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The Inseparability of “Historical Myths” and “Permanent Crises” in the Humanities

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Abstract

Each time I read *Inside Higher Education*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, general and academic periodicals, and books from Johns Hopkins University Press’s “higher education” series, I encounter the persisting myths of the modern university and especially the humanities. Permeated with contradictions, they leap off each page. Read carefully and contextually, they help to explain the unceasing “crisis” of the past sixty or more years. Ignoring well-developed historical and critical literatures, these often self-serving and sometimes dangerously misleading repetitions of origin myths substitute for historical knowledge. The myths resist debate and revision.

Introduction

Each time I read *Inside Higher Education*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Higher Education*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, general and academic periodicals, and books from Johns Hopkins University Press’s “higher education” series, I encounter the persisting myths of the modern university and especially the humanities. Permeated with contradictions, they leap off each page. Read carefully and contextually, they help to explain the unceasing “crisis” of the past sixty or more years.

Ignoring well-developed historical and critical literatures, these often self-serving and sometimes dangerously misleading repetitions of origin myths substitute for historical knowledge. The myths resist debate and revision, in part because they constantly shift their shapes. They reveal their instability and lack of historical foundations. Among the many reasons are, on one hand, they make superficially compelling good copy in print and online. University and trade presses think there is a market.

On the other hand, the myths reinforce many widely held presumptions that pivot around and repeatedly reiterate self-defeating resistance to rethinking. In turn, that leaves many academics blaming everyone but ourselves for “the crisis of the humanities.” They are unwilling to engage in self-criticism and long-overdue revision. In a phrase, it is 2022, not the 1959 of novelist and sometime scientist C.P. Snow’s then anachronistic *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. (See Dirks, 2021; Smith, 2021; During, 2021; Baker, 2021; Skipper, 2022; Tyson, 2022.)

Today no one outside of science studies is likely to mention T.S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* published in 1962. For decades, Kuhn’s work significantly transformed understanding and discourse by refusing to oppose liberal arts to science. Yet since the 1980s and after, professors, as well as students, administrators, and the politics surrounding universities—the defenders and critics of academic disciplines—share a central misunderstanding: They fail to recognize and to learn from their own history. That history is complex and replete with powerful examples of cooperation and learning across the falsely reinforced “great divides.” (See, for example, Mintz, 2021; Graff, 2015a; Scott, 2020; Mattingly, 2017.) Consider five critical elements of the basic elements that pervade the issues: 1) the absence of reliable historical memory, and corresponding useful metaphorical and rhetorical understandings; 2) the mistaken belief that the “world of knowledge” is comprised of two opposing cultures, science *and* the arts and humanities.

This is sometimes mistranslated into “skills” vs. “canonical knowledge,” or the need for two undefined bodies to be “reconciled”; 3) a disproven “reading myth” (and to some extent a “writing myth”) that underlies simplistic solutions and false dichotomies often underlying promotion of “great books” and “the canon”; and 4) a nondebate in which one confused and confusing faction asserts that a seldom defined interdisciplinarity *is the problem*, and another loose grouping parading around an endless umbrella of labels shares a belief that their brand (sometimes for sale) of interdisciplinarity *is the solution*. (For a glaring new example, see Bauerlein, 2022. Compare to Mattingly, 2017; or Graff, 2015a. On historicity, see Graff, 2021a, b, i; Scott, 2020.)

Permeating each of these modern “myths” of the humanities and higher education is 5) an outdated and never accurate mode of thinking and understanding surrounding equally undocumented and undated states of “before and after,” accompanied by a simplistic rhetoric rooted in false dichotomies and oversimplifications.

The propagators of ahistorical, illogical, and dichotomous myths oppose “knowledge” and “skills,” and “learning” and “earning.” These qualities and quantities are inextricably interrelated. A rigorous defense of the humanities cannot deny its broad usefulness. Inextricably interrelated, the myth-mongers never admit that as the world changes, so too do academic learning and teaching, including the humanities in its connections to other bodies of knowledge. Contradictorily, they cannot deny that. (See for example, Montás, 2021; Menand, 2021; Rosenberg, 2022; Graff, 2022c ;“ Cassuto, 2022; Gutkin, 2022.)

