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Breaking Down the Ivory Tower: The (Past and) Future of Liberal Arts Education

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by Nicola Pitchford

One of my favorite movies, the 1949 black comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, tells the tale of a young man born into an impoverished and rejected branch of an aristocratic English family in the late 19th century—who plots his way toward eventually inheriting the family dukedom by methodically murdering all the snobbish, self-satisfied, and spectacularly stupid blue-blooded relatives who stand between him and his rightful place. Despite its bloody premise, it is a delicate film by modern standards, exquisitely acted (by, among others, Alec Guinness as all eight members of the doomed D'Ascoyne family) and morally subtle.

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But before our protagonist, Louis, has hatched his elaborate plan, a scene takes place when he reaches school-leaving age, in which he and his once-wealthy mother sit together in their cramped and meager little living room, pondering his prospects. "I had hoped for Cambridge for you," she says wistfully. "The D'Ascoynes always go to Trinity…." Helpfully, young Louis volunteers, "It should be quite easy to get a job." But Mother corrects him, insisting on maintaining *some* standards despite her reduced circumstances: "Not a *job,* Louis, a *career*. People of quite good family go into the professions nowadays, I understand."

In this brief exchange, the film reveals—and satirizes—a particular relationship between university education and social class that prevailed in Britain, and in much of Europe, for centuries: Higher education is for those elite few who do not need to earn a living; it is the traditional and (in Mother's view) preferable *alternative* to the possibility that a well-bred young man might enter "the professions." That view is not entirely unfamiliar to a contemporary American audience, with certain variations: as the idea that liberal arts education is only for those privileged students who can afford not to worry about getting a job. Going off somewhere to spend a few years on a leafy campus immersing oneself in culture, philosophy, and the odd course in political science or environmental biology is an indulgence. As a nation, we seem to have gone from an ideal of liberal college education as a path to advancement to viewing it suspiciously as a marker of privilege already attained.

What might link this telling moment in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* to the very different context in the U.S. today is that it archly expresses the cynicism about higher education and privilege of a nation struggling with scarce resources and experiencing an upsurge of populist anger at their unequal distribution. The trajectory that English university reform followed, between then and now, holds potential lessons for how we think about—and argue for—the liberal arts and their future.

The year of the film's release, 1949, places it amid post-World War II rationing and scarcity, in a moment of radical social reform when the British welfare state was under construction and the ideology of social democracy was in its ascendancy. Like a number of classic Ealing Studios comedies of this period,

Kind Hearts is, among other things, a popular satire of the outmoded pre-war class system and the ugly distortions of human aspiration it caused: the targets being, in this instance, the absurd and irrelevant aristocracy that has produced and discarded Louis's mother—but also the cunning, greedy middle class (like Louis's splendidly amoral mistress, Sybella), with its conspicuous consumption and its pervasive envy.

> *"The Student Learning Outcome is a 'habit of mind…which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.'"*

In the half-century between the time of the film's setting and the time of its release, an intelligent young man who lacked the right income and family connections—like Louis D'Ascoyne Mazzini—would already have gained a few more options in terms of a university education in England. Half-a-dozen new "red brick" universities had been established in the early 1900s, focusing on "the professions." But the real proliferation of more accessible public universities took place a generation after 1949, as a logical extension of the sweeping overhaul of secondary education instituted in the late 1940s and '50s. Free secondary education for all had been nationally mandated in 1944, in a move that was, along with tax reform and the formation of the National Health Service, one of the pillars of the wartime social compact—that is, the package of reforms that sought to shore up national consensus by aligning the populace's shared hardship and sacrifice with a more equitable distribution of services and opportunities. The expansion of higher education followed. By 1963, the government-commissioned Robbins Report on Higher Education took as its starting point the "axiom" that "courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them."

Engaged Learning, where students both learn and use course material in contexts that bridge the classroom and sites outside it, are the most effective means of fostering profound and lasting understanding of a topic or field.

However, the *nature* of a British university education changed as access became more democratized. Liberal education was not the chosen model. If earning a degree were to meet the needs of "the people," that degree would have to be useful in the workplace. In fact, change in that general direction had already been happening for some decades by the turn of the century, when Louis's mother—who herself, as a woman, could not have earned a Cambridge degree until 1948, just a year before *Kind Hearts* was released—imagines her male relatives' genteel experience of university, divorced from any professional aspirations or obligations. In reality, throughout the 19th century young men "of quite good family" had increasingly been pursuing higher education as the means of entry to careers in medicine, law, and the higher ranks of the civil service. What she imagines, and what *Kind Hearts and Coronets* satirizes, is not the actuality of Oxford or Cambridge in her day, but rather a classic liberal arts education like that advocated in Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1854).

