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Our Universities: How Bad? How Good?

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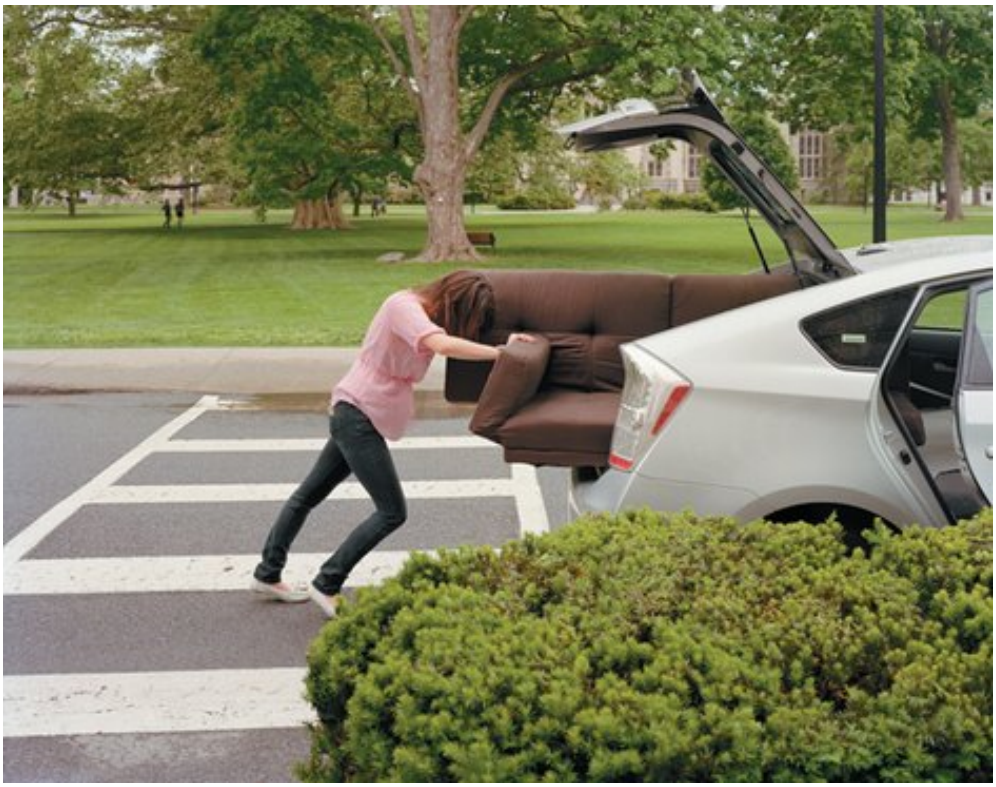
Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses
by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa
University of Chicago Press, 259 pp., $70.00; $25.00 (paper)

Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It
by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus
Times Books, 271 pp., $26.00

Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities
by Mark C. Taylor
Knopf, 240 pp., $24.00

Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities
by Martha C. Nussbaum
Princeton University Press, 158 pp., $22.95



Tim Davis/Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York

Couch in Car, Vassar College, 2010; photograph by Tim Davis from Vassar's sesquicentennial exhibition '150 Years Later: New Photography by Tina Barney, Tim Davis, Katherine Newbegin,' at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Poughkeepsie, New York, through March 27, 2011

The rhetoric of crisis seems to have become endemic to writing about the American university. Some twenty-five years ago, Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky declared American universities to be "the world's best." There was a good deal of dissent from this judgment during the 1980s and 1990s, beginning with Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and continuing with more juvenile attacks such as Charles Sykes's *Profscam* (1988) and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990). But these were salvos in a culture war about the definition and mission of the university, and political dissents from what was seen as a predominantly leftist intellectual and artistic elite.