Take one prominent example. English professor and higher education popularist Leonard Cassuto (2022) unintentionally underscores these points in his ahistorical “Great Books, Graduate Students, and the Value of Fun in Higher Education.” He states that Laurence Veysey’s 1965 *The Emergence of the American University* is “perhaps the single best book ever published on American higher education.” He is unaware that Veysey himself wrote critically about the limits of his classic account.

More importantly, Cassuto is equally unknowledgeable that the almost 60-year-old book has been superseded by histories of colleges and universities by John Thelin, Roger Geiger, and Paul Mattingly. No one, including Veysey himself, endorsed the trichotomy that Cassuto reifies among research, “liberal culture,” and utility. Rather they interrelate them in many different formations over time, and their meanings change. (See Geiger, 1986, 1993, 2015; Thelin, 2004. 2011; Mattingly, 2017.)

The myth of “Great Books” and the literacy myth, old and new

Cassuto also commits the common practices of perpetuating divisions and false distinctions instead of synthetic understanding in concrete contexts. His tripartite title foreshadows his “intellectual malpractice” (to repeat a phrase he attributes to Andrew Delbanco).

Cassuto wades into what is effectively a *nondebate* currently simmering over Louis Menand’s confused criticisms of two recent “great books” coffee table books and a confused, ideologically tinged review of a book review by former English professor and university president Brian Rosenberg. Revealingly, Menand never acknowledges that he led Great Books programs at Columbia and Harvard; he also misdates the development of “great books” in the liberal arts curricula, which Cassuto repeats. (See Menand, 2021; Brian Rosenberg, 2022; Graff. 2022c.)

Disregarding repetitive debates and discourses since at least the 1960s, perhaps since the 1920s, Cassuto follows Rosenberg in reiterating the long-predicted “end of the humanities” if a never-dominant “Great Books core curriculum” dedicated to a largely one-way transmission of “liberal culture”—by exposure or contact—for “characterformation,” rather than knowledge or understanding, either ends or is not reinstated.

In fact, the elitist, top-down “core curriculum” rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of literacy and reading—what I defined as “the literacy myth” in my 1979 book. This is “the reading myth,” in the tradition of *The Literacy Myth*. Understanding that was one stepping stone toward a new comprehension of reading and writing in which long-standing but untested presumptions of the independence and universality of reading and writing as determining factors was replaced by a humanistic and context-dependent understanding.

Ignoring more than one-third of a century’s transformative scholarship across disciplines, proponents of “Great Books,” that were never the norm, conceive of students as empty vessels to be filled with “great” words of their own selection. This is the exposure or contagion theory of instruction, rather than active learning with regular consideration of continuing relevance and applicability in a broad intellectual sense.

Another sign of the straits of the humanities, the “joys” and “inherent value” of “great books” are not integrated with writing and other means of expression, or the many distinctive modes of reading and making meaning across divergent modes of communication and many disciplines. To the humanities’ great loss, this ignores the rest of the curriculum, the broader university, and students’ possible futures. Grasping that allows us to return to the basics for meaningful literacy as preparation for the future. (See Graff, 1979, 1987, 2011. Most recently, see Graff, 2022a, i, j, k, forthcoming a.)

Young adult students are not empty containers into whom “timeless”—and not obviously relevant—wisdom is poured, whether “for research” or “for pleasure.” Reading for understanding and application is an active use of literacy and the hard-won skills of a critical literacy. When Cassuto, following Rosenberg and many others, writes, “This looks to be a burgeoning debate—and it’s one that college educators badly need to have,” he only risks accelerating the decline of the humanities whose prediction has resounded since I entered college in 1967. This is not a debate. (See for sometimes conflicting but honest views Steven Mintz’s Higher Ed Gamma blog in *Inside Higher Education*; compare with Skipper, 2022; Baker, 2021; Montás, 2022; Gutkin, 2022a, b.)

This is not only a nondebate. It is also a series of false dichotomies that have permeated the humanities for decades. For example, Menand, Rosenberg, and Cassuto oppose research *to* reading, rigorous study *to* “fun,” preparing graduate students to teach specialized courses *to* teaching general education. These are unnecessary, uninformed dichotomies that most experienced instructors reject. There is “utility” in these uncalled-for oppositions. Not one of these “critics” mentions historical context or self- and other critical skills.

