

## With Friends Like These . . . Who Will Defend Liberal Education?

JIM SLEEPER

*Like free markets* and Christianity, liberal education in the United States has more noisy claimants than true friends. Lately, it's conservatives who've been crying hosanna to the humanities and funding campus institutes that conscript classic texts into training future Platonic Guardians for business and national-security ventures. At Yale, former Reagan foreign-service officer Charles Hill uses Thucydides as a manual for aspiring leaders in a "Studies in Grand Strategy Program" funded partly by former Reagan Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady. The neoconservative financier Roger Hertog is funding "grand strategy" programs at Columbia, Duke, Temple, the University of Texas at Austin, and (until recently) the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Other undergraduate programs, at George Mason University, St. John's in Annapolis, and the Claremont colleges outside Los Angeles, have long been redoubts for conservative humanists with fairly explicit political agendas.

Sponsors of such ventures claim they're rescuing the liberal arts as a wellspring of republican beliefs and virtues from pollution by multiculturalist, postmodernist left-liberals: "American society in its wisdom has decided to warehouse its radical lunatics on university campuses in specialized departments that operate as nunneries for the perpetually alienated," as David Brooks crowed in 2002. But even now that conservatives have their own campus nunneries, liberal education still has too few true friends.

"Universities, lacking much ventilation, are nests for the uncontrolled growth of cult, left

or right," Todd Gitlin told me recently. That's part of the problem, but another is that universities are being "ventilated" only too well by swift currents bearing not cults but commerce. Conservatives as well as liberals with civic-republican inclinations face not mainly cultish Ayn Randians and national-security zealots on the right or Schmittian leftists and postmodernists and Marxists, but a civically mindless, majoritarian tide that globe-trotting college administrators and trustees are riding toward what New York University President John Sexton calls a "Global Network University" (on the NYU website). His breathless 18,000-word manifesto uses liberal education's idiom to justify universities' embrace of a "flat" neoliberal world of casino finance, corporate welfare, and consumer marketing.

Sexton heralds NYU's transformation into a global "organic circulatory system that mirror[s] the flow of talent and creativity that increasingly defines the world. . . . The resulting system is highly matrixed, all of its parts interconnected in a deep way. The 'network' provides the movement of talent, assets, ideas, and creativity—and multiplies and enhances the capacity of each element." There's no doubting globalization's inevitability and intimacy. Its tides "can be destructive," he admits, but "can also bring blessings, as the annual floods of the Nile sustained the brilliant civilization of ancient Egypt." He warns rightly that "some will react out of fear and, responding to the powerful pull of nativism . . . will turn fear to hate," but he assures us that others—such as NYU and its trustees and faculty—"will have the humility to . . . develop a sympathetic and symbiotic interconnection of peoples and . . . an age of cultural and intellectual ecumenism."

Universities, after all, “traditionally have been...comfortable with difficult dialogues and incubators of new approaches.”

Fair enough, but Sexton then summons Confucius, Socrates, Ibn al’Arabi, Petrarch, and Kant to bless a “complexified global consciousness, not a mere universal, undifferentiated, abstract consciousness. It will be global through the global convergence of cultures and complexified by the dynamics of dialogic dialogue.” His forty-two references to “connecting” and many tiring appeals to “enrichment” and “richness” leave me puzzled about just what’s being connected and wondering whether some sources of “richness” are rich only thanks to their resisting all this “free” circulation and communication without becoming nativist or hateful.

Sexton claims that the Global Network University’s “technological framework . . . will support classroom and other academic activities in multiple locations” to “enrich the learning experience in unique ways: so, a course on cities, or the environment, or poverty, or crime might be held in up to sixteen sites simultaneously. . . . or, orchestras located on two continents, directed by a single conductor, might perform a symphony together.” But, in all this linking of sites of difference, will a student from Scarsdale be more likely to ask a question of a student from the Bronx, where NYU once had a handsome campus that it abandoned for Greenwich Village decades ago?

