

**LIBERAL ARTS VS. SPECIALIZATION IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA**

**A WORKING PAPER**

**KEVIN WALKER, PH.D.**  
**VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**  
[kwalker@colgate.edu](mailto:kwalker@colgate.edu)

**TO BE PRESENTED AT THE COLGATE UNIVERSITY  
JUNIOR FACULTY COLLOQUIUM**

*“As part of their loot they dragged me off, in spite of my protestations and resistance; they ripped apart the gown that I had woven with my own hands, and they departed bearing the ragged pieces which they had torn from it. They imagined that all of me had passed into their hands; and because they bore traces of my clothing about them, foolish men regarded them as my devotees, and more than one of them were brought to ruin through being misled by the uninitiated.”*

– Lady Philosophy, in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*<sup>1</sup>

The progressive movement left a lasting impression on our national life, whether we look at the expanding administrative state, the public’s unrealistic expectation of superhuman leadership from our presidents, or the general historical-evolutionary sense that dominates modern American consciousness. But the most important impression left by the progressives is found in the American university. Progressive reformers paid just as much attention to higher education as they did to every other aspect of American life, and they largely succeeded in transforming universities from liberal arts colleges to institutions pressed into the service of society and the government, at least for a time. The subsequent history of higher education – the vast expansion of university administration, the radical upheavals of the 1960s, the crippling burden of student loan debt, the rigid campus culture of identity politics, the growing skepticism about the value of an undergraduate degree – is largely a result of the progressive era’s structural changes made to higher learning a century ago.

For much of American history prior to the Civil War, the standard institution of higher learning was the old-time college. Whether an early Puritan college like Harvard or Yale, one chartered by the king like William and Mary or Dartmouth, or one established in the early republic by one Christian denomination or another, all more or less carried on the medieval liberal arts tradition passed on to them by the older English colleges. This consisted of teaching classical Greek and Latin literature along with arithmetic and geometry, which in turn prepared the student for important questions in natural science, moral and political philosophy, and Christian theology. The most common career for degree recipients was the ministry, but over time they found themselves just as prepared for law, medicine, and public office.

The great statement of purpose for these colleges was the famous Yale Report of 1828, written in response to the pressure among college reformers to update and redesign the curriculum to fit the times. Critics often looked to other innovative schools as their model, whether the academies of France or Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia, which embraced “the spirit and wants of the age” by teaching the new natural sciences, modern languages, and Enlightenment philosophy. But these, the report announced, would always be exceptions to the rule. A true college was one that provided “the ground work of a thorough education,” which had to be “broad, deep, and solid.” Its goal was to provide “the discipline and furniture of the mind.” The goal was to

teach the art of fixing the attention, directing the train of thought, analyzing a subject proposed for investigation; following, with accurate discrimination, the course of argument; balancing nicely the evidence presented to the judgment; awakening, elevating and controlling the imagination; arranging, with skill, the treasures which memory gathers; rousing and guiding the powers of genius.

Such an education could not be obtained through the study of any single subject alone; it was a way of thinking that had to precede all other subjects. There certainly were advances in

---

<sup>1</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

knowledge and new fields of study opening up, but this did not change the fundamental mission of the college. The college's duty to the typical student was "not to finish his education; but to lay the foundation, and to advance as far in rearing the superstructure, as the short period of his residence will admit." The point of such a fixed and unchanging liberal arts curriculum was to prepare the student to "educate himself," since he has been "taught *how* to learn," the report said. "The cornerstone must be laid before the superstructure is erected."<sup>2</sup>

The old college graduate certainly had a duty to serve society and politics. It aimed to produce gentlemen, but unlike their British counterparts who were meant to serve the crown and the Empire, the American college graduate had a far more challenging task: to be an elite in a self-government constitutional republic. The greatest service these colleges offered was indirect: it was not the special training but the moral and intellectual character of graduates that mattered most to society. And for this, college graduates, whether ministers, physicians, or public officials, were usually admired and trusted by ordinary people.

Many members of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, for example, were graduates of one of these colleges – yet they had not majored in Nation Founding, nor had they taken classes on Constitution Making or Ratification Methods. True, many of them had probably forgotten how to conjugate Greek verbs or do Euclidian proofs, but the point was how the study of these things for a few short years trained their minds and shaped their habits for the world beyond college, or, in the Founders' case, for making history. The old colleges produced social elites, but of the best kind – the classic gentleman whose greatness was in his well-trained intellect and well-practiced virtues that gave him a trustworthy and electable character. These colleges had flaws, of course: they could be strict and controlling, and oftentimes forgot the value of what they were teaching by letting it drift into hollow repetition. But they always knew themselves, and were able to reform when necessary by returning to basic understanding of human happiness.

This was precisely what American higher education left behind with the great reforms of the "university movement" that came after the Civil War, through the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, which are the focus of this essay. Like many social and political institutions at the time, colleges fell into a season of self-doubt. The spirit of the Yale Report, with its clarity and certainty about how to educate a human person, yielded to the spirit of democracy, which demanded that colleges become universities that unleashed the individual student to discover and pursue specific interests by taking electives, choosing a major, and graduating with a degree in a specific field of study. At the same time, universities became the object of government projects, especially the Land Grant Act of 1862, designed to establish public institutions that would provide useful degrees in agriculture, engineering, and other industrial sciences.

All along, philosophic perceptions of knowledge were radically altered: even as the natural sciences advanced in breakthrough discoveries that led to practical applications to improve human life, the idea that there was a specific way to educate a human being declined; human purpose yielded to a pragmatic view of learning where each mind was different, meaning human beings shared no common end. This been the deepest assumption and driving force in the older colleges, but it was now forced to yield to a more pragmatic kind of learning.

The signs were clear that even private institutions, including old-time colleges, had to become public-serving universities. This was the age of great university presidents who were appointed specifically because of their new educational philosophies, and the changes they

---

<sup>2</sup> *Reports on the Course of Instruction at Yale College by a Committee of the Corporation and the Academic Faculty* (New Haven: Hezekiah Howe, 1828), pp. 6-7; 14; 16.

promised to bring to American higher education. They delivered on that promise to the great approval of boards, students, and faculty at the time – yet they created a whole new series of difficulties for their universities in later years, which it fell to the progressive movement to resolve.

