

The End of College as We Knew It?

Restaurants get eulogies. Airlines get bailouts. Shakespeare gets kicked when he's down.



By Frank Bruni
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We need doctors right now. My God, we need doctors: to evaluate the coronavirus's assault, assess the body's response and figure out where, in that potentially deadly tumble of events, there's a chance to intervene.

We need research scientists. It falls to them to map every last wrinkle of this invader and find its Achilles' heel.

But we also need Achilles. We need Homer. We need writers, philosophers, historians. They'll be the ones to chart the social, cultural and political challenges of this pandemic — and of all the other dynamics that have pushed the United States so harrowingly close to the edge. In terms of restoring faith in the American project and reseeding common ground, they're beyond essential.

And I'm not sure we get that.

Colleges and universities are in trouble — serious trouble. They're agonizing over whether they can safely welcome students back to campus in the fall or must try to replicate the educational experience imperfectly online. They're confronting sharply reduced revenue, severe budget cuts, warfare between administrators and faculty, and even lawsuits from students who want refunds for a derailed spring semester. And a devastated economy leaves their very missions and identities in limbo, all but guaranteeing that more students will approach higher education in a brutally practical fashion, as an on-ramp to employment and nothing more.

"If one were to invent a crisis uniquely and diabolically designed to undermine the foundations of traditional colleges and universities, it might look very much like the current global pandemic," Brian Rosenberg, who just finished a nearly 17-year stretch as president of Macalester College, wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently. That wasn't a renegade take. It was a representative, even restrained, one.

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When I later exchanged emails with him, he expanded on it. He observed that the physically close-knit nature of the classroom and the campus puts colleges “not far behind cruise ships and assisted-living facilities” as ideal theaters of contagion. He noted that this contagion came along when higher education was already on the defensive — maligned by conservative politicians for its supposed elitism and resented by students and their families for its hefty price tag.

Now, he said, he can detect people taking “a ghoulish pleasure” in its travails. Restaurants get eulogies. Airlines get bailouts. Universities get kicked when they’re down. “That says a lot about our societal priorities,” Rosenberg said.

But not all aspects of university life will be equally undermined. Homer could be in particular peril, dismissed along with the rest of the humanities as a fusty luxury, a disposable lark. And that chills Rosenberg.

“Here is the problem,” he told me. “A society without a grounding in ethics, self-reflection, empathy and beauty is one that has lost its way.”

“We are seeing that play out,” he added — and this was *before* George Floyd’s anguished pleas and the fury and the fires. He pointed to the empathy deficit in Americans openly hostile to social-distancing directives, which was followed by the empathy void that put a knee to Floyd’s neck. “I can only imagine how George Eliot or Shakespeare would write about such people,” he said.

We don’t have to imagine, because Shakespeare, Eliot and scores of the other writers and thinkers at the core of a liberal arts education lavished attention on the conflict between individual desires and communal obligations, on the toxic fruits of fear and on the dangerous lure of ignorance. That’s why we read them. That’s why we should continue to, especially now.

“This is not only a public health crisis and an economic crisis, though Lord knows it’s both of those,” said Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American studies at Columbia University and the president of the Teagle Foundation, a philanthropy that promotes the liberal arts. “It’s also a values crisis. It raises all kinds of deep human questions: What are our responsibilities to other people? Does representative democracy work? How do we get to a place where something like bipartisanship could emerge again?”

The answers will sooner come from history, philosophy and literature than from drug companies, social media and outer space. Put another way, whom do you trust: Pfizer, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Plato and Jane Austen? It’s not a close call.

What a mess we’re in. What disruption we’re in for. It will probably look like this in higher education: Dozens and potentially hundreds of small four-year colleges go under, some of them within the next year and others over the next five. Online instruction proliferates, because the pandemic has forced more schools to

experiment with it, because it could be a way for them to expand enrollment and thus revenues, and because it's more accessible to financially strapped students who are wedging classes between shifts at work.

The already pronounced divide between richly endowed, largely residential schools and more socioeconomically diverse ones that depend on public funding grows wider as state and local governments face unprecedented financial distress. A shrinking minority of students get a boutique college experience. Then there's everybody else.



LaGuardia Community College in Queens. Jake Naughton for The New York Times

“We always knew that America was moving more and more toward very different groups of people,” Gail Mellow, the former president of LaGuardia Community College in Queens, told me. Now that movement is accelerating.

And if the economy doesn't do some spectacular turnaround, more students will demand a financial payoff from college that's as immediate and certain as possible. For computer science and chemistry departments, that's a boon. For English, comparative literature, classics and anthropology? A bust.