The new crisis accuses the American university of failing to educate (variously, failing to train the mind and to prepare for the workplace), of losing its place in international competition, of being an institution top-heavy with administrators and pandering to a faculty that does very little, as well as to students who care more about expensive cars and state-of-the-art fitness rooms than about Socrates. Above all, the university has become unjustifiably

expensive, inaccessible, and unaccountable. The subtitle given by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus to *Higher Education?* sums it up: *How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It.*

Debating education has always been an American pastime, and choosing the "best colleges" a lucrative business, as *U.S. News and World Report* has well understood. The debate has long been studded with reformist notions, utopian or practical, but it was sustained by the belief that American universities were something of high quality—indeed, something precious—that were worth the attention they got, and worth striving to enter.

The universities in turn have on the whole made efforts to make themselves far more democratic than they once were (the changes in their demographics since the 1960s are, when you think about it, quite remarkable), to open their gates to the disadvantaged of American society more fully than many other sectors of society, and to try to make their benefits available to those who can't pay for them. The wealthiest among them claim to adhere to a "need-blind" admissions policy—that is, to admit the freshman class without looking at its scholarship requests, then provide the financial aid each student needs. To be sure, that policy can be pursued only by a handful of colleges, and there is evidence that the sticker price is now so high that many who might get adequate financial aid don't even try for admission. Moreover, in the competition among universities for the best and the brightest, there has been something of a mad escalation in facilities and amenities, on the assumption that they must match the spas and fitness centers that the wealthiest of their students grew up with. More telling, I think, is what has happened to the leading public universities, which have been busy raising tuitions at a faster rate than ever before to compensate for the lack of support from the states whose pride and joy they purportedly are.

If crisis there is, it surely has something to do with the larger crisis in American society: the increasing gap between haves and have-nots, the retreat from any commitment to economic fairness, the sense that the system is rigged to benefit a tarnished elite that no longer justifies its existence. The affluence gap between Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, plus a few others, and the rest

of the universities has indeed increased, and permits a degree of luxury to both students and faculty in those institutions that are the envy of the rest. (Faculty at the University of California, Berkeley—generally considered the greatest public university in the world—had their telephones removed from their offices last year, in a nicely symbolic gesture of their helplessness under the budget knife.)

Meanwhile, many students who would previously have gone to a four-year college have to be content with a two-year community college, where faculty are typically underpaid and overworked. Even at many relatively more prosperous institutions, full-time tenured faculty—expensive and immovable—are being replaced by various temps and adjuncts. As in the rest of corporate America—and universities are increasingly corporate in their management style—a hungry and mobile labor force is considered desirable. There is in fact some evidence that increased access to higher education has simply perpetuated or even exacerbated social stratification since the educational "system" is itself so highly tiered, and expansion tends to come in lower tiers rather than the elites.[1] "Going to college" can mean very different things in different kinds of institutions.

The result, I think, is a fair measure of bafflement and *ressentiment*, resulting in a kind of indiscriminate flailing about in criticism of the university, some of it justified, much of it misdirected, and some pernicious. There's a demand that the entire enterprise justify itself through "outcomes," as tested, for instance, in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) test promoted by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in *Academically Adrift.* I suspect that some of the impetus for outcomes testing derives from the report of the commission appointed by George W. Bush's secretary of education, Margaret Spellings, released in 2006 under the title *A Test of Leadership*.[2] There we read, for instance, that we face

> a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of postsecondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students. The result is that students, parents, and policymakers are often left scratching their heads over the answers to basic questions, from the true cost of private colleges (where most students don't pay the official

> sticker price) to which institutions do a better job than others not only of graduating students but of teaching them what they need to learn.

Hence the recommendation of the CLA, as a kind of *Consumer Reports* for the head-scratchers.

More needs to be said about the CLA, but let me stick for now with the crisis rhetoric. The Spellings Commission report continues:

> History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to—or even to notice—changes in the world around them, from railroads to steel manufacturers. Without serious self-examination and reform, institutions of higher education risk falling into the same trap, seeing their market share substantially reduced and their services increasingly characterized by obsolescence.
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> Already, troubling signs are abundant. Where once the United States led the world in educational attainment, recent data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicate that our nation is now ranked 12th among major industrialized countries in higher education attainment. Another half dozen countries are close on our heels. And these global pressures come at a time when data from the US Department of Labor indicate that postsecondary education will be ever more important for workers hoping to fill the fastest-growing jobs in our new economy.