I argue that it was precisely the drift away from these old liberal arts colleges that explain so much of our present condition of higher education. First, I will consider the early reforms that turned the simple old-time colleges in to large and complicated, expansive (and expensive) universities, first at Harvard and Johns Hopkins University, and eventually in institutions all over the United States, which resulted in a fragmented and bewildering educational experience. Second, I look at the way progressives responded to this confusion, and tried to recover the value of higher education for democracy, not in the way the old-time colleges did, but according to the needs of an administrative state designed to directly serve American democracy.

## **I. From Colleges to Universities – From Liberal Arts to Specialization**

### **A. Charles Eliot and the Elective System**

After a few years as an assistant professor of mathematics and chemistry at Harvard College, Professor Charles W. Eliot was denied promotion to chair in 1863. Instead of reassessing his career or engaging in some professional soul-searching, though, Eliot decided that the problem was not him, but with American higher education in general. To prove this, he spent two years in Europe touring and investigating every aspect of the Old World's universities. Eliot came to believe that those schools had adapted far better to the conditions of modern life than American ones had, especially in Germany, where universities had undergone Wilhelm von Humboldt's reforms in the early nineteenth century. Eliot came home and prepared a thorough indictment of American colleges. His writings gave a new direction to his career, and a profound transformation of American higher education that is still with us today.

Eliot's assessment and plans for reform appeared in "The New Education," an essay published in *The Atlantic* in 1869. There, he announced that the old-time colleges, with their emphasis on Greek, Latin, mathematics and theology, had become terribly out of place in modern American society. The federal government had realized this, appropriating millions of dollars through the Land Grant Act of 1862 to create public universities offering far more useful degrees in agriculture and engineering. Many wealthy tycoons followed suit and spent their fortunes founding technical schools designed to advance American industry. It was true that some older colleges allowed studies in the newer natural and applied sciences and even the social sciences, but these remained subordinate to classical and religious studies; hence, the student interested in biology or sociology could only pursue those things after hours of dead languages or religious indoctrination. This was not enough for Eliot. For him, it was time for a radical re-founding of American education.

Eliot wrote that the American people "are fighting the wilderness, physical and moral, on the one hand, and on the other are struggling to work out the awful problem of self-government. For this fight they must be trained and armed."<sup>3</sup> Everyone involved could see this, from alumni to presidents. College education had to give students the right tools and the proper insights for facing the times: ancient Greek and Roman texts might provide the sound reasoning and

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles W. Eliot, *The New Education*, *The Atlantic* (February 1869).  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archives/1869/02/the-new-education/309049/>

character development necessary for an eighteenth-century gentleman, but these were the values of a bygone age, and they were ill-fitted to modern problems and success in a democratic culture.

The great educational mistake, Eliot believed, was “to reason about the average human mind as if it were a globe, to be expanded symmetrically from a center outward.” But, Eliot insisted, “a cutting-tool, a drill, or auger would be a juster symbol of the mind.” Man was not a microcosm of the universe that must grow in all directions simultaneously; he was instead someone whose value lay in being specifically trained to effectively fix particular societal problems. Modern life came with a variety of different tasks requiring different tools; accordingly, there were different disciplines, not to mention different types of people and different ways of learning. Instead of forcing them all into the same mold or leaving them to compete for predominance, a true university simply recognized the “natural bent and peculiar quality of every boy’s mind.” It was, in fact a “division of mental labor,” which, as in economics, allowed individual interests to produce greater prosperity for all. Good education “demands this regard to the peculiar constitution of each mind, as much as does the happiness of the individual most nearly concerned.”<sup>4</sup>

Eliot admitted that there was great tension, not only between the old and new disciplines, but among the new disciplines themselves: pure science pursued knowledge for its own sake, making it suspicious of applied science; applied science looked askance at pure science that made great discoveries but failed to make them useful to mankind; and, of course, all were suspicious of the humanities, which dealt in imprecise notions of beauty and excellence. But this state of conflict was not because some studies were nobler, more architectonic, or more attuned to truth than others; it was merely the result of “unlike frames of mind” forced to be competitive and hostile toward each other when what they really needed was separate academic departments sustained by diverse student interests.

The central value of a university, he concluded, was in all the disciplines “being good in their separate places.” Even Greek, Latin, mathematics and religion could stay around for those old-fashioned “frames of mind” who prefer such things. “It cannot be said too loudly or too often, that no subject of human inquiry can be out of place in the programme of a real university,” Eliot wrote. “It is only necessary that every subject should be taught at the university on a higher plane than elsewhere.” The dignity of each discipline was not found in the way each related to the others to a shared common root in philosophy or theology, nor was it in a common aim to find a higher truth. Its “higher plane” was found only in the rigor with which the topic was pursued, beginning only with the *choice* of a student to study it.

Eliot’s *Atlantic* article gained the attention of certain board members at Harvard who had corporate interests and looked back on their own classical education as useless hoop-jumping. They found great value in his elective-based proposal, which would turn Harvard from an old-time college into a leading modern university. Despite great objections from other board members and many faculty members, this faction forced the board’s hand and made Charles Eliot the new president of Harvard. As the reforming leader of the nation’s oldest college, Eliot was now in a position to influence all of American higher education by starting the nationwide movement toward the modern university.

Eliot publicly introduced the elective system in his inaugural address, presenting it not as a hostile takeover of the old college or the exile of classical curriculum, but as a declaration of the fundamental equality between all disciplines. “This university recognizes no real antagonism between literature and science, and consents to no such narrow alternatives as mathematics or

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

classics, science or metaphysics. We would have them all, and at their best.” And they were best, from the student’s point of view, not because of their superior methods or greater claim to truth, but because they were best for the student’s own personality, disposition, and future career. This would reverse the great error of modern education, where “the individual traits of different minds have not been sufficiently attended to.” Perhaps lower grades of education required more structure and planning, but the university student “ought to know what he likes best and is most fit for.” Civilization, according to Eliot, was not characterized by its highest end, but by the “variety of its tools.” So it was with individuals: human character was not measured by notions of virtue or a good life; instead, “concentration, and the highest development of his own peculiar faculty, is the only prudence.” This, he wrote, had direct political implications: “For the State, it is variety, not uniformity, of intellectual product, which is needful.”<sup>5</sup>

