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The Two Cultures of Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century and Their Impact on Academic Freedom

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Abstract

Like C.P. Snow's two cultures of the humanities and the sciences, a new bimodal view of higher education is becoming increasingly important at the start of the twenty-first century: one that sees the goal of universities as developing "the whole person" and another that sees it as largely or even exclusively in terms of job training. The problem many academics face is that the culture of higher education that regards it as preparation for a career is now widely shared by legislators, members of governing boards, and others who set the budgets of colleges and universities. Because of this divide, there is increased pressure on administrators and professors alike to shift the focus of higher education away from pure research to applied research and to appraise both the teaching and research missions of higher education on the basis of their returns on investment. Moreover, faculty members in the arts, humanities, and social sciences find themselves increasingly working in an environment in which most of the attention and funding is being redirected to the STEM disciplines. This article explores ways to bridge the gap between these two new cultures before the potential damage to academic freedom becomes irreparable.

In his highly acclaimed Rede Lecture at Cambridge's Senate House in 1959, C. P. Snow coined the expression "the two cultures" as a way of characterizing what he saw as a growing dichotomy between science and the humanities in the twentieth century.¹ That distinction helped shape a great deal of academic policy for nearly

fifty years. Universities underwent curricular reforms and general education reviews in successive attempts to bridge the gap that divided these two cultures. Distribution requirements, core curricula, E. D. Hirsch's cultural literacy campaign, Lynne Cheney's Fifty Hours initiative,² and numerous other experiments in higher education were conceived, at least in part, to make sure that students majoring in biology knew their Shakespeare and that students majoring in comparative literature could recite the Krebs cycle. But with the twenty-first century well underway, we're witnessing the emergency of a new type of split between two other cultures with both similarities to and (at times very pronounced) differences from the cultures that Snow was discussing. This new divide cuts to the very heart of what higher education is and the purpose it serves.

On one side of this debate are those whose career it is to teach and conduct research at a college or university. They often view the purpose of higher education in terms of the contribution it makes to "the whole person" as well as to society as a whole. College graduates, their argument goes, participate more actively in the life of a democracy, play a greater role in the shaping of its culture, live healthier and more productive lives, and challenge the assumptions that hold society back or create inequities that lead to injustice and violence. The other side of the discussion—which includes many governors, legislators, and members of governing boards—identify the purpose of higher education as job training pure and simple. A college education is expensive, they contend, and its value is best measured in terms of its return on investment. If a college degree leads to a job that more than pays for the tuition and opportunity costs required to attend a university these days, then that college education has been worthwhile. If it doesn't, then something must be seriously wrong with either the concept of the university itself or the business model that is used to support it.

Certainly, this debate didn't originate in the recent past. There have always been those who regarded college primarily as preparation for a career and others who saw it more as a preparation for a life well led. Indeed, Western universities began in the Middle Ages as a sort of high-level vocational training, with the first institutions dedicated to producing lawyers, priests, physicians, and teachers. But it is equally true that *American* higher education began with a dual mission of preparing its graduates both for meaningful work and meaningful lives. Training members of the clergy was important, but so was the study of the liberal arts as a way of building a new type of republic. So, although the conflict between these two perspectives is not new, what has changed is largely the rancor of the debate and, as is the case with so many political issues nowadays, the polarization of the debaters. The two sides are not so much talking to one another as shouting past one another, each contingent building its case on a set of assumptions that it regards as universally true and that is dismissed by its opponents as the result of blindness, hypocrisy, or both. These perspectives have become, not merely two ways of addressing the same problem, but two entirely different cultures, with implications that are a genuine cause for concern for the short-term future of higher education.

Let's begin with one of the few areas of agreement between these two new cultures: Higher education should be regarded as neither a purely public nor a purely private good but as a benefit that combines features of both. On the academic side, people speak often about how college improves the quality of life for its graduates at the same time that it benefits the larger community. On a personal level, the college-educated are better informed as voters, less likely to fall victim to fraudulent claims by advertisers and demagogues, more likely to engage in activities that will prolong their lives and keep them intellectually sharp and more actively involved in economic, cultural, and personal development. For those outside of academia, college programs are usually valued because they help graduates become more employable and help the community by attracting additional investment and increasing taxable income. In other words, even in the one area where there is agreement between the two cultures, that very agreement illustrates the depth of the gulf between them. On one side, educating the whole person is treated as a nearly sacred mission. On the other, providing access to a career becomes an implicit clause in a contract. Who cares, those who adopt this perspective may say, how nuanced a student's understanding of Wittgenstein is if he or she can't find a job?