Are these scare tactics legitimate? The comparison of higher education to an "industry" (with implications that it is beginning to look like a rust belt), then the claims that eleven other countries are doing better in "higher education attainment" and that we are not preparing students for jobs in the "new economy," capture a number of the contradictions I find in some of the other crisis books under review.

On the one hand, all the critics of the American university claim to be partisans of the liberal arts, to want students to study philosophy and literature, even the arts, and to learn "critical thinking" (the currently accepted mantra—not a bad one). On the other hand, the tests proposed always seem to have to do with job preparation—even as the critics in the same breath deplore "vocationalism"

and point to the impoverished education that many majors in business or accounting receive. And one would like to know whether the level of higher education attainment measured by the OECD is in fact liberal education or simply technocratic training at a high level (a point raised by Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit*, the welcome outlier among the books under review).

Hacker and Dreifus, in their self-consciously iconoclastic (and sometimes cranky) book, identify a "Golden Dozen" colleges considered the most desirable: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Penn, Stanford, Duke, Amherst, Williams. They find it hard to obtain "solid information" to gauge the success of Golden Dozen graduates. So they turn to *Who's Who in America*, to track one class ('73) from Princeton—to find that national eminence has been achieved by a disappointing percentage of them. From this and some other equally shaky research, they conclude: "We found that most Dozen graduates do not create distinctive lives and careers—at least not to the extent one would expect from colleges that claim to find and nurture unusual talent." The exercise is trivial—to judge the successful life requires far greater depth of knowledge—and its conclusions lightweight.

After concluding that colleges and universities have "lost track of their basic mission," Hacker and Dreifus in their final chapter list a jumble of recommendations, some good, some terrible. They want universities to divest themselves of proliferating administrative offices (agreed, but some of these have arisen in response to mandates such as affirmative action), to abolish varsity athletics (good again, but even William G. Bowen, former president of Princeton and of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, who has studied this subject more deeply than anyone I know of, has given up on that reasonable but impossible task[3]), end the exploitation of adjuncts (I agree wholeheartedly), reduce the number of senior professors, and get rid of tenure. In the place of the Golden Dozen, they recommend their own Top Ten, including Notre Dame, the University of Mississippi, Raritan Valley Community College, Arizona State University, and others—worthy institutions all, though unlikely to replace Yale and Harvard. What seems to recommend them most to Hacker and Dreifus is of course precisely that they are plain Chevys in a parking lot with too many BMWs.

The argument would be more persuasive if the populism of the book didn't scatter about accusations that seem to have little to back them up. What starts out as praise of Michael Sandel's Harvard course on "Justice," for instance, quickly takes a sour turn and an illogical twist. Just because these students read Aristotle, Kant, and John Rawls, Hacker and Dreifus contend, "doesn't mean that the verbal fluency students attain will necessarily lead them to more selfless lives. On the contrary, it might just be aiding them in justifying less honorable choices."

A moment later, they are contrasting the verbal fluency of Harvard students with the act of a workingman who jumped onto a New York subway track to save a child, which then leads to the conclusion: "Perhaps deliberation is overrated. We wonder if, had some professors been on the platform, would they have paused to ponder how John Stuart Mill might have parsed the choices?" Where's the logic here—especially since Hacker and Dreifus have just been arguing in favor of philosophy and critical thinking?

The truth is that this book is short on reasoned analysis and long on animus, directed at elite universities, at administrators, and more than anything else at the "professoriate," as they call it. Professors are seen on the whole as lazy, self-serving, interested only in sabbaticals, prizing only their own research, and profoundly uninterested in teaching students. The accusation is not new. I have to say that it does not correspond with my own experience, and that of most of the faculty I know—including dozens of former students teaching in a range of institutions, from the elite to the community college. On the contrary, I find most faculty more than ever before aware of the importance of teaching well. Some of their research is highly specialized, some trivial, and some in fact of remarkable ambition and interdisciplinary reach.