And what of liberal education’s encounters with lasting challenges to politics and the spirit, which require sustained, intensive interaction among teachers and students? “Some of the study away sites have programs for entering college freshmen,” Sexton tells us, because “many entering students prefer to begin their studies at a site, moving to New York for their second year, then studying at other sites in the network in their third year before returning again to New York for their senior year. One 2010 graduate completed her NYU bachelors degree with five study away semesters.”

I’d like to meet her. And I’d like to examine how “NYU’s undergraduate business school”—



named for trustee Leonard Stern, the Hartz Mountain pet foods magnate—“allows students who opt for ‘Stern World’ to do five semesters in New York, one in

London, one in Shanghai, and one in Abu Dhabi—all with...quality at the level NYU demands.” The claim is that the “result is a highly enriched business curriculum that better prepares its students for today’s business environment.”

The result is really a trustee’s and president’s dream of revolution from the top. Sexton assures us that the ever-connecting Global Network University accommodates depth in “specialized sites run by schools or departments where . . . the academic advantages of the specialized site otherwise would be unavailable. Archeological digs are one example.” I dig, but what of the depth that comes only from long periods of sitting still and studying with trusted interlocutors to anchor one’s travels? “[A] significant share of the most talented and creative faculty, students and staff will want . . . borderless lives,” Sexton advises. “The circulatory quality of the system will allow cosmopolitans to savor a ragout of places, experiences, and research and learning opportunities” that will “exert a strong influence on the talent class” and enhance its “capacity to lead thought and to learn.”

*But is this preparation* for leadership, or is it ragout? Sexton says little about political power or capital, whose flows threaten to dissolve, crush, or control the *collegium*, or self-governing company of scholars, that determines liberal education’s mission while standing farther apart from markets and host governments than he seems to imagine. There’s more hubris in his missionary “humility” than genuine engagement with difference: Sexton’s peroration quotes a paean by the historian David Levering Lewis, in a speech at NYU’s Abu Dhabi campus, to the university’s “reforming presidential trinity of John Brademas, Jay Oliva, and John Sexton.”

Recent faculty-student stirrings suggest that thoughtful conservatives—not only political philosophers in the mold of John Gray or the

late Michael Oakeshott but younger public intellectuals such as David Frum, Andrew Sullivan, Scott McConnell, Rod Dreher, James Pinkerton, and Ross Douthat—could be liberals’ and even progressives’ allies against the neoliberalization of the liberal arts that Sexton champions.

Such conservatives want to temper citizen-leaders’ training for power-wielding and wealth-making with serious humanist truth-seeking. And, increasingly, they recognize—even if they don’t say it openly—that the conservative passion for ordered republican liberty is being polluted not mainly by feckless liberals but by “free-market” obeisance to every whim and riptide of global capital. The late political philosopher Allan Bloom saw it coming. His *The Closing of the American Mind* argued that the university should distance itself from “whatever is most powerful” and the “worship of vulgar success” in order to remain a “publicly respectable place . . . for scholars and students to be unhindered in their use of reason.” He disdained not only the postmodernists and multiculturalists he became famous for denouncing but also professors and administrators whose hunger for power or market share leaves them in the power of those they hope to influence.

Bloom’s defense of liberal education recalls Dwight Macdonald’s leftish admonition to Columbia students in 1968 not to destroy the university—compromised though it was by corporate-state contracts—but to preserve its capacity to interrogate, inform, and elevate their public pursuits. Today, both men might admonish students coming to college from the Internet and the mall to discover through liberal education that the world isn’t flat but that it has abysses yawning before them, not just on screens but at their feet and in their hearts, and that they’ll need coordinates and a faith strong enough to navigate those abysses, face the demons in them, and defy established powers on behalf of public virtues and beliefs those powers are violating.