These are false dichotomies not foundational oppositions. Repeating them to the exclusion of larger, pressing concerns also limits the appeal and recognition of the applied and intellectually integrated value of a rigorous but not overly compartmentalized and intellectually integrated humanities education. This is the necessary foundation for a healthier future for the humanities. I address these opportunities in a continuing series of essays and books. (See for example, Graff, 2001; 2011; 2015a, b, c; 2021a, b, c; 2022i, j, k, forthcoming a, b.)

Isolation and self-segregation follow from the combination of lack of knowledge and misrepresentation. The result is the “decline” and “loss of appeal” of the humanities that we self-pityingly and self-servingly attribute to everyone, inside and outside universities, but ourselves.

Interdisciplinarity: Myths of threats vs. salvation

The simultaneous threat and magic wand(s) of “interdisciplinarity” also hangs over the humanities, as it has since the 1960s. The stand-off between the opposing magic bullets of one or more of the scores of proposed interdisciplinarity reflects the same ahistorical, decontextual, dichotomous, and self-serving myths and contradictions. (See Graff, 2001, 2015a, 2021a, b.)

What is the course of interdisciplinarity in the first two decades of the 21st century? My conclusions are mixed. As noted earlier, too many observers write as if nothing has developed since novelist and philosopher C.P. Snow published *The Two Cultures*. They miss T.S. Kuhn’s seminal *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* of 1962. Ignoring the histories of their own fields, they do not acknowledge the striking interdisciplinary currents across, between, and among the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and medicine in two growth periods, the 1960s-1970s and the 1990s-2000s. (See Graff, 2015a, 2021a & b.)

At the same time, often false rhetoric and self-promotion continue. (See for example, Davis, 2007.) This ranges, on one hand, from the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies, which changed its name from Integrative Studies to Interdisciplinary Studies—which are not synonymous—without explanation. AIS repeats long lists of inaccurate synonyms for what they proclaim as “interdisciplinary.” Julie Thompson Klein’s “‘Advancing’ Interdisciplinary Studies: The Boundary Work of Integrating, Complexifying, and Professionalizing” highlights the contradictions, which are magnified with ever longer lists of non-synonyms. They include, for example, interdisciplinarity, integration, transdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transcendent interdisciplinary, interaction, intersection, complexify [sic], relationality and translation, professionalize, interprofessionalism, expand, holistic and multileveled, problem-solving, policy studies, and team science. (See Klein, 2018; and idiosyncratic *Manifesto of Interdisciplinarity* and its supporting statements.)

On the other hand, there is the for-profit, adisciplinary or anti-disciplinary marketing company Minerva that sells contentless “skills” online courses, especially to new universities in the Middle East and contradictorily declares the enterprise to be “interdisciplinary.”

Minerva misrepresents a World Economic Forum rhetorical prediction that “85% of jobs that will exist in 2030 have not yet been invented” as its *raison d’être*. (Ammagui, 2021.) No wonder there is grist for the anachronistic anti-interdisciplinary and unreconstructed disciplinarians, especially in the humanities.

These approaches miss major lessons of the 20th century and therefore repeat its excesses and errors. First, interdisciplinarity has a history and can only be understood in its historical contexts. It is never an unprecedented discovery of “firsts” or “revolutions,” but an ongoing process of dynamic intersections across fields and elements of disciplines or disciplinary clusters over time. Second, it is variable and dynamic. Interdisciplinarity takes place within disciplines, across “boundaries,” and over intellectual, theoretical, and methodical spaces large and small. Third, despite the nomenclature, interdisciplinarity is far less about disciplines per se than about the questions, problems, data, and tools and methods available to pursue those questions and resolve, at least in part and for a time, those problems. Just as “no one can ‘master’ more than one discipline,” no one can “master” an entire individual discipline. Disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are selective and develop within and across both intellectual and institutional boundaries.