Martha Nussbaum; drawing by John Springs

It's easy to blame the professors. They are also the main target of Mark C.

Taylor's inflated *Crisis on Campus*, a *New York Times* Op-Ed from 2009 that hypertrophied into a book. "If American higher education is to thrive in the 21st century, colleges and universities, like Wall Street and Detroit, must be rigorously regulated and completely restructured," he wrote in the *Times*. [4] The book develops his notions for restructuring over a set of chapters that mainly rehearse ideas that have been common currency since the 1960s: revamp doctoral programs, abolish departments and promote interdisciplinarity, create knowledge networks using new technologies, move from "walls to webs," impose mandatory retirement, put an end to tenure.

The proposals are not new, a number of them have been acted upon in one form or another, others are underway—no university that I know of is oblivious to the revolutions of network and Web. As for mandatory retirement, Taylor seems to forget that this was not abolished by the universities, which would love to bring it back, but by an act of Congress. Regulation is a more sinister matter, I believe. Who or what is to regulate American universities? The Department of Education that brought us the Spellings Commission report? Some national board armed with the Collegiate Learning Assessment? Or perhaps Representative Darrell Issa, chair of the House Committee on Oversight?

On the whole, one has to say that the relative autonomy of the American university has been far more beneficial than the contrary. American higher education is a nonsystem that is messy, reduplicative, unfair—just like American society as a whole—but it has made genuine commitments to quality and to a greater degree of social justice, to the extent that is within its control, than most other institutions of the society. It has brought new blood into old elitist institutions, and indeed has thoroughly scrambled the hereditary caste it began with. You have simply to walk the paths of any reputable American university today to see that the student population looks like the range of American ethnicities—far more than many other institutions. Universities have taken seriously calls for inclusiveness and affirmative action. The large expenditures on their admissions offices that bring sneers from Hacker and Dreifus have promoted diversity in ways unimagined fifty years ago. Given the long and continuing history of American anti-intellectualism—which today takes the form of a vicious know-nothingism—I am often surprised that

America has universities of the quality it does.

The Hacker and Dreifus animus against Harvard et al. reminds me of the time I lived in rural Virginia and drove some distance on Sundays to buy *The New York Times*: the storekeeper would squint at me as I handed over my $5.00 and declare, "'T'ain't worth it." While he was probably right about the Sunday *Times*, I doubt that many students (or their parents) will really pass up admission to the Golden Dozen for a place at Ole Miss. For both the wrong reasons and the right reasons, America's elite colleges will continue to be coveted (Harvard just reported a record 35,000 applications for its next freshman class).

The real issue that emerges for me from this and other critiques of American higher education concerns our once proudly public universities. Since the time I last taught at the University of Virginia, five years ago, in-state tuition has risen by over 50 percent. The reason is simple: the Commonwealth of Virginia's contribution to its flagship university makes up only about 8 percent of its operating budget. Salaries and student aid are squeezed. Administrators who want UVA to continue as a first-rate institution see raising tuition as the only solution. Not their fault—but what has happened to the American commitment to public higher education? The University of California system, in so many ways the pride of the nation, is currently being savaged by budget cuts. Things are not likely to get better: most state budgets are in a parlous condition, and education is the easy target—especially with Hacker and Dreifus and Taylor telling people that many of the faculty are a waste of money to begin with.

A lot of money would make things better. Since that is unlikely to come to the public universities—whereas the rich private universities are now recuperating pretty well from their endowment losses of a couple of years ago—should we heed the calls in these books to abolish tenure, which would allow universities to fire and hire at will? Neither Taylor nor Hacker and Dreifus think tenure is necessary to protect academic freedom: the former sees no threat, and the latter two give a few examples where tenure did nothing to protect a number of unfortunates, including Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado, who fell afoul of administrators or politicians, or both. If tenure is a weak shield, why

have it?

