about the larger Cold War context at all. For these students, the idea of anti-McCarthyism dangles unattached and useless, because they cannot recognize how and why it might appear in other (that is, contemporary) contexts. Just to be clear, these conservatives see the value of teaching race, class, and sex, but they resist the monopolizing of the curriculum--*just as the student protestors of the 1970s resisted monopolization by the classic Canon.*

Not only does the emphasis on race, sex, and class crowd out other important topics, but it may even be directly counter-productive, argues Victor D. Hanson, a historian of ancient Greece who split his career between California State University-

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Fonte, Peter Wood, and Ashley, "Recasting History: Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?" (2013),

<[http://www.nas.org/articles/recasting\\_history\\_are\\_race\\_class\\_and\\_gender\\_dominating\\_american\\_history](http://www.nas.org/articles/recasting_history_are_race_class_and_gender_dominating_american_history)>, p.7-8.

Fresno and his family's vineyards.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that the problem is its banality. Consider Homer's Achilles, he says, a literary character offering rich ground for a discussion of the all-too human emotions of pride, anger, and glory - one that can challenge students' own choices and beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Those discussions give students opportunities to think about their own behavior and learn the kind of self-mastery described by Deneen and George. Instead, a critical discussion can actually *comfort* students (especially women and minorities): "Ho, hum, another dead white male who was sexist and had slaves. How awful. Good thing *I'm* not like that." Kagan agrees with this, insisting that while the predominant place of sex, race, and class was appropriate once, it does not reflect modern society that has, for all its imperfections, undergone a sea change since the 1960s. What might have been transgressive once is now nothing students do not regularly see in pop culture.

Kagan's experience at Yale may not be fully representative, but they match my own experiences at a public university near the Mason-Dixon line. The fraternity I advised invited a women's studies professor to participate in an in-house lecture series; she requested they read Anne Koedt's 1970 "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," hoping to challenge their assumed heteronormativity. Once the discussion began, however, she was taken aback to hear the men reach an enthusiastic consensus: "Wow, this is great. They should have told us about the clitoris at freshman orientation." Born a decade after Koedt's article appeared, it never occurred to them to be disturbed by the knowledge that women can reach orgasm without penetration, or be threatened by the idea that some women prefer other women. Her grand plans of challenging their images of masculinity

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<sup>14</sup> Hanson is currently a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institute, as is Robert George (cited earlier) and many prominent conservative academics. The Institute provides a platform for them to speak on policy issues.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer: The Demise Of Classical Education And The Recovery Of Greek Wisdom* (New York, NY: Free Press. 1998). Many of his recent writings are partisan polemics, but his *The Other Greeks* (1999) remains a compelling historical argument that the democratic values of equality and participation originated with redneck farmers in Classical Greece, not urban sophisticates.

ended up as nothing more than sex column advice. So it often goes, conservatives argue, with race, sex, and class coursework.

And yet, one might reply, few students leave campus radicalized. It seems fair to ask Kagan why, if students are so exposed to these ideas, do they not react? He responds by arguing that teaching critical thinking requires questions that push against strongly held beliefs. Challenging students on issues where they lack conviction, or even worse, agree with the questioner, is like weightlifting without weights, and today's students lack any reasoned convictions against which critical dialogue can get traction. As he puts it, they come to campus with:

...a kind of cultural void, an ignorance of the past, a sense of rootlessness and aimlessness, as though not only the students but also the world was born yesterday, a feeling that they are attached to the society in which they live only incidentally and accidentally.<sup>16</sup>

This is not to say that students agree with progressive ideas, rather, that few of them have strongly reasoned beliefs (some strong opinions, yes, but not coherent beliefs based in things they have learned). Sure, we can all think of memorable exceptions, but those students are memorable precisely because they are the exceptions. The silent majority of students are ill-served by current practice because we cannot liberate students who have nothing to be liberated from. In a sense, the lack of student radicalism proves Kagan's point: if criticizing current power structures was enough to radicalize students, there should be far more student radicalism than we see today.