For these sentiments, Eliot gained great admirers in German universities who marveled at the way Harvard led all of American higher education in falling under their influence. Eugen Kühnemann, for instance, a German professor who toured the United States in 1909 gave a positive assessment of the Eliot’s legacy. Thanks to Eliot, American higher education was now driven by “natural inclination,” and the desire to learn by “the direction of his particular talents” – and this, Kühnemann pointed out with glee, was “another point of resemblance to the German university student.” With the elective system,

the free choice of studies develops all varieties of individual talents to the very greatest intensification of personal power, to thorough expertness of each student in his own field, and it engenders respect for such expertness in any field. For insufficient appreciation of the value of expert labor is one of the worst afflictions of American life.<sup>6</sup>

No one could deny, though, that the old-time college was far more intellectually rigorous than colleges with elective systems at the time. Eliot admitted that those who were “found incompetent to pursue the usual classical studies of the preparatory school or the college, turned to the loosely organized scientific schools as safe harbors for their laziness or stupidity.”<sup>7</sup> German universities were impressive because they had been developed out of old medieval institutions and adhered to certain cultural traits that were uniquely their own; Americans aping Germans did not ensure German-level quality in faculty and students. But Eliot reassured everyone that this was only a passing problem: the transition would soon be complete, and Harvard would modernize the same way German universities had. What seemed like a hodge-podge set of electives could still meet the demand for excellence as the system developed. Besides, a place like Harvard could make the transition by simply riding the tide of its own prestige into a new era. But what about other colleges?

## **B. Daniel Coit Gilman and the University Major**

It was Eliot’s friend and fellow president, Daniel Coit Gilman, who sought to demonstrate that the elective-based, multi-departmental university could work anywhere and

---

<sup>5</sup> *Addresses at the Inauguration of Charles William Elliot, President of Harvard College, October 19, 1869* (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1869), 29; 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Eugen Kühnemann, *Charles W. Eliot: President of Harvard University* (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin Company, 1909), 13; 52.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, *The New Education*.

ought to be the model for American universities of the future. Like Eliot, Gilman began with a rocky career as president of the University of California, where he tried for three years to bring Harvard-like reforms but faced a state legislature that constantly hampered his efforts. But in 1875 the founders of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore invited him to be the first president on the recommendation of Eliot. As it turned out, Gilman would go far beyond Eliot's elective system: he would help create a university dedicated wholly to the advancement of knowledge through specific departments, led by chairs who were the leaders in their respective fields. With this, the university major was born.

In his treatise, *The Benefits which Society derives from Universities*, Gilman insisted that the first and most fundamental duty of a modern university was to “advance knowledge” – i.e., not to simply preserve old knowledge or to grow more deeply in accepted wisdom, but to go *beyond* them in a spirit of exploration. Preserving knowledge and passing on wisdom had been the task of the old colleges, which were not “advancing” in any sense, but simply running in circles. The scholars at Johns Hopkins and like-minded universities, in contrast, found that “[n]o history is so remote that it may be neglected; no law of mathematics is so hidden that it may not be sought out; no problem in respect to physics is so difficult that it must be shunned.” The new great task was research and discovery, probing the limits of knowledge, however small the steps may be.<sup>8</sup>

Above all, academic life had to be arduous, the result of relentless effort. “No love of ease, no dread of labor, no fear of consequences, no desire for wealth will divert a band of well chosen professors from uniting their forces in the prosecution of study,” Gilman wrote.

To the claims of duty, to the responsibilities of station, to the voices of enlightened conscience such men respond, and they throw their hearts into their work with as much devotion, and as little selfishness, as it is possible for human nature to exhibit. By their labors knowledge has been accumulated, intellectual capital has been acquired. In these processes of investigation the leading universities of the world have always been engaged.<sup>9</sup>

What was all of this strenuous pursuit of knowledge for, though? For Gilman, it was not something that led to a certain conclusion: it was instead a process that went on indefinitely; it was not a goal so much as a way of life – e.g., laborious research to produce a miniscule conclusion which could itself be refuted by yet another study, all advancing to no end in particular but more of the same. Gilman proclaimed that neither he nor anyone else could comprehend the recent breakthrough discoveries in mathematics, for example, and only a few researchers within a given field could grasp it. But that was the point: the most worthwhile kind of knowledge was specialized knowledge, meaning “the progress of mathematics underlies and sustains all progress in exact knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Exact knowledge – especially the kind that expanded, pushed back frontiers, and made even the smallest steps toward certainty – was the true purpose of a university. Given the limits of human intellect, the “advancement of knowledge” could not occur as a shared experience, but through narrowest possible channels.

The great practical difficulty was in finding faculty who were up for such a strenuous career. Gilman had found a few European-educated Americans – chemist Ira Remsen, mathematician James Joseph Sylvester, historian Herbert Baxter Adams, and classicist Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve – and each was entrusted with developing their departments and academic

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 31.

journals. But in general, American academics were too habituated to the ways of old colleges, and the American temperament was too impatient and short-sighted to engage in such tedious work. Gilman longed to bring German scholars to Johns Hopkins so that the school could enjoy the fruit of “the thoroughness of the German mind, its desire for perfection in every detail, and its philosophical aptitudes.” Some had agreed to come, he announced in his inaugural address in 1876. But, he wrote, “I must tell you, in domestic confidence, that it is not an easy task to transplant a tree which is deeply rooted.”<sup>11</sup> If German professors would not come, Johns Hopkins would simply have to produce their own, training them in a graduate school that awarded Ph.D.’s for themselves and for other American universities.

Gilman’s German ideal was the centerpiece of his presidency. Despite the struggles of transferring a highly-developed German institution to American shores, “the keynote of the German system was also the keynote of Mr. Gilman’s conception of the university that was to be,” according to a later report to the Board of Trustees.

[F]or he had in view the appointment of professors who had shown their ability as investigators, whose duties as teachers would not be so burdensome as to interfere with the prosecution of their researchers, whose students should be so advanced as to stimulate them to their best work, and the fruit of whose labors in the advancement of science and learning should be continually manifest in the shape of published results.

The shortfall was, of course, the disconnection between the professor as researcher and the professor as teacher: undergraduates might not receive much care and guidance in their education. But this was not the goal for Gilman: he wrote that undergraduate education was a “secondary matter,” since the “vital force of the University was directed in the main to the building up in America of a true university, – a university permeated by the spirit of the universities of Germany, with research as the center, the heart, of the whole organism.” Perhaps undergraduates would miss important lessons, and receive a specialized degree despite major gaps in their basic knowledge. But that was no failure on the university’s part because it was simply not the true objective of higher education: instead, “the German doctorate of philosophy must be set up as the fixed goal of students.”<sup>12</sup> What the university lacked in actual learning, whatever knowledge random electives or narrow majors might leave out, it could be made up for with the quantity of researching experts with doctoral degrees the university produced.