These studies don't consider whether the dark days of McCarthyism would have produced even more casualties without it; nor do they anticipate what things could be like in a political culture of Tea Partiers and Palinites. To be sure, tenure can protect the careers of some mediocrities. On the other hand, the selection of faculty by peers empowered by the permanence of their appointments still seems the best way to ensure that they are chosen on the right grounds. And the weightiness of this decision—attaching someone to your institution for an indefinite future—at least means that almost all universities have created reasonably careful and solemn procedures of review.

Here, really, is the other argument for tenure, less often heard than the claim that it protects academic freedom. It runs like this: if the body of permanently appointed professors is not to determine who merits appointment as professors, according to peer review of their competence and the prospect of their remaining active and engaged, who will? Who will do the hiring and firing? It would in all likelihood be the administration—presidents, boards of trustees, some of whom have considerable power as it is. Is that really what we want—even what Hacker and Dreifus, who have no love for most university presidents, whom they think overpaid and mediocre, would want?

Proposals to abolish tenure in a setting of calls for some equivalent of "no child left behind" for college students—what the Spellings Commission report and *Academically Adrift* propose—should give us pause. Arguments emphasizing crisis and decline feed the demand for reform based on "improved measurement" of what students learn, which in turn is fostering a new metrics enterprise. That "Collegiate Learning Assessment," designed not to test student acquisition of knowledge but rather "core outcomes espoused by all of higher education," has three parts. According to Arum and Roksa, the best developed is the "performance task component." In the example they give (and praise), students are asked to write a "memo" to the president of DynaTech, which makes precision instruments, concerning whether the corporation should buy a certain small jet, the SwiftAir 235, which seems to meet the needs of its sales force—but has had a recent crash.

This cost-benefit exercise is fun, but it hardly tests the kind of thing I teach

(which might best be evaluated, I have often thought, by what students are thinking about and dreaming of twenty years after graduation). Such exercises resemble the case studies pioneered by Harvard Business School. But the test results allow Arum and Roksa to ring the alarm bells (students are learning very little from their college studies), and to cite with approval the Spellings Commission report claim that "the quality of student learning at US colleges and universities is inadequate, and in some cases, declining." To blame? The culture of the professoriate, once more. The solution?

> From our standpoint, the evidence of student and organizational cultures' inattention to learning and high levels of societal investment makes discussion of higher education's accountability both largely inevitable and in certain respects warranted.

Though ponderously stated (as is the whole book), the message again is that the university must be policed and regulated through outcomes testing.[5]

One turns with some relief to Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit*, and her impassioned (if somewhat preachy) argument in favor of study of the humanities. She suggests, contra the critics, that "the liberal arts portion of college and university education in the United States now supports democratic citizenship better than it did fifty years ago." Her concern is with the diminishing place given to the liberal arts in many institutions: their marginalization by technocratic and business-oriented demands.[6] Her book pursues a comparison between the US and India, and the progressive reforms of John Dewey and of Rabindranath Tagore, which seem to have been largely lost in India's drive to achieve pride of place in the new global economies. Nussbaum takes her position firmly in the Socratic tradition of inquiry, and of teaching, and she points out that this works best in small groups, with live questions and answers. Nussbaum calls on a great tradition of educational reformers—Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebl, Horace Mann, Dewey—to argue for the place of creative play and imaginative sympathy in education. She wants dreamers to further the American dream—something that is beyond the imagination of most of the books under review.