Newman argued for a university held separate from "Utility," where "Knowledge is…its own end [and] its own reward…, an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake"—in short, a liberal arts university. Here, "all branches of knowledge are connected together" and the end product—what we would call, in today's higher ed. professional jargon, the Student Learning Outcome—is a "habit of mind… which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and

wisdom." Like Louis's mother, Newman viewed this ideal as fitting for a certain social class (and gender), describing "liberal education" as "the especial characteristic or property of a University and of a gentleman."

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For the most part, Newman's vision struggled against the tide in the Europe of the mid-19th century, where universities were already becoming centers of specific professionalization and of single-subject teaching that grew out of specialized research. By the mid-20th century, the system of universal secondary education that was being implemented in England while *Kind Hearts* showed in cinemas required that university-bound schoolchildren begin to narrow their fields of study before the age of 16; by the time they entered university, almost all had already committed to studying a single, advanced subject only. This specialization of students in higher education has been the modern norm not only in Britain but also throughout Europe and most of the rest of the world.

Many (not all) of Newman's ideas found much more hospitable ground in the U.S., where the liberal arts *college*—as distinct from, although sometimes nested within, the research university—has presented a very different national ideal of the elite higher education experience. Columbia University professor Andrew Delbanco, author of the forthcoming *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be,* argues that this ideal thrived in the United States in part because of the influence of Puritanism, which not only valued diligent study, but also preached the benefits of learning in an atmosphere of communal exchange—as opposed to the model of the isolated researcher-scholar, creating ultra-specialized knowledge independently. Delbanco writes that the model of the professor with a small class, proceeding by means of discussion and mutual exploration and with participants contributing from varied points of interest, embodies an "idea of lateral learning [that] originates from the Puritan conception of the gathered church, in which the criterion for membership was the candidate's 'aptness to edifie another.'"

For Delbanco and other defenders of liberal education today, it's not a great leap from the idea of "lateral learning" to the claim that there's an inherently democratic potential in this particular model: it teaches us to understand one another across different disciplinary languages and methods, and to see no particular field of endeavor or way of knowing as definitive. That argument has been made compellingly by University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum, in her essay "The Liberal Arts Are Not Elitist" and elsewhere. Nussbaum argues that the distinctly American liberal arts model of higher education has a separate ancestry from the earlier European version: it is "not a vestige of elitism or class distinction: From early on, leading American educators connected the liberal arts to the preparation of informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens." Nussbaum's democratic version of the proper "output" of a university education is a long way from Newman's listing of character traits an educated (Catholic) gentleman should possess: for her, liberal education ideally produces "complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements." As Nussbaum's last clause implies, this is also education for a world where it is crucial we learn to think across difference, where genteel "tolerance" has been replaced, for all

but the most cloistered and barricaded of us, by the undeniable reality of living amid diversity.

But the challenge facing the liberal arts is that education for democracy does not necessarily look like a key priority during a global economic downturn. Universities like Dominican—where our professional programs are grounded in the liberal arts and all undergraduate students begin their college experience with a shared interdisciplinary curriculum in Big History—must articulate and embody the argument that the education we offer *makes sense* in a diverse, fragmented nation and world, and in a time when most of us are questioning how our limited resources should be expended. In doing so, we should also reclaim the ground of populism: reassert the fundamental tenet that liberal arts education, rather than belonging to those who already Have, is an active part of an ongoing commitment to democratization and expanding inclusion.

Many of the current public attacks on the arts and humanities, or on broad-based and multi-disciplinary (i.e., liberal) study in general, have come from political leaders who must be seen to be spending taxpayer money responsibly—whether on public university systems or on government-funded financial aid and other forms of subsidy. Part of their concern is also to preserve the accessibility of publicly financed higher education; and here, the tendency is to assume (as in the U.K. in the post-war years) that accessibility means direct training for careers. The real damage is not done by comments like those of Senator Rick Santorum (a liberal arts graduate), who appeared to dismiss the importance of access when he referred to President Obama as a "snob" for emphasizing college education as a major path to prosperity; it's in the numerous, less highly visible decisions of under-pressure governors, state Regents, and even public university presidents, who aim their budget cuts at programs perceived as less economically productive, less job-market focused, less directly responsive to the need for students, families, and other taxpayers to see tangible and immediate results from a college education.