So while Charles Eliot focused on offering student-guided elective courses, Daniel Coit Gilman emphasized the need for highly specialized faculty members. These two educational trends seemed to fit together perfectly: under the Eliot-Gilman model, faculty would research and publish within their fields in order to “advance knowledge” – and, given the constraints of time, they would be allowed to teach only those classes that fit within their research agenda. Meanwhile, students would take electives that seemed interesting and relevant to their personal tastes, thus expanding the menu of educational experiences and opening up the university to a wider array of students. The old guard would protest and probably resist, but they would easily be crowded out by young Ph.D.’s hired to teach in the various departments. It was at once a catchy new trend and an imperative for survival, especially for other reform-minded presidents who were concerned about long-term sustainability for their colleges. In short, an institution of higher learning could truly thrive by simply becoming everything to everyone.

---

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Coit Gilman, Inaugural Address at Johns Hopkins University, February 22, 1976.

<https://www.jhu.edu/about/history/gilman-address/>

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Fabian Franklin, *The Life of Daniel Coit Gilman* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1910), 196; 227.



It was a vision that was passed along to nearly every American institution of higher education by the turn of the century. As one contributor to the *Harvard Crimson* wrote in 1883, the elective system “works to develop a man’s individuality” and overcomes “dull uniformity” – yet the strongest argument in its favor was “the way in which educators are being converted to its support and in which college after college is swinging into line. Almost unknown on this continent a half-score years ago, it has now obtained more or less recognition from nearly every college of repute in the land.”<sup>13</sup>

So it was at Cornell University, where President Andrew Dickenson White claimed that his time at the University of Berlin had “intensified my desire to do something for university education in the United States. There I saw my ideal of a university not only realized, but extended and glorified.” Cornell, like other universities, would abandon the old college way, which was “narrow, their methods outworn, and the students, as a rule, confined to one simple, single, cast-iron course, in which the great majority of them took no interest,” and replace it with an elective system that would encourage self-motivated investigation and a variety of specialized majors to choose from.<sup>14</sup>

So it was at the University of Michigan. Henry P. Tappan, president from 1852 to 1863, had insisted that German universities “stand forth as model institutions.” They featured “professors of eminence” who were “so numerous that a proper division of labor takes place, and every subject is thoroughly discussed.” There, the student experience was shaped entirely by the elective system: “every student selects the courses he is to attend. He is thrown upon his own responsibility and diligence. He is left free to pursue his studies.” Students could pursue any number of professions, and, like the German graduate designed his own education which prepared him to “go through the most rigid examinations, both oral and written.” On the whole, German higher education “furnishes every department of life with educated men, and keeps up at the Universities themselves, in every branch of knowledge, a support of erudite and elegant scholars and authors, for the benefit and glory of their country, and the good of mankind.”<sup>15</sup> Tappan did not realize this in his time, but subsequent presidents and reformers embraced it.

So it was at Stanford University, founded in 1891 by David Starr Jordan who called the elective system a “democracy of the intellect.” What was most revealing, though, was Jordan’s observation that electives allowed students to study with “men who held their attention.” While other like-minded academic reformers emphasized student interest in particular subjects, Jordan looked to the role of student preference for the professors themselves. Critics of electives, he wrote, “forgot or never realized the intellectual lassitude among young men submitted to a pre-arranged discipline awakening no interest and with no visible relation to present tastes or future career.” This, Jordan insisted, was what led to the “enormous increase in university attendance which began in the [1890s] and is so conspicuous at present.” In this, Jordan went beyond other advocates of the elective system: the point was the teacher, whose example and personal appeal was the main thing – and whose duty “is to adapt the work to the student, not the student to the work.” As far as what students actually learn, the more diverse and “patchwork” it was, the better. “Higher education should thus foster divergence instead of conformity, its function being

---

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, Harvard’s Elective System, the *Harvard Crimson*, May 3, 1883.

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1883/5/3/harvards-elective-system-the-advantages-of/>

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Dickenson White, *Autobiography* (New York: The Century Company, 1905), 291; 272. Remarkably, White even believed that the elective system helped reduce the “wild, wicked, outrageous, and destructive” drinking habits of American students: “the substitution of the students’ own aims and tastes for the old cast-iron curriculum, are doubtless the main reasons for this.” *Ibid.*, 518.

<sup>15</sup> Henry P. Tappan, *University Education* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850), pp. 39-40; 43-45.

not to bring up youths to a predetermined standard, but to help each to make the most of his inborn talents.” To assume otherwise was, in fact, “the acme of educational laziness.”<sup>16</sup>

And so it was in colleges and universities across the land, large and small, public and even private: one after another gave in and ardently accepted the Germanizing effects of these reformers. There was substantial resistance at the colleges who had enough prestige and support to do so – especially the College of New Jersey in Princeton under the leadership of James McCosh and Yale University following Noah Porter. But eventually, standard higher education became fragmented into departments teaching electives and students studying in majors. As liberal arts colleges expanded into bloated and confusing universities, as college catalogs grew to hundreds of pages, and as academic journals proliferated to print increasingly specialized research, higher education found itself wandering down a strange new path. And within a few years, it seemed unthinkable to do it any other way.

### C. Assessing the Eliot-Gilman System

But what did all of this amount to for students, especially as the years passed and observers were able to truly assess the new system?

Probably the most famous “Harvard Man” of his time was Theodore Roosevelt, who attended from 1876-1880, just as the college was making its major transition. He looked back on his experience with great fondness:

me much more than any of my text-books. Everything in in this magazine instilled the individual virtues, and the necessity of character as the chief factor in any man’s success—a teaching in which I now believe as sincerely as ever, for all the laws that the wit of man can devise will never make a man a worthy citizen unless he has within himself the right stuff, unless he has self-reliance, energy, courage, the power of insisting on his own rights and the sympathy that makes him regardful of the rights of others. All this individual morality I was taught by the books I read at home and the books I studied at Harvard. But there was almost no teaching of the need for collective action, and of the fact that in addition to, not as a substitute for, individual responsibility, there is a collective responsibility. Books such as Herbert Croly’s “Promise of American Life” and Walter E. Weyl’s “New Democracy” would generally at that time have been treated either as unintelligible or else as pure heresy.