I develop this argument briefly through the example of an interdisciplinary field of study in which I played a major role from 1971 on: literacy studies and more specifically “the new literacy studies.” (See Graff, 1979; 1987, 2011; 2022a, k.) The fundamental reorientation of the new literacy studies by the 1980s and 1990s—based on studies by historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and rhetoric and compositionists—was clear recognition of the contextual, ideological, historical, sociocultural, and variable nature of reading and writing (and sometimes arithmetic), and their influence and impacts. Like interdisciplinarity itself, the new literacy studies has faced the challenge of endless “new literacies,” many of them marketing campaigns, like “financial” or “media” literacy. (See Graff, 2002a, k.)

I selectively institutionalized literacy studies at Ohio State University from 2004 to 2016 while I served as the inaugural Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies and Professor of English and History. With my administrative associate, a cross-campus coordinating committee, countless colleagues, and several generations of graduate students, I founded LiteracyStudies@OSU, a university-wide interdisciplinary initiative. We succeeded for more than a decade by implementing a variegated, multi-level approach that utilized different forms and formats for different purposes and different target audiences. We purposefully did not seek to establish a traditional, permanent, and separate institutional structure.

To develop a population of graduate students across the huge 65,000 student, disconnected university, we established a university-wide, interdisciplinary graduate minor open to all OSU graduate students regardless of area of degree concentration. It was particularly attractive in my home departments of English and History and Education. We attracted enterprising and original students in such disparate fields as the arts, dance, foreign languages, cultural studies, communications, the sciences and medicine. We formed a Graduate Student Interdisciplinary Seminar that was led by a student steering committee and met monthly with the only nonstudent attendees being myself and my administrative associate. In 2009 we held a landmark International Interdisciplinary Literacy Studies Conference for Graduate Students that attracted several hundred participants from a number of states and five countries outside the U.S. It was planned and coordinated by a multi-university committee of students, under my supervision, most of whom received academic credit for their learning efforts. Many have now established professional careers in their major fields.

Among faculty and researchers across the university and some outside, we organized semi-formally through a wide range of “working groups” of different constituents, agendas, and longevity. Involving hundreds of professors, staff, and students over years, groups ranged from the history of the book and printing to literacy in science and medicine; literacy in translation across languages and symbolic systems; literacy in health and medicine; literacy in law and society; literacy in dance and the arts; literacy in communications; literacy in education and teaching, among others.

Interrelating them were invited lectures by nationally and internationally distinguished scholars held twice each semester, often in conjunction with working groups and always with seminar and luncheon opportunities with students. In addition, we held workshops and mini-conferences on such questions and themes as legal issues; “literacy in science;” gender, race, and ethnicity and literacy or literacies; teaching and learning literacy and literacies; performance and bodily literacies; and themes in communications.

The university's refusal to honor its own formal commitment for funding led to the closing of the program, and my retirement several years earlier than I anticipated. LiteracyStudies@OSU no longer exists. The many lessons learned require another essay.

More generally, the Dirks, Cassutos, Rosenbergs, and many others misunderstand the multiple "cultures" of academia. Dirks mistakenly asserts, "As science became increasingly central ... the humanities began their slow decline. Today, there is a widespread belief that they are both largely irrelevant to contemporary life and ill-suited to preparing students for careers." He all but seeks to create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although professors of arts and humanities and social sciences lack awareness, the basic sciences suffer many of the same patterns of declining enrollment, faculty, and funding as the arts and humanities. These commentators conflate declining enrollments—an economic as well as a cultural and political issue—with the humanities being "attacked for enshrining ideas of Western civilization or American culture that give no place to the voices of those oppressed...." They seem unaware that these "attacks" come overwhelmingly from within, not outside the humanities.

In 2022, it is not sufficient to assert across society, culture, and campuses that "the culture of science is clearly in the ascendant." Right-wing activists, many traditional conservatives, and vulnerable peoples do not agree. Look at the Trumpists and their kindred across the world, and opposition to Covid mitigation measures and public health more broadly, as well as to documented inclusive histories. Failures of K-12, community college, and university education across disciplines partly account for these misunderstandings.

It is not true, as Dirks, among others, misstates, "the two cultures have become in some ways even more incomprehensible to each other." If anything, the arts, humanities, social sciences, and basic sciences have formed stronger links in the face of the economically aggressive but often overstated competition from STEM and business fields. Although these observers miss it, "a deeper conversation between the arts and sciences" goes on. I have participated in it since my first professorial post in 1975. Too often, humanities professors have their heads down, reinforcing problems in part their own making.

Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary initiatives, projects, and programs have become more common. They are not enough, but they progress. Students want much more than most universities offer them. Therein lies a different future. The "'two cultures' paradigm" is not "a particular obstacle."

It is 2022, not 1959. Today, sometimes for sound reasons, many do not agree that "universities must lead the way." Nor, I would argue, should we or dare to attempt to "lead by ourselves." We must be active participants in larger efforts.

Yesterday and today

We proclaim either turning inward or outward, "back to the books" or "on the hill," or "going public and becoming relevant." (See Graff, 2022d.) And of course, we call for decades to "follow the sciences" (without understanding them or appreciating the many rapprochements that have developed since the 1960s), or "ape the sciences," as in "quantum social science" or "neuroscientific literary criticism." (See Graff, 2021a.) Quantitative, digital, gender, narrative, and other innovations are much more often separated from the core rather than integrated.

A recent report on Classics confirms the persistence of the same combinations of fears and complaints since the 1960s. This is inseparable from the practice of pitting a false choice of "preserving the undergraduate major" (with or without language requirements) against seeking "large, bills-paying enrollments" in elective or general education courses on mythology, ancient warfare, or women in antiquity. (Paul Basken, 2021.)

Almost daily, I read the same cavils that were common when I was an undergraduate humanities and social science major in the late 1960s. I heard them as a graduate student in history in the first half of the 1970s. And ever since.

We repeat our own slogans of decline, denial, and dichotomies: The "cold, cruel, capitalist, corporate world" does not appreciate us or support unprofitable disciplines. University administrators do not provide budgets, admission priorities, research support, faculty positions, or physical space for the liberal arts and their historical siblings across the core of the modern university. We are a "luxury" that neither universities nor, it is asserted continually, students and their families, nor the political economy and culture can afford. Yet when

asked with well-framed survey questions, both students and their employers want clearthinking, contextual understanding, and excellent communicating across traditional and new media. The self-destructive dichotomies can be dramatically reduced. (See Graff, 2015a & b, 2021b; 2022b, c, d, e, i, j, k, forthcoming a.)

With inconsistencies and confusions, since the post-World War II era, accelerating in the 1960s and 1970s, and regularly thereafter, the core fields composed by the not-so-classical disciplines and the then not-yet-“traditional” general education curricula were often branded as outdated and nonutilitarian. That is, compared to business and finance, engineering, and certain—but not all—areas of the sciences.

Especially from the early 2000s, revised admissions plans that favored engineering and business students crippled enrollment, budgets, faculty numbers, and course offerings—not only in the arts and humanities but also in social and natural sciences. (See Graff, 2015b.) In turn, they came to haunt the applied programs themselves, because those losses resulted in a lack of lower-division foundation courses that business and especially technology students required. Rarely admitted is the consistent exodus of technical students who left their prized programs in dissatisfaction and/or failure. Despite the battles of deans and colleges, and the failures of presidents and provosts, the parts of universities always impinge more or less directly on each other.

Seldom publicized is the compelling evidence over time that both humanities and other graduates do not feel satisfied with their undergraduate education. A 2021 survey by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reported that 47% of humanities students “feel that their undergraduate institution did not prepare them for life and regret their choice of major.” That starkly conflicts with other findings that most graduates, including humanities majors, “have generally satisfying lives and careers.” Humanities students report that their reflections are “driven largely by unrealistic expectations of entering students.” (Basken, 2021.) Do not their professors and program directors bear a measure of responsibility?

This is powerful testimony that we can no longer ignore. Many graduates, but especially in the humanities, “leave their classes without understanding they are learning more than just subject matter, I think that is on the teacher,” the study’s lead author observes. He may be partly correct, but he is wrong to individualize the causation. It speaks to the disciplinary major and the failure to learn from our history.

How little humanities curricula have changed since my undergraduate years, despite the loss of students and faculty. They have transitioned much less than changes in general education or lower division requirements. The latter have severely harmed not only the arts and sciences but also the social sciences and basic sciences.