In this context, liberal arts programs can come to seem selfish and extravagant. Florida Governor Rick

Scott suggested last fall that State funding should go only to degree programs in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math)—"where people can get jobs." One supportive response published in the *Herald-Tribune* no doubt spoke for many when its author wrote, "If you want to major in French literature,

philosophy, women's studies, cartography, or Latin then knock yourself out! But do it on your own dime! I wasn't on the mommy and daddy scholarship." It's an objection that has come to seem like basic common sense.

Ironically, just when liberal arts higher education in this country is under increasing pressure to prove its connection to employability and demonstrate that it is not elitist, a number of other countries—some of them considered more attuned to contemporary global market imperatives—are suddenly starting to introduce U.S.-style multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary liberal arts curricula. And the two primary reasons for this innovation are exactly the imperatives in the U.S.: the need to produce graduates better equipped for the workforce and the desire to make university education more accessible to diverse populations.

England, which embraced specialization as the route to more widespread and democratized university education throughout the past century, is among a number of European countries where some universities are looking to American models and experimenting with a liberal arts alternative. When University College London began a pilot degree program two years ago in arts and sciences, the institution's Chancellor told a newspaper that he was worried the "early narrowing" required by the English model was producing students with a narrow, not global, view of the world. Other British universities similarly cite the demand for "broader experience." Indeed, the British government has been recommending for the past 15 years that universities develop more multi-disciplinary degree programs that foster flexible skills development.

Whether liberal learning's free-ranging habits of inquiry can flourish in China's tightly controlled society remains to be seen, but many universities there are introducing liberal arts and general education curricula—at least for the first year of university studies—precisely to better address the nation's need for an appropriately prepared workforce: according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* "Managers [in China] say that many college graduates are unemployable, as they leave university with little useful knowledge and an inability to think for themselves. And, in fact, as many as one-third of recent college graduates are unemployed."

These sentiments echo the findings of U.S.-based research that indicates employers are seeking

precisely the kinds of broad-based, widely transferrable skills of critical thinking, articulate expression, and the ability to manage complexity and effectively respond to context (including in cross-cultural situations) that liberal education seeks to impart. Studies undertaken by the Association of American Colleges and Universities have found, for example, that in the wake of the economic downturn, 91% of employers say they are "asking employees to use a broader set of skills than in the past." Likewise, employers generally are "frustrated with their inability to find '360 degree people' who have both the specific job/technical skills and the broader skills (communication and problem-solving skills, work ethic, and ability to work with others) necessary to promise greater success for both the individual and the employer."

Perhaps even more striking is the second reason why international universities are increasingly turning to the liberal arts: they see links between this curriculum and the goals of diversity and greater accessibility. The inflexibility and isolation of the traditional European degree program has been identified as a factor in high drop-out rates among students from minority and non-traditional populations. The new liberal arts degree at St Mary's, Winchester University, in England—explicitly built on American models—has played a central role in enabling the school to boast "one of the highest percentages of widening access [student] success rates in the U.K."

Similarly, in Brazil, where the higher-education participation rates of dark-skinned and mixed-race Brazilians—many of whom live in low-income areas where secondary schools do not provide adequate preparation for specialized entrance exams—are disproportionately low, at least one university has introduced a two-year liberal arts pre-matriculation program aimed precisely at improving access. This program, at the State University of Campinas, provides students of color the opportunity to study abstract reasoning, methods of qualitative and quantitative research, and natural science at post-secondary levels, under the theory that having a wider sense of the interdisciplinary *context* for learning is something taken for granted in middle-class families but often entirely closed to less privileged youngsters. And advocates of the liberal arts in Brazilian higher education again connect these skills back to the practicalities of the global workforce: the former president of the Federal University of Bahia told the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* "The way we produce professionals right now is being substituted very quickly with a general and broader education that companies later customize for their own needs. That is more flexible, more multipurpose, and better than the current model."

> *"...Compartmentalization, hyper-specialization, and the ivy-covered walls of the academy are things of the past; to connect is the imperative of the 21st century, and of 21st-century higher education."*

Back in the United States, however, the public university systems that have provided an entry-point to higher education for so many economically disadvantaged students and students of color are not looking as though they will be in any position to champion the value and utility of liberal education for diverse populations. Something topsy-turvy is happening, where—to an extent—private colleges and universities are becoming more accessible, and sometimes even more affordable, than publics. Restrictions on enrollment numbers, from community colleges to the big State University systems, are far from unique to California. And thanks to state and federal budget cutbacks, the costs of education at public institutions are rising fast—even for those

lucky students who can get into the classes they need to graduate within four years and not have to pay for additional semesters. A fairly stunning analysis undertaken recently by the Bay Area News Group showed that for some middle-class families, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Williams would all cost thousands less per year than most UC and even Cal State campuses.