That difference in outlook would be merely interesting to social historians if it were not for the way these two cultures are now affecting university policy and, by extension, the defense of academic freedom. The fact is that those who subscribe to the education-as-career-training or education-as-economic-development arguments are often the very same people who make decisions about funding for American higher education. They are the governors, legislators, and board members who control the budget, set policy, hire presidents, and create or dismantle institutions. And their understanding of what higher education is for drives those decisions. Each year Thomas Harnish and Emily Parker examine gubernatorial state of the state addresses to identify recurring threads in statements made about higher education. In 2013, they found that 48 of 50 governors mentioned higher education in their annual addresses, with the most common themes being the role of higher education in economic and workforce development (31 of 50 governors talking about it), state funding for higher education (19), college affordability (18), and the readiness of high school graduates for college or a career (17). Far less commonly discussed were issues like quality in higher education, faculty recruitment, professional salaries, and equity across institutions of higher education—each of these topics being mentioned by only a single governor—even though these concerns are repeatedly addressed in faculty meetings all across the country.³

It is not simply that the rhetoric of the two cultures has diverged; their fundamental assumptions why we even have postsecondary education are increasingly different. For example, if you were to ask most people associated with a college or university to identify their highest moral purpose and how their work helps them achieve that purpose, they would probably say something about their efforts to produce an informed electorate, train the leaders of tomorrow in critical thinking, engage students in serious reflection

on ethical and social issues, and prepare their graduates for meaningful lives of service, work, and leisure. That was the case in 2000 when, at a colloquium on the moral purposes of the university sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, the philosopher Richard Rorty concluded that “one of the most important things that happened in the United States in the twentieth century was that the universities became the places where movements for the relief of human suffering found privileged sanctuaries and power bases. The universities came to play a social role that they had not played in the nineteenth century. Today the American universities not only form the best system of higher education in the world, but are morally impressive institutions.”⁴ In other words, to professors and most administrators, it is (with apologies to Jane Austen) a truth universally acknowledged that the highest moral purpose of higher education involves the relief of human suffering and helping each generation of students contribute more effectively to the greater needs of society. In our more reflective moments, that is what we identify as our most important pedagogical goal, the ultimate value of our research, and the overarching purpose of our collegiate service. It is what becomes our rationale when we defend academic freedom: Silencing even a single voice simply because it says something that others may not want to hear infringes, not merely on the rights of that professor but also on the right of society to be exposed to valid, though unpopular points of view. In fact, many of the ways we recognize the achievements of our peers and our students are based on this very notion. For instance, here is what the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University defines as the goal of its annual Moral Purpose Award: This distinction will be “given for the best undergraduate student essay on the role a liberal arts education plays in students’ exploration of the personal and social purposes by which to orient their future and the intellectual, emotional, and moral commitments that make for a full life.”⁵

That focus on the “full life” and “personal and social purposes” has become such an integral part of how we view higher education’s mission that it comes as something of a shock when we hear other people in positions of authority describe it differently. Here, for example, is how Ohio governor John Kasich put it on February 19, 2013: “I believe that jobs are our greatest moral purpose. . . . I never talk to a job creator where I don’t stress the fact that our colleges and universities can pinpoint and prepare our kids for the 21st-century jobs. They need an amazing amount of credit for what they have done and we are now leading the country in stressing graduation over enrollment. It is going to strengthen the economy of the state of Ohio.”⁶

It is hard to have a meaningful conversation about how legislators and professors, trustees and academics can work together to improve the quality of and accessibility to our colleges and universities when we differ so fundamentally in our understanding of what these institutions have been created to do. Helping students find meaningful employment after they graduate is certainly a *part* of what the vast majority of professors see as their job. But relatively few would describe it as their *only* objective, and even fewer would consider it their “highest moral purpose.” Moreover, that contrast between the two cultures has become far

starker in recent years because of the conviction many legislatures and governing boards have developed that job preparation is addressed in only a handful of academic disciplines and that those fields are the same ones that produce valuable research. As Governor Kasich stated only the year before, “We’re also saying that it’s not good enough to do research. If you don’t commercialize and create jobs, what’s the point? I can find you research on a top shelf in a building 140 years from now. Commercialize. Create jobs. Spinoff companies.”⁷