Why do we embrace denial, dichotomies, and self-serving pitying rather than rejoin the worlds of knowledge and learning, and the larger world? Discussions of course content, pedagogy, and structure of the major are stale and repetitive. We ignore changing students’ and their families’ desires (both accurate and inaccurate), in effect denying the continuing value and strengths of our fields. (See for example, for history, Scott, 2020; Hunt, 2018; Guillory, 1993, 2022; Millgram, 2015, to cite a few. See references to my recent writing below.)

At the same time, we ignore urgent calls from many voices, including recently from UNESCO to change “teaching and access” to meet current and future needs and crises. (John Morgan, 2021.) In a rare intervention, the International Commission on the Futures of Education concluded, “Universities must respond to crises in democracy, social fragmentation and climate change by rethinking their missions to innovate in teaching and push further on open access in research....”

Simultaneously, we either cry in our beer, or cling to our precarious perches in decaying ivory towers, celebrating our hard-earned irrelevance. (See for example, the dramatically out-of-date and out-of-touch, Skipper, “The liberal arts can counteract polarization,” or the superficial Roth, 2022.)

Closely related is our neglect of the humanities’ historical roles and, in my view, fundamental responsibilities. Many of these are public rather than campus-oriented extensions of our knowledge bases and legacies. Public history has a long history. But across the disciplines, appreciation of the legitimate (that is, not primarily partisan political, fund-raising, or self-promotional) “public humanities” is dramatically undeveloped. (See Graff, 2022d.)

Inseparably tied to that role is the always present responsibility for concerned and knowledgeable humanists to address both major and minor public issues in all our forums. The history, as Joan Wallach Scott, details in her *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom*, and *On the Judgment of History*, cannot be slighted.

We can adapt to changing conditions in the world around us and within universities, which too often lead by slogans rather than plans or policies. (See Graff, 2022b, e.) We can revise our long outdated and often contradictory slogans.

Can the humanities transform themselves, at least in part, to participate in transforming teaching and learning? We can do this both disciplinarily and interdisciplinarily. We can also speak to real student needs both within and outside of degree-bearing majors. (See Graff, 2015a, b, 2021a, b; 2022d, h, i., j, k, forthcoming a, b.)

Today and tomorrow

Both American and worldwide higher education have massive problems—many of our own making. Chief among them is how we ask and answer fundamental questions about the contemporary situation and its tangled paths. Beneath that level are our intersecting inability to understand historical context, and to find a basic language and logic for understanding. These complications echo through the subjects, interviews, and promotion for such titles of the moment as new Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner's (2022) *The Real World of College: What Higher Education Is and What It Can Be*. (See Graff, 2022j, forthcoming a.)

The problems are many and revealingly symptomatic. Books like *The Real World of College* never address what they mean by “real world,” “what higher education is,” or “what it can be.” There is *no one* “higher education [or] real world.”

Such common books, their reception, and the discussions they prompt even among self-proclaimed specialists underscore their almost self-caricaturing absence of both recent and longer-term historical perspectives. The central complaints that animate these books and articles exist outside historical time and meaningful context. The *Inside Higher Education* interviewer of *The Real World of College* authors comments, “The authors ... discuss how higher education lost its way” and “what institutions need to do to get back to their mission of transforming students’ lives.” The *what* and the *when* are missing. (For contrasts in recent higher education journalism, see Michael W. Clune, 2015; Jaschik, 2021; Baker, 2021; Mintz, 2022; Skipper, 2022. For neglected but fundamental, relevant issues, see Paul Campos, 2021; Marcus, 2021, 2022.)

The first element of the *what* and *when* must be the historical. (See, for example, Mattingly, 2017; or the still-prescient Michael B. Katz, 1987.) When I was an undergraduate in the late 1960s, as was Gardner, the same disconnected, unhelpful pressure cooker—“Earning is more important than learning”—overheated on the front burners even at our elite universities. It has never stopped, not at least since the end of World War II, the advent of the G.I. Bill, the expansion of different kinds of universities and their populations, and across different majors on the same campuses.

The presumption of an undocumented “golden age” from which we have *fallen* is never dated or made concrete. The larger discourse of higher education—analysis, diagnosis, and prescriptions—has no historical understanding, only a largely fictitious diagnosis of long-term disability and high morality. (On causes and consequences of the failure of historical memory, see Graff, 2015b, 2021a, b, 2022a, c, d, e, f, h, i, j, k, forthcoming a, b; Guillory, 1993, 2022; Mintz, 2021. See in contrast among numerous studies, Dirks, 2021; Montás, 2021; Rosenberg, 2022, Cassuto, 2022.)