Of course, Ivy League schools can provide that much scholarship support because they have extraordinarily deep pockets—funded by hefty endowments—even in the current economic climate. Dominican, and other less-wealthy private institutions, cannot quite compete in terms of price tag with most public universities. Rather, we offer an increasingly wise alternative investment. And the rapidly shrinking opportunities in public higher education, in terms of both curriculum and access, have left a gaping space into which civic-minded private colleges and universities can and should step. We need to make clear that "private" does not equal "exclusive"; and "private liberal arts university" does not equal "a luxury most of us can't afford." The lines are blurring: Dominican is a private university that operates in the public good, the community good; and the liberal arts basis to our curriculum—for the reasons I've outlined here, and others—is helping to produce students and graduates who bring enormous benefit to the communities, including the workplaces, they inhabit.

What we are doing at Dominican offers a modest casebook in how private liberal arts universities can break down the idea of the privileged, isolated ivory tower and assert their fundamental connection, and benefit, to the community (whether that community be local or global).

The first compelling point Dominican illustrates is that private liberal arts universities can effectively serve the needs and interests of first-generation college students and students of color (respectively, 25% and 46% of our student body). This has been a deliberate commitment at Dominican, but it also demonstrates that broad-based and contextualized learning can be just as appealing and just as relevant as more narrow pre-professional programs to those students and families who are often under the most pressure to consider immediate return on their college investment. There is more to be done yet, in terms of our supporting students and educating potential employers in the community about the pragmatic utility of a broad skill set in literacy, numeracy, and analytic thinking: one of the strategic initiatives we are focusing on University-wide is the development of more internship opportunities, to more systematically connect classroom learning to workplace challenges.

...Reclaim the ground of populism: reassert the fundamental tenet that liberal arts education, rather than belonging to those who already Have, is an active part of an ongoing commitment to democratization and expanding inclusion.

In fact, each of the Engaged Learning initiatives at Dominican emphasizes the deep connections between the University campus and what gets sarcastically called the "real world"—or rather, emphasizes the fact that the University is in no way

segregated from the world. Service-learning courses fully integrate an academic topic with its application toward addressing a social problem that our community partner organizations are focused on solving. Similarly, community-based research projects—whether mapping demographic patterns and local service needs in the Canal district of San Rafael or studying the spread of Sudden Oak Death Syndrome along the West Coast—unite students and faculty mentors in topical and relevant work for good. Further afield, students apply their skills in research, study, and service in communities from Yakima, WA (with Habitat for Humanity) to La Bamba, Mexico, to Tororo, Uganda. Current educational research suggests that such forms of engaged learning, where students both *learn* and *use* course material in contexts that bridge the classroom and sites outside it, are the most effective means of fostering profound and lasting understanding of a topic or field.

To return, finally, to the specific issue of a liberal arts-based curriculum that makes sense in the 21st century: our undergraduate students have, through their First Year Experience in Big History, a shared intellectual framework that fosters their ability to make connections and put their knowledge in context. There's a good reason why a "big ideas" philanthropist like Bill Gates would see the emerging academic field of Big History as an ideal vehicle for getting high-school students more engaged with their learning and more able to see the relevance of obtaining knowledge in every subject from history to physics. Big History is fundamentally interdisciplinary and integrative; it offers a framework for considering the interconnection of…well, everything and everyone, on both micro (atomic) and macro (universal and historical) levels. With this basic platform underlying their further studies, Dominican students are prepared from their freshman year not to think about specialized academic disciplines in isolation from one another, or academic study in isolation from society and economy, but rather to balance effectively the demand for depth (intensive knowledge) and the need always to stay aware of connections and relevance.

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Thinking about our work at Dominican, and about the future of liberal arts education, I think often of another English text, set at the turn of the 20th century: E. M. Forster's great novel, *Howards End.* It's a more serious fiction than *Kind Hearts and Coronets,* but it's concerned with similar questions of social and financial exclusion in a world where the old class structure no longer functions effectively. Forster's characters come together from two families immersed in the divergent worlds of business (on the grand scale of imperial capitalism) and the arts, and while the two factions clash fiercely—and tragically—they also recognize a compelling need for one another, if their families and their nation are to accomplish anything positive in the world. The novel's famous, wistful epigraph is "Only connect…." To me, compartmentalization, hyper-specialization, and the ivy-covered walls of the academy are things of the past; to *connect* is the imperative of the 21st century, and of 21st-century higher education.