That attitude permeates even the local level. Since many politicians who express these views are the same people who are responsible for selecting members of governing boards—and since those governing boards then select chancellors and presidents—ideas can move rapidly from congress to campus, from political discussion to local policy. Thus, in Florida, Governor Rick Scott attracted a considerable amount of attention in 2011 by proclaiming, “We don’t need a lot more anthropologists in the state. It’s a great degree if people want to get it, but we don’t need them here. I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, and math degrees. That’s what our kids need to focus all their time and attention on, those types of degrees, so when they get out of school, they can get a job.”⁸

Adopting this perspective, trustees at a midsized comprehensive public university in Florida later developed “recommendations . . . to ensure internal appropriations be geared to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); eliminating courses/departments irrelevant to achieving STEM goals; reviewing tenure guidelines; and, recognizing and prioritizing the plans iterated during the [Board of Trustees’] Retreat.”⁹

The basic assumptions behind these policy changes are clear.

1. The primary purpose of higher education is vocational.
2. Its secondary purpose is to engage in research and development that have a positive and immediate economic impact.
3. Both of those purposes can only be achieved through the STEM disciplines.

Legislators and board members thus conclude that other disciplines should be de-emphasized, defunded, or eliminated; curricula should be revised so that students “focus all their time and attention on” STEM subjects; tenure guidelines should be revised to ensure that faculty members engage more exclusively in vocational education and commercially productive research; and academic freedom should exist only to the degree that it develops innovative products and identifies untapped markets.

We can couple those conclusions with a few others commonly reached by those who espouse similar views.

1. College tuition has become too high and now far exceeds the economic return received from this investment.
2. The employability of college graduates in the United States is too low because

students do not receive instruction in the skills they need for success in today's workforce.

3. College requirements must be made more flexible so that students have access to a larger number of two-year and three-year baccalaureate degrees, more credit for their advanced placement courses and professional experience, recognition of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other nontraditional courses as equivalent to regular college coursework, and a guarantee that they will be able to graduate in the field they want at the time they want.

It is here that the very pronounced differences between today's two cultures of higher education and those Snow described over half a century ago become most apparent. For all the apparent disconnect between their two worldviews, neither the science culture nor the humanities culture was actively trying to destroy the other. But many of the legislators, regents, and trustees who have adopted the view that all of higher education is job training find no justification at all for the other view. Even though faculty members and more enlightened administrators (trust me; they do exist) work conscientiously to find a place for career and professional training within the wider framework of higher education, that level of acceptance is rarely if ever returned. Boards and legislatures impose higher tuition rates on students who wish to explore various intellectual options before committing to a major, penalize institutions with low six-year graduation rates because they refuse to force march students toward completing the same program they chose when they first applied as high school seniors, and increasingly shift funding away from the arts, humanities, and social sciences to STEM disciplines and professional fields. With a divide this sharp between how university professors view their mission and how those who pay the bills (including, we must admit, a large number of parents) view it, is there any way at all to bridge this gulf?

One possibility may be to recognize that, when we responded to these arguments in the past, we spoke in a way that did not address the underlying concerns of legislators, trustees, and parents. We simply took for granted assumptions of the other culture, answering misleading statements about the employability of college graduates with our own data about placement rates and responding to generalizations about the significance of the STEM disciplines with information about how our own research was supporting these fields. But what we really need to be doing is engaging in the activity that academics do best: challenging the underlying assumptions have led people to make misleading claims and generating reliable information to counter data that were taken out of context or, in some cases, simply misunderstood. And we can do so with an economic case that is far stronger than the one made by the other culture. In its study *Education Pays 2010*, the College Board documented the following:

- Students with a baccalaureate degree do indeed earn higher incomes and pay more

in taxes than students who only graduate from high school (an average of \$42,700 in income and \$13,000 in taxes paid for those with an undergraduate degree versus \$26,700 in income and \$7,100 in taxes for those who only complete high school).