This resonates with my own experiences of teaching Marx at a university and to a group of Christian homeschoolers. My university students generally greet Marxist critiques with boredom; most do not care enough about capitalism to have an opinion. My homeschoolers, on the other hand, predictably counter-attacked--but that is when the teaching starts: how can we read Acts 2:44-45 and reject communal ownership? How can we read Isaiah 65:21-22 and not see the parallels between Marx's Labor Theory of Value and the ownership of one's work in scripture? Their pre-existing beliefs *force* my

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<sup>16</sup> Kagan, "Ave Atque Vale," 2013.

students to think critically in a way that is impossible to duplicate with unmoored college students.

For the record, in making these critiques traditional conservatives are quite aware they lost control of the Academy in the 1970s, and were decisively defeated in the Culture Wars of the 1990s. Kors acknowledges this as he articulates a common sentiment among these writers:

The academic world that I entered is gone. I teach for my students, whom I love, and I fight for intellectual pluralism, for legal equality and for fairness simply because it is my duty to bear witness to the values I cherish, with no expectation of success.<sup>17</sup>

Historians caution us, however, to be careful of history written by the winners. Losers often have stories the winners would rather not hear, and the experience to know when victors become the very thing they originally opposed. So it is, traditional conservatives like Kors argue, in higher education today.

### **The Libertarian Critique**

While conservatives in the humanities tend towards traditionalism, higher education writers in other disciplines tend to a more diverse set of ideas that can, at the risk of oversimplification, be collectively labeled libertarian. In contrast to how traditional conservatives unambiguously assert the value of liberal arts education, libertarians demur. Indeed, many of their proposals give the impression that they oppose higher education in general (particularly for the less well-off). They tend to support online education and vocational programs for most students and face-to-face liberal arts education for an elite few; some suggest that college is unnecessary. Based on these policies, cynics accuse them of taking the corporate shilling to advocate policies that benefit the elite.

Libertarians counter that in reality, the reverse is true. Both progressives and libertarians agree that today's higher education contributes to inequality, but they differ about why. Progressives argue that equality demands universal access to college.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kors, "The Sadness of Higher Education," 2008.

<sup>18</sup> For recent examples of this, see: Ron Brownstein, "Are College Degrees Inherited?" *National Journal*

Libertarians counter that this argument rests on flawed assumptions about education and diversity. According to them, contemporary higher education fails its 1970s-era aspirations by locking students in a system that fails to deliver a quality education, forces students into punishing debt, and most crucially, marginalizes students whose strengths lie elsewhere.

They begin their critique by noting that the signaling function of higher education has overtaken its learning one. College has become a screening device, not a place of education.<sup>19</sup> As *National Review* writer Andrew Ferguson puts it:

As higher education was democratized, a college degree became more desirable than the learning it was originally meant to signify. It was a guarantee of smarts, drive, social standing, and future prospects.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, while a college degree may enhance a young person's future earnings, that does not happen because the student actually learns anything. Instead, a college degree provides a *credential*, one assuring employers that the candidate meets certain minimum standards.

One reason for this, Libertarians point out, is that most students do not very learn much.<sup>21</sup> The National Survey of Student Engagement finds that on average, students study less than sixteen hours a week; a wider analysis finds that students study less than two hours a day.<sup>22</sup> The same source found that a majority of college students have never

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*Magazine*, April 12, 2014; Suzanne Mettler, *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> George Leef, "The Overselling of Higher Education," Pope Center for Higher Education policy paper, (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Ferguson, *Crazy U: One Dad's Crash Course in Getting his Kid into College* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2011), p.38.

<sup>21</sup> David Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: the Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa *Academia Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

taken a course requiring more than twenty pages of writing a semester. Even a sympathetic observer like former Harvard president Derek Bok agrees that contemporary higher education generally fails to challenge students.<sup>23</sup>

The consequences of not studying are predictable. A survey of more than 3,000 students at nineteen institutions found not only found *no* measureable improvement in critical thinking during college students first year at school, but also found that their academic motivation and interest in their field actually *declined*.<sup>24</sup> In political science, a multi-year study of graduating students shows that graduating seniors actually know *less* about American political institutions than incoming freshmen.<sup>25</sup> While unpleasant to face, anyone who teaches outside the few highly selective institutions knows that this image is reality--with some notable exceptions, our students do not just study minimally: assignments go unread, papers are written in a single draft the night before they are due, and social and work obligations trump academic ones.<sup>26</sup>