Edward Slosson, a former professor of chemistry who turned to journalism, wrote a series of articles for the *Independent* based on his tour of fourteen American schools in 1910, which were compiled into his book, *Great American Universities*. He acknowledged that the

---

<sup>16</sup> David Starr Jordan, *The Days of a Man: Being Memories of a Naturalist, Teacher, and Minor Prophet of Democracy* (New York: World Book Company, 1922), pp. 87-88; 236-237.

universities under the new model were quite successful – but only for those who defined success in quantitative terms. Universities grew in terms of new buildings, a bigger faculty, and, of course, student enrollment that helped contribute to the endowment. But those things created a whole new set of dangers. Nearly all universities required professors to have a German-style Ph.D., but the degree itself was now “imperiled by its popularity.” Nearly all universities “insist that all their teachers shall be doctors, oblivious to the fact that all doctors are not teachers.” There were vast research projects and publications, which did yield real advances in knowledge, Slosson admitted, and much of it proved to be valuable to a modern industrial society. But this resulted in the professor’s alienation from students, and made the educational experience drab and lifeless. A troop of students “file into the classroom, sit down, remove the expression from their faces, open their notebooks on the broad chair arms, and receive,” Slosson observed. “The instructor tries to provoke them into a semblance of life by extravagant and absurd statements, by insults, by dazzling paradoxes, by extraneous jokes. No use; they just take it down.”<sup>17</sup> Was this not exactly what the great educational reformers were trying to overcome – lack of student interest, irrelevant educations, and bland uniformity? Weren’t these all the things that Charles Eliot, Daniel Coit Gilman and their legions of followers believed they were overcoming as they deconstructed the old-time liberal arts degree?

Columnist W.H. Whicker gave a similar account in 1929 following his visit to a several American colleges, where he observed that they had in fact become pathetic imitations of their former selves, creating an aura of scholarship that was really quite a fraud. The typical professor – a “doctor of dullness,” as he called him – “has set himself up as an authority on some ancient field of learning.” It is, inevitably, a narrow field, but at least it is *his* – and instead of letting it fill him with wonder and awe, he dominates it. He is published in journals and respected for his research which brings prestige to the university. But for the modern scholar,

personality, experience, manhood, health – all are waived for the Doctorate. As a consequence, the student is compelled for credit to listen to the spiritless, colorless talk of professors of journalism who could not live through a week before a newspaper desk, professors of painting who cannot paint, professors of music who have never composed the simplest melody, and professors of English who cannot write, who are not interested in writing, and who have never had enough contact with life to know even the modern idioms and figures of their trade.

It was no surprise, then, that young men were primarily focused on football and young women with sorority teas. Going to college was really about socializing and distraction, a four-year delay on adulthood. The only real work was in a few exams to cram for and a few haphazardly written essays – a small price to pay for all the fun that could be had. Such things, Whicker wrote, is “wisdom itself.”<sup>18</sup>

Other critics were alarmed by the kind of elitism that was taking shape in American universities, especially the more prestigious ones. While professors retreated into their research, the students focused on clubs and fraternities – the pipe-smoking, rite-performing, late night secret societies where college students took solemn oaths and formed pacts of loyalty, thus forming a new social elite. Owen Johnson, the Yale graduate who wrote the popular and revealing novel, *Stover at Yale*, reported that all notions of university enlightenment had long been replaced by “snobbery.” “In the whole struggle for human liberty there is nothing finer than the history of the university as an ideal,” Johnson said in an interview with the *New York Times*,

---

<sup>17</sup> Edward Slosson, *Great American Universities* (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1910), 492; 520.

<sup>18</sup> W.H. Whicker, “Doctors of Dullness,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 228, No. 1 (Jul., 1929): 115-116; 119.

listing the good that universities had always done throughout history in the face of bigotry and occasional mob violence. The recent university reforms had not resulted in an institution better fit to serve American society, but one that produced quite the opposite kind of person: the snob. “The aim of the average youth who goes to the great universities and the aim of those who send him there are not that he shall acquire knowledge, but that he shall make the friends most useful to him.” Universities, especially the prestigious ones, now produced graduates who were not distinguished by who they were, but who they knew. The new snob class showed “contempt for learning,” meaning that “they are ashamed of the thing that they are supposed to be.”<sup>19</sup> What was worse, all of this became the basis for alumni networks that were quite superior to ordinary American life, and in that, a serious threat to democracy.

But by far the most revealing account came from Robert Benchley who graduated from Harvard in 1912, and wrote a painfully honest essay, “What College Did to Me.” Where Johnson saw snobbish elites, Benchley saw only cheeky frat boys who knew how to game the system. “My courses were all selected with a very definite aim in view, with a serious purpose in mind – no classes before eleven in the morning or after two-thirty in the afternoon, and nothing on Saturday at all. That was my slogan. On that rock was my education built.” Benchley was only one student, yet the source of his sarcasm was something many students shared, and which he names: the “Elective System.” He listed the classes that made up his meandering and pointless curriculum – a botany class devoted exclusively to flowers, an English class focused only on sixteenth century poets, a music class on the clavichord, and a fine art class that covered nothing more than Doric columns – all taught by professors who were clearly too focused on their narrow research and publications so that they could offer nothing broader and more substantial. As a result, what did Benchley even remember learning? The law of diminishing returns means that “after a certain margin is reached returns begin to diminish”; “the ancient Phoenicians were really Jews”; “Queen Elizabeth was not above suspicion”; “Marcus Aurelius had a son who turned out to be a bad boy”; and “Charlemagne either died or was born or did something with the Holy Roman Empire in 800.” Above all, though, the Harvard graduate had learned that “almost everything you need to know about a subject is in the encyclopedia.”<sup>20</sup>

Hence, the experience of classical liberal learning, the transformation of heart and mind envisioned by Harvard’s Puritan founders, the preparation of graduates for the awesome duty of self-government – all of this had been abolished for a system that produced only powerful aristocrats, cheeky frat boys, or a mixture of the two.

What had gone wrong? Perhaps the old classical curriculum was antiquated and irrelevant to the needs of modern faculty and students, but was it better to be so adrift in a sea of specialties? Could anything redeem universities from this situation?