They're already hurting: The percentage of college students getting degrees in the humanities has declined sharply over the past decade while the popularity of more obviously job-related majors connected to, say, health care and technology surged. And the pandemic provides extra incentive for schools to redirect money from the humanities to the sciences, because that's where big grants for biomedical research are.

To solve our short-term problems, that emphasis makes sense. But to solve our long-term ones? To apply the lessons of the Spanish flu of 1918 and the urban riots of 1968 to the misery and rage of 2020? I want as many broadly educated, deeply reflective citizens and leaders as possible.

Like Andrea Romero, 19, a computer science major at Purdue University who, as part of its Cornerstone program, which encourages all undergraduates to dip into the humanities, took a class in “transformative texts.” In an essay about being forced by the pandemic to leave campus, return home and linger there, she invoked Homer’s “Odyssey” — specifically, Odysseus’ consignment to the nymph Calypso’s island. The hero’s life there is pleasant, even good. But the ease of a given moment can’t — and shouldn’t — erase the commitments and aspirations beyond it.

“I look forward to my return to ‘Ithaca,’” Romero wrote, likening the Purdue campus to Odysseus’s destination. “Until this day arrives, I have learned that it is valid to feel disappointed and fortunate at the same time.”

Mrinali Dhembala, 21, told me that her double major in political science and Chinese language at Hunter College, which is part of the City University of New York, isn’t perfectly tailored to a given profession. But it has allowed her to see and evaluate America’s predicament through the lens of other struggles, taught her to watch for the way some people try to profit from others’ pain, taken her outside of her narrowest self and given her “more sensitivity and warmheartedness,” she said.

Lexi Robinson, 21, just graduated from Central Michigan University. Although her major was public and nonprofit administration, she also delved into the humanities, for example taking a Religion and Social Issues course that she found especially meaningful. It sounded an alarm about moral absolutism. “Whatever side you’re on, you think the other is telling blatant lies,” she told me, adding that such a viewpoint is a dead end for democracy. “How do we ever come to a middle ground?”

At Ursinus College in Pennsylvania this spring, Stephanie Mackler, an associate professor of education, asked the students in one of her seminars to write about the merits of the liberal arts. Matt Schmitz, 20, who is majoring in psychology and educational studies, reflected on the story of Galileo. It’s about so much more than astronomy, he wrote; it’s a window into humans’ investment in established fictions over discomfiting truths. To study the humanities, Schmitz observed, is to connect to something grander: “Without it, humanity would be left to aimlessly wander from day to day and problem to problem.”

Rodrigo Vazquez, 28, is pursuing a master’s degree in applied mathematics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he got a bachelor’s degree in economics. But he also majored in English, which opened vistas to him that he still savors. Confined like so many Americans to his house over recent months, he told me that he staved off loneliness with reading: not just Camus’s “The Plague,” an obvious choice, but also Proust’s “Swann’s Way” and Melville’s “Moby-Dick.” They made him feel connected to human struggle across time.

“Moby-Dick.” Now there’s a transformative text about our investments in — and responsibilities to — one another.

Consider the celebrated passage in which Ishmael describes being roped to Queequeg, who dangles over their ship’s side to attend to a whale carcass. If one man gets sucked into the heaving water, both men go under. And Ishmael reflects “that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that

my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death."

"This situation of mine," he adds, "was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes."

Or these days, that struggles to breathe.

Columbia University in Manhattan. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A vaccine for the coronavirus won't inoculate anyone against the ideological arrogance, conspiracy theories and other internet-abetted passions and prejudices that drive Americans apart. But the perspective, discernment and skepticism that a liberal arts education can nurture just might.

Science may produce better versions of tear gas and lighter versions of riot gear, God help us. But it can't compete with the humanities for telling us how and why certain societies unravel and others thrive.

Maybe that's so obviously self-evident that amid all the raging need in our country, governments will dig deeper to expand the opportunity of college. Maybe college students will demand enlightenment on top of, or even before, job training.

"I think we're going to have a lot of surprises," said Christopher Newfield, a professor of literature and American studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who has written extensively about the degradation of higher education over recent decades. "People are not linear." They could well flock to Melville. "I wouldn't bet my house on it," he said, but added, "I'd bet a *room* of my house on it."

We need doctors, all right, but not all doctors are the same, as Benito Cachinero-Sánchez, the vice chair of the Library of America's board of directors, reminded me. If he were choosing between two physicians, he said, he would go with one who has read Chekhov, "because he's a fuller human being and he's going to treat *me* like a fuller human being."

Current events show that when it comes to treating one another like fuller human beings, we need all the help we can get.

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