While a credentialing college may not provide a quality education, libertarians note ironically, it does keep down the *hoi polloi*. Glenn Reynolds, law professor at Tennessee and author of the widely read libertarian blog *Instapundit*, explains why students see no alternative to college:

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<sup>23</sup> Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look At How Much Students Learn And Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Charles Blaich, "Overview of findings from the First Year of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education" (Wabash College, Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, 2007)  
<<http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Intercollegiate Studies Institute, "Enlightened Citizenship," (American Civic Literacy Institute, 2011)  
<<http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/resources/downloads.aspx>>.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Brandon, *The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given Up on Educating Your Child and What You Can Do About It* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2011).

The major problem with [apprenticeship plans] is that college now serves largely as a status marker, a sign of membership in the educated “caste,” and as a place to meet a future spouse of commensurate status.<sup>27</sup>

Entry into the upper echelons of American society requires a college degree, and entry to a good college--to the extent it depends on personal achievement rather than inherited privilege--depends on a particular skill set, and one that clusters among the affluent.

In fact, the gatekeeping role of higher education--not just getting into college, but the sitting in chairs and doing written homework for four more years to graduate--protects the children of privilege and prevents competition from the less fortunate. For the latter, "holding out only one valued alternative, namely a four-year college degree, to them is cruel and unethical and does more harm than good." <sup>28</sup>

Not only does the current system of unequal access create inequality, providing universal access--as many progressives suggest--would not solve this problem. It may even make it worse, these authors argue, because not everyone graduates. In contrast, libertarians insist, before the majority of people attempted college, there were many more ways for talented young people to succeed.<sup>29</sup>

In an earlier era, academics might have successfully defended a “college for all” agenda by insisting that higher education contains special truths that everyone should be exposed to, both for individual and public reasons. Unfortunately, that era is gone. The “sage on the stage” is passé, and in most schools, general education based on fixed menu of courses that all students must take have been replaced with a smorgasbord of classes from which students may choose. There are pedagogical arguments in support of the new methods, but the key point is that they no longer support assertions that education must take place in a traditional college system (as opposed to online or elsewhere).

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<sup>27</sup> Glen Reynolds, *The Higher Education Bubble* (Encounter Books, 2013) p.36.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Gray and Edwin Herr, *Other ways to win: Creating alternatives for high school graduates* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000) p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2000).

At this point, it may be worth clearing up two persistent misunderstandings of the libertarian position. First, they do not contest the importance of critical thinking as both a job-related and citizenship-related skill. To the contrary, they remain skeptical about liberal arts majors precisely because--as the evidence above shows--too many liberal arts majors *do not actually learn critical thinking*. The growth of pop culture in college curricula makes this even more painful--who needs to go to college to read Harry Potter? Second, their opposition to the “college for all” mantra does not stem from elitism or a neo-colonial interest in oppressing the uneducated. It stems from an appreciation of human diversity and the different gifts each person possesses--forcing everyone into a one-size-fits-all system that rewards a particular kind of person disenfranchises everyone else.

Is it a coincidence, libertarians ask, that so many academics push a system that privileges the very trait (college success) that they are best suited to give their own children? On the same note, is it a coincidence also that the “college for all” agenda appears perfectly designed to enhance academics’ own career prospects and status?

This brings us full circle from the 1960s and 70s. The reformers of that era insisted on greater access to education for everyone, not just a privileged few, and their demands have largely been met. Today, more than seventy percent of high school students go on to enroll in college.<sup>30</sup> Non-selective community colleges offer *all* high school graduates an inexpensive and geographically convenient place to begin their coursework. Remedial courses are offered to help those who suffered from a failed K-12 system.

More could certainly be done to make college more affordable, but that response fundamentally misses the point that conservatives are making. Pushing students into a system that ill suits their talents and background does not empower people, it punishes them. When success in academia becomes a universal measuring stick, it privileges those who are good at academia--who tend to be the children of the elite. The alternative to cramming everyone into the same square hole, libertarians insist, is redefining “higher education” itself to become more inclusive.