Before we subscribe to the narrative of decline promoted by critics of the university, we might think of the narrow-mindedness of our educational

beginnings. The early curriculum of Yale College was described, in a somewhat severe retrospect, by Samuel Johnson of the class of 1714 (who later became president of King's College, itself to become Columbia University):

> The utmost that was generally attempted…was to construe five or six of Tully's orations, as many books of Virgil, and part only of the Greek Testament, with some chapters of the Hebrew Psalter. Common arithmetic, and a little surveying, were the *ne plus ultra* of mathematical acquirements. The logic, metaphysics, and ethics that were then taught, were entangled in the scholastic cobwebs of a few paltry systems, that would now be laid by as proper food for worms. Indeed…the students had heard of a certain new and strange philosophy, that was in vogue in England, and the names of Descartes, Boyle, Locke, and Newton, had reached them; but they were not suffered to think that any valuable improvements were to be expected from philosophical innovations.[7]

Some 250 years later, I knew a distinguished graduate of the Yale class of 1930 who assured me that he did all assigned homework on the trolley to crew practice (the loss of the trolley, of course, is real decline). Nor do I think the American university has gone into free fall since 1987, when Dean Rosovsky estimated it to be the world's best. In fact, I think that most good universities have undergone considerable self-study and reform since then—which, though not always productive of good results, have largely focused on improving undergraduate education, and created new opportunities for freshmen and others to work closely with creative scholars.

I must say with regret that none of these books seems to me quite worthy of its subject—with the exception of Nussbaum's, a book that needs to be read and heeded, but may not make much headway against the critical consensus. To me, the university is a precious and fragile institution, one that lives with crisis —since education, like psychoanalysis, is an "impossible profession"—but at its best thrives on it. It has endured through many transformations of ideology and purpose, but at its best remained faithful to a vision of disinterested pursuit and transmission of knowledge. Research and teaching have always cohabited: anyone who teaches a subject well wants to know more about it, and when she knows more, to impart that knowledge. Universities when true to themselves

have always been places that harbor recondite subjects of little immediate utility—places where you can study hieroglyphics and Coptic as well as string theory and the habits of lemmings—places half in and half out of the world. No country needs that more than the US, where the pragmatic has always dominated.

I am not so much impressed by the faults and failings of the university—they are real enough, but largely the product of frightening trends toward inequality in American society that the universities can combat only to a limited degree. It's more the survival of the university that amazes and concerns me. It's one of the best things we've got, and at times—as when reading these books—it almost seems to me better than what we deserve. I will succumb here to a temptation (expecting that I'll be ridiculed by Hacker and Dreifus) of quoting Henry James, at the moment his character Nick Dormer, in *The Tragic Muse*, who has sacrificed a career in politics to pursue a vocation as a painter, stands before a set of great portraits in London's National Gallery:

> As he stood before them the perfection of their survival often struck him as the supreme eloquence, the virtue that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away, but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the tragic centuries had only sweetened their freshness.

Universities are not so isolated from the tragic past, but they still make a claim to speak with eloquence across the centuries. They often fail, they need reform and course correction, but they are not, at their best, merely venal and self-serving. They deserve better critics than they have got at present.

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1. 1
   See the interesting and depressing study by Ann L. Mullen, *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), which pursues a detailed comparison of students at Yale and at Southern Connecticut State University, two miles

apart. ↩

2. 2
The report is available at: www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports.html . ↩

3. 3
See James N. Shulman and William G. Bowen, *The Game of* Life *: College Sports and Educational Values* (Princeton University Press, 2001), Bowen and Sarah A. Levin, *Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values* (Princeton University Press, 2003), and Bowen's recent disabused comments on his earlier studies in *Lessons Learned: Reflections of a University President* (Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 109–111. ↩

4. 4
"End the University as We Know It," *The New York Times* , April 26, 2009. ↩

5. 5
UK faculty have for some years now been required to report to government in the form of the "Research Assessment Exercise" (RAE). For an analysis of what that has meant, see Simon Head, " The Grim Threat to British Universities ," *The New York Review* , January 13, 2011. ↩

6. 6
See also Victor E. Ferrall Jr.'s *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Harvard University Press, 2011), which looks at the economic challenges facing liberal arts colleges. ↩

7. 7
Johnson's remarks are cited in the 1828 Report of the Yale College Faculty—a conservative defense of a curriculum founded on the Greek and Roman classics that had considerable influence in American universities for several decades. ↩