Concern about the degradation of the liberal arts prompted Harvard’s faculty in 2006 to give its governing corporation little choice but to show President Lawrence Summers the door. Some conservative pundits blamed

politically correct professors; the *Wall Street Journal* criticized Harvard’s “largely left-wing faculty” for having “about as much intellectual diversity as the Pyongyang parliament.” In fact, a larger, moderate majority of faculty rebuked Summers for reducing liberal education to training for management of money, power, and public relations and for treating professors as corporate employees rather than as peers in a *collegium*.

Former Harvard College dean Harry Lewis noted in *Excellence Without a Soul* that Summers was really just playing “the role cast for him by the large forces shaping research universities [that] led the [Harvard] Corporation to think he was the man for the job.” University of Virginia trustees decided last summer that President Teresa Sullivan *wasn’t* right for the job because she resisted the so-called “strategic dynamism” of their market-and-technology-driven priorities. But a faculty-student revolt forced Sullivan’s reinstatement, vindicating the institution’s founder, Thomas Jefferson, who had perfectly anticipated Bloom’s call for a sanctuary for unhindered reason: “This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind,” Jefferson wrote. “For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.”

Last spring, Yale College faculty passed what amounted to a vote of no confidence in President Richard Levin’s establishment of an undergraduate liberal arts college in Singapore in collaboration with that authoritarian city state at the behest of Yale trustees with deep business ties to Singapore’s sovereign-wealth funds. In August, Levin announced his resignation, effective next June, amid faculty resistance to Yale’s transformation by corporate management and conscription of the liberal arts, in Grand Strategy, Global Affairs, and other entities, into a “parallel university” that eludes faculty governance. Even the conservative *Commentary* and the *National Review* supported Yale professors against their Singapore-bound administration, albeit for nationalist more than progressive reasons; conservatives do

also want to conserve freedoms of expression and political action that their counterparts on the left are defending.

“Wealthy board members . . . often believe that universities should be run like businesses, despite the poor record of most actual businesses,” observes University of Virginia professor Siva Vaidhyanathan, adding that universities “do not have ‘business models.’ They have complementary missions of teaching, research, and public service. Yet such leaders think of universities as a collection of market transactions, instead of a . . . tapestry of creativity, experimentation, rigorous thought, preservation, recreation, vision, critical debate, contemplative spaces, powerful information sources, invention, and immeasurable human capital.”

*Undergraduate colleges* should also be spaces where eighteen-year-olds learn to recognize and accept responsibility for hard moral choices, as Harvard’s Lewis put it. But instead of shielding colleges that nurture and discipline citizen-leaders capable of engaging a polity or moral code that way, trustees and presidents now regard students as customers buying career skills and faculty as employees tasked with productivity and marketing goals—or, in public universities, as political appointees, apologists, or opera-

tives for the state. Not surprisingly, as some faculty do become self-marketing “free agents” or patronage seekers, the company of scholars and its humanist and civic-republican missions dissolve.

The appropriate response will require more than rebukes to trustees. Faculty and students need to revivify the differences between liberal arts colleges and the research universities where many colleges are housed and their faculty are trained. They’ll have to look beyond treating students as apprentices to scholarly methodologies, although some will become scholars. They’ll have to refrain from accelerating the career training of students eager, even desperate, for just that. They’ll have to find new ways to help students develop the disciplines and graces to weave a more humanist tapestry in their lives and public pursuits.

John Sexton’s way won’t accomplish that. He ends his manifesto quoting David Levering Lewis saying, “I close with the words of Archimedes, as they are a perfect expression of the complementary visions of President John Sexton and [Abu Dhabi Crown Prince] Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan: ‘Give me a place to stand and I’ll move the Earth.’”

*Give me another place* to stand, please, away from NYU’s “Stern World”; from Virginia trustees in thrall to online education offered by business corporations they serve; and from Yale trustees, deep into their collaborations with Singapore. I hope to find some conservatives standing with me, because the recent protests against the neoliberalization of liberal education show that one needn’t be a liberal or a leftist to regret what’s happening to our colleges. Or to resist it.

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