## II. Enlisting Universities in the Service of Democracy

All of these ideas and reforms were *within* colleges and universities, and all of the decisions were made by men who had spent their entire career in academia. But what did these reforms mean for the world outside? Would it, as Eliot hoped, form an “intelligent public

---

<sup>19</sup> Owen Johnson quoted in “Danger in the Snobbery of American Colleges,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1912.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Benchley, “What College Did to Me” (1927), in *Essential Documents in the History of American Higher Education*, edited by John R. Thelin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 258-262.

opinion” which was the “one indispensable condition of social progress”?<sup>21</sup> Would “exact knowledge” support more breakthrough discoveries and inventions like “steam locomotion, telegraphy, telephony, photography, and electric lighting,” contributing to the general wellbeing of society?<sup>22</sup> In some ways, by appealing to a diverse array of interests, American universities joined the many other institutions of the nineteenth century, whether religious or political or cultural, in becoming deeply democratized. But in other ways, it created a whole new set of elites who, at best, were distinguished by their expertise – or, at worst, by their snobbery. The purpose of the university in relation to its own faculty and students was one thing, but its relationship with American society – and particularly American democracy – was quite another issue.

The old-time colleges had faced similar struggles, but they remained far more certain of their shared purpose. Their graduates did serve democracy, but as trusted gentlemen, or elites who would be distinguished by a certain condition of character and mind that made them especially fit to serve the republic. Perhaps the old college’s day had come and gone – or maybe they were wrong from the start about democracy’s need for truly wise and virtuous elites. But could modern universities really replace them and maintain the same relationship with the American people? Was exact knowledge really as valuable as sound wisdom? Could expertise serve society as well as virtue?

## A. In Search of Experts

It was this question that drew the attention of the progressive movement. Progressivism in general was concerned with attuning all institutions, laws and practices to history, which was itself an organic, developing, living thing – and its greatest enemy was those traditional practices that were too firm to allow history to move forward. The direction of history was clear, at least when the progressive movement was in its prime: the goal of history was a vibrant American-style democracy, the small township operating on a national scale.

But democracy came with the risk of faction and mob-like behavior. The old Constitution managed this perennial danger through representation by elected officials who worked within a system of checks and balances. But the new modern, progressive democracy promised something far better. The greatness of democracy could be more fully discovered and unleashed with the help of the administrative state, as progressives envisioned it, which served to both reflect the will of the people better than representatives had, and also would guide democracy into its best form. The most immediate task was the use of regulatory commissions entrusted with overseeing private industries. But once that was complete, the future promised a “Great Community,” or the full exercise of the “right of the people to rule.”

To reach that end, the administrative state would need to be staffed by a benevolent new class of elites who were distinguished by their scientific expertise, but also the public-spiritedness to see themselves as servants of the people. They were to do the most sophisticated statistics and write the most objective case studies, but do it with the greatest sensitivity – a class of servant-elites.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Addresses at the inauguration of Charles William Eliot*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> D.C. Gilman, *The Benefits which Society derives from Universities*, 33-34. This, of course, was laughable for the great inventors: it had not been exact science that produced the most of these inventions, but the inventors’ own trial and error, great risks of time and money, and, above all the desire to make a fortune.

The experts were out there, many of them holding Ph.D.'s and socially valuable knowledge. But they were often lost in the crowd and unable to gain the attention of the masses since they lacked experience in elections, parties, and the usual ways of making policy. Many found it much safer to stay cloistered in the university. "A gulf does exist in the country between individual excellence and effective popular influence," as Herbert Croly put it in his *Promise of American Life*, the great manifesto of American progressivism. "Many excellent specialists exercise a very small amount of influence, and many individuals who exercise apparently a great deal of influence are conspicuously lacking in any kind of excellence." How could Americans bridge the gulf that existed between public-spirited elites and the democracy that needed them? How could we draw the scholar out of the academy to offer his insights without forcing him through the drudgery of winning an election or putting up with parliamentary politics?

Enter the university graduate: "As soon as any young man appears whose ideals are perched a little higher than those of his neighbors... he should apparently be immediately taken at his own valuation and loaded with rewards and opportunities," Croly wrote. "The public should take off its hat and ask him humbly to step into the limelight and show himself off for the popular edification," by offering them "the very meat and wine of the mind."<sup>23</sup> It was these promising young experts who would receive appointments to administrative positions and make scientific rules that would govern a good society – not by preventing abuse of power as the Constitution did, but by simply granting that power to the right kind of people.

Those people, Croly explained, "had to depend, not upon mere energy, untutored enthusiasm, and good-will," – i.e., the ways of conventional politicians – "but upon careful training and single-minded devotion to a special task, and at the same time proper provision had to be made for coordinating the results of this highly specialized work." If an expert was well-trained, "his individuality tended to disappear in his work," Croly argued; "his interests became those of a group."<sup>24</sup>

The great progressive plan, then, was that universities were to become institutions that housed departments dedicated to a new set of disciplines, which had not yet been fully appreciated: the social sciences. Economics had established itself, but only as a part of political economy; political science was a mixture of history and philosophy; and sociology hovered between the disciplines, and tended to be the favorite of utopian visionaries. Those who took these disciplines seriously, including their founders, did not believe any of them were "sciences" at all, but arts useful for therapy and methods of social control. But for the progressives, the serious study of the social sciences really could bring human intellect to new heights of political and social authority. If breakthrough discoveries in the natural sciences could bring marvelous new methods to agriculture and engineering, why couldn't universities do the same for an array of social and political problems? Here, the university would be saved from its inner malaise, and also become the source of big-hearted bureaucrats.

The model for this was, as always, the German university. But while other educational reformers looked to Germany as the land of academic perfection, progressives saw what a deliberate connection they had with the Prussian civil service that used to serve German society. Richard Ely, for instance, was one of many Johns Hopkins faculty who studied in Germany and came home with a Ph.D. in economics, and also with a new educational mission. Under a variety of specialized social sciences, "advanced students" at Johns Hopkins and like-minded institutions would take classes on "the best methods of carrying out proposed reform" – leaving

---

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 442-443.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

aside courses on chemistry, mathematics, or philosophy and taking instead “Principles and Practice of Administration with special reference to Civil Service problems and Municipal Reform.” “It is safe to predict,” Ely concluded, that Johns Hopkins “will continue to satisfy in increasing degree the need of the country for a true university.”<sup>25</sup>

The “German method” Ely wrote “is simply the common-sense method.” He saw the university in terms of what a modern society and administrative government expects of it. “It is a function of the modern university to offer instruction in all branches of economics, political science, and sociology.” With great candor, he announced that it is the “function of the university to train experts for every branch of the public service.” In this, there was no distinction between a public and private university: all had the same essential function. By housing specialized social sciences and training graduates in those fields, universities gave their great gift to American democracy. They were “doing as much as anything else to bring in the city of the future, which we are eagerly awaiting.”<sup>26</sup>

The social sciences were as narrow in focus as other disciplines, but since they touched so directly on social realities – poverty, industrial problems, and the perennial need for “social justice” – they commanded far more respect and seriousness from undergraduates. By examining those injustices, social science both gave students the tools for empirically interpreting and documenting social realities and stoked their deepest feelings of pity and compassion. The urgency of social wrongs gave purpose to the fractured education that universities now dealt in. On a deeper level, social sciences gave a sense of shame to those who were indifferent to what they learned, and fulfilled the desire for direction that comes with being young – or, if nothing else, the way to feel so much smarter than one’s elders.