It is not clear from libertarian writings, though, what form(s) that new education may take. Online education and for-profit schools have their advocates, but so do

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<sup>30</sup> Gray and Herr, *Other Ways to Win*,

community colleges and traditional apprentice programs like those in Germany. This diversity is natural for libertarians: instead of recommending a unified solution, their philosophical preference is to promote diverse ideas--even questionable ones--and see which ones work.

### **So What?**

At first glance, the need for traditional conservative and libertarian voices is not apparent. For all that they might be marginalized in academia, their plight hardly warrants action; indeed, many traditional conservatives' writings suggest they (and I) find academia quite congenial. Nevertheless, it may be time for progressives to rethink their marginalization of conservatives because they point out unpleasant contradictions at the heart of contemporary higher education.

The first contradiction is a curricular one. Academics rhetorically disavow any "special knowledge" or core texts; all across the country, conservatives argue, general education requirements have been loosened to make the student "...the autonomous authority on the content of his education."<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, academics insist that students cannot become true democratic citizens without sharing their professors' critiques of existing power structures (particularly those of race, sex, and class). So which is it--do students have to take their classes or not? The contemporary self-image as possessors of special knowledge crucial to democratic society is ironic, because that is exactly how the traditional conservative professors of the 1950s saw themselves as well.

The second contradiction is a mismatch between the public goals proclaimed and the private goals achieved. Defenders of higher education funding argue that it should be subsidized because it provides a public good. In theory, this could be persuasive, but its power depends on proof that a college education actually delivers the goods, and that

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<sup>31</sup> Wood and Tascone, *Recasting History*, p. 371. In my experience serving on general education committees, this centrifugal pressure may be the result of disciplinary isolation more than pedagogical purpose. Nevertheless, within the UNC system (in which I work) there is little evidence of faculty interest in stronger core requirements (Jay Schalin and Jenna Ashely Robinson, "General Education at UNC-Chapel Hill, Pope Center Report, 2013).

proof is sorely lacking. There is some evidence for higher graduate earnings, of course, but that supports the private good aspect of education--the credential. And to the extent that college only provides a private good, there is no reason to subsidize it with taxpayer money, especially since the beneficiaries of that subsidy tend to be better off than average. Counterintuitively, then, the effort to provide everyone with a college credential has actually *reduced* the justification for public funds.<sup>32</sup>

The third contradiction is the most pernicious. The quest to make college nearly universal--undertaken to promote equality--has protected the elite by closing off alternatives. It is no coincidence that the rise in college enrollment since the 1970s has correlated with rising *inequality*, conservatives argue. Students who might have found rewarding paths elsewhere--working or learning a trade, for example--end up paying for classes from which they gain little. For the large percent that fail out, the damage is even worse: the financial cost, the years of their lives they could have done something else with, and the psychological scars of failure. For the elite who grow up in good schools, with parents who teach them to sit still and read books, the system works perfectly. Trapping everyone else in college only emphasizes how much 'better' they are than the underprivileged.

Successfully resolving these contradictions will be difficult. Higher funding may help with the second one, but not the other two, and generating the political will for funding will require solutions to those as well. The libertarian answer to the third problem is well known: free educators to develop new forms and institutions to serve those ill-served by the current system. Not all of these will succeed; the situation may resemble eighteenth century America, in which more than a thousand colleges were founded and more than seventy percent failed.<sup>33</sup> Sprinkled among the failures, however, were successes that rose to join the greatest universities in the world. Without the freedom to fail, libertarians remind us, those successes would not have happened.

Traditional conservatives offer a simpler solution to the first contradiction: teach. Or as Hanson puts it: "Write what others can read, stay fast in the classroom, forgo the

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<sup>32</sup> Labaree, *How to Succeed in School*.

<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, *Crazy U*.

conference, and tutor the uninitiated.”<sup>34</sup> Academia currently rewards those who minimize teaching and research niche topics, publishing them for a small coterie of fellow academics. While research can be useful, and can inform a professor’s teaching, research for the sake of research does not benefit students. Is it any wonder, conservatives ask, that taxpayers doubt that college professors provide the much bally-hoed “public goods?”