Typical of the literature, books like *The Real World* begin with the historically, interpretively, and logically false opposition of “learning” vs. “earning,” rather than their always shifting, dynamic interrelationships. That is a certain route to failed understanding and resolution. “Learning and earning” always coexist with regular tensions, contradictions, and points of reinforcement. “Higher education” as a variegated set of institutional systems has never been fundamentally “broken” *or* in complete repair. One issue is that its warranties are far too limited.

Responses to these questions are almost always contradictory; research designs and samples are biased. The literature skews toward elite universities that are these researchers’ homes. That only magnifies the complications and contradictions. Not all contemporary higher education can be modelled on what seems to be appropriate to Harvard, Chicago, or Stanford professors.

The complications expand with the high level of abstraction and unreality in this genre of writing about higher education. On the fundamental matter of comparisons and advancing meaningful generalizations, Fischman and Gardner contradict the bases of their project when they write in a blog post on their book's website: "We were asked about patterns and trends of individuals representing traditional demographic differences...."

Prioritizing differences among individuals may actually work against and undermine our central recommendation: "Colleges (both independent and within universities) need to be singularly focused on the broad intellectual development of *all* students.... We believe that American colleges and universities need to focus on the development of what we call Higher Education Capital." (<https://www.therealworldofcollege.com/blog>)

Drawn directly from expectations stimulated by decades at Harvard, HEDCAP translates into a metaphor or rhetorical play on the complicated fields of "human capital" that derive from debates in economics since at least Adam Smith and Karl Marx. It is not a "measure," as these representative authors declare. Without controlling for institutional and other basic distinctions among students and institutions, the approaches and the discourse are fallacious, elitist, anti-intellectual, and opposed to higher learning itself.

Virtually the entire genre sinks in a sea of rhetorical and conceptual obscurity and misunderstanding. Along the way, we lose sight of the historical, contemporary, and possible futures of higher education.

Conclusions

Refusal to confront the complex but highly instructive histories all but prevents constructive criticism and reconceptualization. This neglect results in repeated references to the seemingly unread Snow's *Two Cultures* and the forgetting of the much more original and forward-looking, intellectually influential 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

There are many paths to "reconciliation" of the arts and sciences to play on Snow's dichotomy. Some have been taken with success; others not. We ignore that at great risk. (Compare Graff, 2015a and Jacobs, 2013, with Dirks, 2021; Klein, 2018; and Frodeman, 2010. See Graff, 2021 and 2022 in general.)

Recognizing and comprehending the historical foundations of the present is required for confronting our multiple "crises." *Step 1*: Learn the actual history(ies); stop imagining or fabricating them. *Step 2*: Replace distorting misrepresentations and misunderstandings with the multiple and contradictory realities; end false dichotomies and equivalences, and question all presumptions. *Step 3*: Take pride in our histories while learning from both long-term and recent histories.

The lessons fill many volumes with instructions on what to emulate, avoid, and most importantly revise for transformed institutional, generational, social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Among the critical lessons: Students and their social worlds change; disciplines and disciplinary clusters change; knowledge changes; isolation is self-defeating; "public" and "applied" humanities have exemplary histories with much to teach us for activism both inside and outside universities. So does intellectually responsible interdisciplinarity in a variety of forms and formats. The so-called "two cultures" selectively reconcile, but the concepts of opposing "cultures" and "reconciliation" both demand critical questioning. Finally, humanities scholars can be our own worst enemies, but also our own best thinkers and advocates for change. Begin by asking, can we imagine universities *without* humanities? (See, for a beginning, Graff, 2015a, 2021 and 2022 in general, forthcoming a, b; Mintz, 2021.)

There are many paths to "reconciliation" if that is our goal. I prefer revisioning, reformulating, reconnecting, and translating. Some have been taken with success; others not. We ignore that at great risk. Can we afford to continue taking those risks?

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literacy and education including higher education, children and families, cities, interdisciplinarity, and contemporary politics, culture, and society.

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