Ely spoke from his own experience teaching political economy at Johns Hopkins and other schools. “The universities of our country are full of energetic, capable young men, eager for public service and ready to devote themselves to careful preparation for the various branches of the civil service.” Even with all of the doubts about “the outcome of special preparation” that followed the Eliot-Gilman reforms of American higher education, “there is a daily increasing number of young men devoting themselves to those studies which prepare them for a public career.” At the same time, the demand for such highly-trained civil servants was growing in municipal, state and federal government; legislative bodies increasingly realized the need for special commissions and regulatory agencies, and they knew that the greatest improvements in recent years were “due to university men, to whom their work is not a mere routine, but to whom it is intellectually interesting because it is seen in its wider relations, and to whom it is a stimulus because it offers opportunities for social service.”<sup>27</sup>

What would check the use of government power put into the hands of such men? “Efficient and enlightened” civil servants, Ely believed, did not need to be checked because their education in the social sciences simply made them good. Consider their studies – the meticulousness involved, the single-minded devotion to research and problem-solving based on objective data and scientific thinking – things had much the same effect on the mind as the natural scientist designing and running experiments: he had no ambition or avarice or any of the self-interest that could corrupt his task; he therefore became exactly the kind of person who could be given absolute power to serve the public good because the idea of abusing that trust had been purged out of him by his studies. The social sciences could take Owen Johnson’s snobs and

---

<sup>25</sup> Richard Ely, “The Johns Hopkins University,” *Christian Union* 26, 8 (Aug. 24, 1882): 146.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Ely, *The Coming City* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1902), pp. 51; 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Robert Benchley's pranksters and turn them into something more like angels wielding statistics.<sup>28</sup>

## B. Universities in the Nation's Service

Among the more inspired young men of the times was Woodrow Wilson, a graduate student of Johns Hopkins who studied with Ely as well as with historians Herbert Baxter Adams and J. Franklin Jameson, who are largely responsible for conceiving the academic study of the social sciences and developing it out of their own disciplines. Though better known for his writings on Congress and the Constitution or his theories of liberal internationalism, and, of course, his extraordinary presidency, a major part of Wilson's thinking involved the role of the university in supplying the state with necessary administrative experts who would serve the public better than conventional politicians. He claimed to have found the all-important link between the university and the real world: the discipline of political science.

Wilson made this explicit in an 1886 speech at Byrn Mawr College where he taught before going to Princeton. At the time, many colleges had accepted German-style reforms, but had not yet discovered how they "might be a great direct aid to government." Like all specialized disciplines, the study of political science "might do more than merely prepare men to understand *anything*. It might give them some preliminary drill in the practical thought of this great *particular* thing, government." Yet, in colleges across the land, "there is missing a professor of politics," he said. Following Eliot's reforms, there was "instruction almost everywhere, of one sort or another, in history, and in many institutions instruction in political economy, jurisprudence, and constitutional law," among a variety of other subjects. There was also great interest in important political questions of the day. But there was not yet the one thing every true university really needed: a professor – or, better yet, a department – of political science.

The study of politics as it existed depended far more on practice than theory, and it was driven more by prejudice than logic – meaning it wasn't a "study" at all, but an experience for those who were elected to public office. The true study of politics, though, would take both things seriously: the duty of the political science professor, Wilson explained, was "to expound government as an historical development and to dissect it as a living organism."<sup>29</sup> This was, of course, classic Wilsonian rhetoric that appears throughout his writings: politics was best understood in evolutionary terms; government was an organism that grew by adaptation to external forces; and, like any living thing, the whole system had to continue evolving in order to flourish – overcoming those practices and institutions that prevented change.

---

<sup>28</sup> Charles Eliot had originally only been focused on the elective system, based on an educational philosophy that was concerned with faculty and students alone who sought to make the university into their own unique research and learning experience. But once progressivism turned the university into a public service institution, he changed his tune. Soon after his retirement in 1909, he observed that the role of academics on regulatory commissions and as expert advisers for legislative committees had grown rapidly, and it would no doubt continue "more and more as the people learn that the only safe way under modern conditions is to entrust public business to experts, and to take the advice of experts on all new projects for the promotion of the public welfare." All conventional legislation, by comparison, was written "with much waste of time and effort, or remain to the last obscure or defective." Charles Eliot, "The University Man: Where and How He May Contribute to the Nation's Progress," *New York Times*, September 18, 1911.

<sup>29</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *On the Study of Politics: An Address to Princeton Alumni*, March, 1886, in *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 110.



With politics understood in this way, the greatest gift of political science was not only a better understanding of how democracy developed into what it is, but the methods that opened up new possibilities for what it *could be* – especially with the application of administrative science. Wilson acknowledged that administration was a foreign thing that would have trouble finding acceptance in the United States. “In trying to instruct our own public opinion, we are dealing with a pupil apt to think itself quite sufficiently instructed beforehand,” attached as it was to the Constitution with its checks and balances that stood in the way of an expansive administrative state. But that did not mean we couldn’t “Americanize it.” Americans, Wilson believed, could take the same tools used by kings and emperors of the old world and train it to serve the new sovereign: the American people. Who could reveal this to the American people, and help them truly see themselves? It might be a long and complicated process involving a new kind of presidential leadership to win the public’s trust; but before that could happen, he wrote, “no college of respectability can afford to do without a well-filled chair of political science.”<sup>30</sup>