The biggest obstacle to overcoming these contradictions may be tenure-track faculty. Ensuring that colleges have a monopoly gatekeeper function protects college teachers’ jobs and status. Less rigor in the classroom means less distractions from research. Focusing on theoretical critiques instead of informative content privileges the tenured as well. After all, anyone can teach how the Constitution divides government into three branches, but only an elite can explain the hidden structures of power that lurk behind them. Tony Esolen, who translates and teaches poetry at Providence College, describes the fundamental selfishness in contemporary Humanities:

Why read at all if you are not going to accept the work on its own terms? Criticism becomes nothing more than an imposition of the self upon the poet and his art. The poet does not teach us; we teach the poet, in the same way that a schoolyard bully proposes to teach the skinny kid who can’t defend himself. We ply our “theory” upon a poet who cannot answer back. We dress it with pseudo-scientific language to impress the sophomores while remaining impervious to his thought and his humanity. This is called “critical thinking,” quite uncritical about itself and predictable in its results, as if a living being were pressed through a grinder.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, career incentives push faculty ever farther from the content that sophomores need. Plum jobs and promotion require ever-increasing amounts of research, and because the material in survey courses is common knowledge among faculty, ambitious researchers must go ever farther afield.

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<sup>34</sup> Hanson and Heath, *Who Killed Homer?*, p. 161.

<sup>35</sup> Tony Esolen, “The Subhumanities: The Reductive Violence of Race, Class, and Gender Theory,” *Intercollegiate Review* (Fall 2013).

Those concerned about the role of adjunct instructors should think about this as well. Everyone in higher education knows how adjuncts are exploited: they teach large sections of introductory classes to generate revenue that sustains a cadre of tenure-track faculty who teach fewer and upper-division courses that match their research interests. While they may rhetorically support progressive policies, many tenure-track faculty contribute to this practice out of self-interest. Hanson makes it connection explicit in a recent editorial on student protests at Dartmouth:

But why do very liberal universities do very illiberal things like raise their costs consistently above the rate of inflation, for which, in similar circumstances, food markets or gas stations would be chastised? ... And why do universities in general depend on graduate teachers, part-time lecturers and adjunct faculty to teach many courses that are identical to those taught by full, tenured faculty at rates of compensation three times higher — in an exploitative way that Target or Costco would be fined for?<sup>36</sup>

Nor is this only at the Ivies. Recently, I cringed when a recent candidate for chair of my (R2) department went on at length about his plans to implement course releases for grant writing. That is exactly what neo-liberal elites want from university administrators--encourage faculty to chase external (probably corporate) money instead of teaching undergraduates; encourage the exploitation of adjuncts to deal with students while the “real” professors are doing something else.

## **Conclusion**

Some readers may find it jarring to hear conservatives criticize tenure-track faculty for being self-interested, but that misperception underlines the diversity of “conservative” thought. In reality, conservatives problematize self-interest in many different ways. For all their support of free choice, libertarians are the first to argue that when one actor has coercive power over another, self-interest promotes exploitative rent-seeking, not mutual

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<sup>36</sup>Victor Hanson, “Our Psychodramatic Campuses” (2014), <<http://pjmedia.com/victordavishanson/our-psychodramatic-campuses/>>.

benefit. For their part, traditional conservatives have railed against the atomized, self-interested individual since the Enlightenment and religious conservatives have done so since time immemorial. Unfortunately, these conservative discussions about the limits of self-interest rarely penetrate far into the public consciousness, leaving too many (on *both* sides of the aisle) with the false idea that conservatism equals unbridled self-interest.

That misperception gets to the heart of the problem. These short introductions to conservative thought on higher education may not be persuasive; certainly many of the sources cited here have been criticized in ways that go beyond the scope of this article to address. Nevertheless, in their writings and in their daily work, the authors cited here show their passion for education and their interest in helping all Americans, not just the elite. Readers who are serious about ensuring access to quality education for all Americans need to stop reflexively demonizing conservatives as cultural supremacists and sellouts, and broaden their understanding of contemporary higher education by exploring conservative views more thoughtfully.