- But that increase becomes *even larger* for those who then follow their undergraduate work with a master's degree (\$51,100 in salary and \$16,200 in taxes) and *larger still* for those who complete a doctorate (\$68,800 and \$23,100). In other words, per capita, professors contribute more to the local economy than do many of those in other lines of work.¹⁰
- Moreover, college graduates are far less likely than those with less education to draw unemployment benefits, require assistance from social service programs, or become incarcerated.¹¹
- In comparison to other segments of the population, those who attend college less frequently rely on social safety nets because they smoke less, exercise more, and are less obese.¹²
- They are also more likely to have children who excel in school (carrying the benefit of their own educations forward for future generations), reduce the cost of public programs by freely volunteering their time, and *vote* for people in public office—including those who make decisions about higher education funding.¹³

Perhaps most important, these trends were documented without regard to the student's major, full-time or part-time enrollment status, political affiliation, or eventual career. So, if politicians and governing boards truly wish to have a positive economic impact on their regions, reduce spending on public programs, increase employability of members in their community, and secure the support of the people who actually vote, their current strategy of preferring some disciplines over others, demonizing the professoriate (and the teaching profession as a whole), and measuring the cost of higher education against the rate of inflation is dead wrong.¹⁴ Instead, they should be

- encouraging more students to pursue *graduate degrees*, regardless of discipline;
- *investing* more heavily in higher education because of its demonstrated high return on investment;
- and supporting rather than restricting *academic freedom* since the belief that many of them have in the value of a free marketplace should logically be transferred to the marketplace of ideas.

It is cold comfort to those of us who have long worked in higher education and cherish academic freedom as one of our most important principles that we can recognize academic fads when we see them.

Having witnessed one burst of enthusiasm for the STEM disciplines following the launch of Sputnik, greater interest in investigative journalism in the wake of the Watergate scandal, soaring enrollments in archaeology, the classics, and even Rick Scott's nemesis, anthropology, as a result of the *Indiana Jones* movies and the career of Margaret Mead, we know that the current fixation on STEM disciplines by boards, legislators, and upper administrators will also have a limited shelf life. But, until the next craze appears, we can do our part to improve communication between today's two cultures in higher education by correcting the false assumptions of those who set budgets and policies, backing up gut feelings with reliable information, and making common cause with other faculty members and administrators who share our belief in the greatest moral purpose of academic life today.

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Notes

¹ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And a Second Look—An Expanded Version of "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

² Lynne V. Cheney, *Fifty Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989).

³ American Association of State Colleges and Universities, "2013 Gubernatorial State of the State Addresses and Higher Education," March 7, 2013, <http://congressweb.com/aascu/advisoryView.cfm?id=134784>.

⁴ Richard Rorty, Julie Reuben, and George Marsden, "The Moral Purposes of the University: An Exchange," *Hedgehog Review*, Fall 2000, 106–19, <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/University/2.3IRortyetal.pdf>.

⁵ Keenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, "Kenan Moral Purpose Award," <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/students/kenan-moral-purpose-award/>, accessed June 24, 2014.

⁶ John R. Kasich, "2013 State of the State Address," Lima, Ohio, February 19, 2013, <http://www.governor.ohio.gov/Portals/0/2013%20State%20of%20the%20State%20Transcript.pdf>.

⁷ John R. Kasich, "2012 State of the State Address," Steubenville, Ohio, <http://www.governor.ohio.gov/Portals/0/2012%20State%20of%20the%20State%20Address%20Transcript.pdf>, accessed June 24, 2014.

⁸ Jonathan Turley, "Florida Governor Campaigns against . . . Anthropologists," *Res ipsa loquitur* ("The thing itself speaks"), October 12, 2011, <http://jonathanturley.org/2011/10/12/no-bones-about-it-florida-governor-campaigns-against-anthropologists/>.

⁹ Florida Atlantic University Board of Trustees, Audit and Finance Committee, "Draft Minutes," April 16, 2013, http://www.fau.edu/bot/meetings/06_04_2013_committee_meetings/audit_finance/rollcall.pdf.

¹⁰ See trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays/figures-tables/median-earnings-and-tax-payments-education-level-2008.

¹¹ See trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays/figures-tables/other-economic-benefits#Unemployment Part 1.

¹² See trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays/figures-tables/health-benefits.

¹³ See trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays/figures-tables/other-individual-societal-benefits.

¹⁴ On the last issue, see William J. Baumol, *The Cost Disease: Why Computers Get Cheaper and Health Care Doesn't* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).