The study of politics had been around for centuries, but it was usually more concerned with explaining mankind’s political nature than finding solutions to political problems. Plato and Aristotle, along with their medieval followers, could only rehash the same concept of the soul, since they had no concept of the state; modern political thought, beginning with Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, were more solution-oriented, but they still assumed too much was fixed and unchanging in human nature and the way it shaped political life. “If we are to put in new boilers and to mend the fires which drive our governmental machinery, we must not leave the old wheels and joints and valves and bands to creak and buzz and clatter on as best they may at bidding of the new force,” Wilson wrote. “We must put in new running parts wherever there is the least lack of strength or adjustment.” This was possible thanks to the civil service and the exam necessary for joining it. In short, the political science major would ensure a country governed by “public-spirited instruments of just government.”<sup>31</sup>

Wilson brought this teaching with him to Princeton University, where he taught for several years before being appointed president in 1902. Education had long been a matter of private contract between tuition-paying parents and the young recipient of a degree; but now, “[t]he service of institutions of learning is not private but public,” he announced in his inaugural address. “It is plain what the nation needs as its affairs grow more and more complex and its interests begin to touch the ends of the earth. It needs efficient and enlightened men. The universities of the country must take part in supplying them.”<sup>32</sup>

This idea spread even to the large state universities, many of them founded only to supply better farming techniques and industrial methods. Another president, Charles Van Hise, called the university “the soul of the State.” He agreed with the Hopkins model that the university’s greatest duty is to “advance knowledge” – but more specifically, it should advance “those lines of knowledge which concern the development of the State... it is their duty to assist in carrying knowledge to the people.” With such a role, the university had a fundamental duty to go public and address the radically changing conditions of national life. “The progress of the nation will continue,” he wrote, claiming that such things were inevitable. “The old ideals and ideas will be modified. The human race is ever moving upward and onward.” Students had to be prepared for

---

<sup>30</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration,” *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jun., 1887): 202; 215.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.

<sup>32</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Princeton for the Nation’s Service: An Address Delivered on the Occasion of his Inauguration as President of Princeton University*, October 25, 1802 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1803), 3.

this, since “no advance has ever been made without suffering; such is the cost of progress.”<sup>33</sup> The university’s duty for both faculty, students and the public, was to predict outcomes of major changes and help the nation cope, but also thrive in a whole new way. These are “are above all the times when the university should be most active in the guidance of public opinion... The nation and the States have a right to demand of the university expert service in valuing a public utility,” he wrote – and, sure enough it “has equally the right to demand expert service in politics and sociology.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion: University Social Sciences and the Civil Service Today**

For all his insistence on the need for expertise in the service of democracy, Woodrow Wilson showed a surprising desire to see a truly liberal education in American universities. In this, he stood apart from university reformers like Eliot and Gilman and even his fellow progressives like Croly and Ely. Even as Wilson dedicated Princeton to the “nation’s service” by supplying competent and highly-skilled public servants, he lamented the “neglect of the general into which we have been led by our eager pursuit of the particular” due to the frantic pursuit of “the German fashion” he saw overtaking universities everywhere. Students, it turned out, still needed “general studies,” as Wilson called them, which would provide the student with “enlightenment and edification” and “schooling of his spirit.”<sup>35</sup> He insisted that there really ought to be a core curriculum necessary for a truly human education, which a diverse and confused set of electives could not provide. But Wilson’s revelation came too late, and, what was worse, he seemed unable to say exactly what those “general studies” should be.

Today, the social sciences hold precisely that position in higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the social sciences – namely sociology, political science, and economics (leaving aside psychology) – were the third largest set of undergraduate degrees awarded by colleges and universities, following business and nursing, in the 2016-2017 school year.<sup>36</sup> Various sociology and political science departments describe themselves in universal, comprehensive ways. They promise to give students the tools for doing highly objective social research, but also use morally loaded words like “justice” and “well-being,” alongside challenging notions of “authority,” “organization,” and, of course, “power” – things that do not require any kind of objective moral improvement, but only “change.” Princeton University’s department of sociology has “faculty mentors working on some of the most pressing social issues of the day: inequality, poverty, immigration, race and ethnic relations, discrimination, health and well-being, [sic] and religion in public life.”<sup>37</sup> The University of

---

<sup>33</sup> Charles Van Hise, “The Place of the University in Democracy,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1916.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Princeton for the Nation’s Service*, 6. Wilson was apparently consistent in this view. Even as an undergraduate in 1877, he pointed out in a student newspaper that “the mere student works with the spirit of a slave” by pursuing a narrow subject directed toward some other end; the scholar, on the other hand, “seeks wisdom because he is inspired with a love for it.” Though the modern scholar may research and teach within a narrow discipline, “the scholar who is versed in all literature is capable of drawing apt illustrations from science and art.” Woodrow Wilson, “True Scholarship,” in *Essential Writings and Speeches*, 106-107.

<sup>36</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Undergraduate Degree Fields, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cta.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cta.asp) (updated May 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Princeton University’s Department of Sociology: Undergraduate Program <https://sociology.princeton.edu/undergraduate-program>

Michigan’s department promises that the sociology major “will provide you with the tools you need to understand today’s most vexing social problems,” by offering “skills for thinking critically, collecting and interpreting data, and making evidence-based arguments.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Columbia’s political science department “seeks to understand the exercise of power in a variety of settings.”<sup>39</sup> The University of Virginia’s department “enables students to approach life after college with a critical eye, an analytic edge” – but also “sensitivity to the concerns of people all over the world.”<sup>40</sup>

Non-majors in other fields are still required to take general education classes in the social sciences, which are treated as the courses that address the truly foundational human things. The classes are usually large surveys taught by adjunct professors designed only to meet “gen ed” requirements, but the subjects themselves are often designed to meet civic competence requirements deemed necessary for all students. Hence, the progressive vision for the social sciences in education and its displacement of the old-time classical curriculum has been a tremendous success, at least *within* higher education.

But, we are left asking, where are the vast armies of angelic social scientists staffing government agencies? What has become of the university-government symbiosis in the original progressive vision? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), sociology majors are practically non-existent in the federal civil service, and only 13% work for state and municipal governments; 31% stay in higher education; 21% go into elementary and high school teaching; and the rest have unrelated careers.<sup>41</sup> Political science majors do better: 48% work for the federal government (excluding the Post Office); 27% offer professional, scientific, and technical services; 7% go into non-profit work; and only 7% have unrelated jobs.<sup>42</sup> Those social science majors who work for the government are more often expected to perform duties unrelated to their field, and compete with those who studied “technical, trade, vocational, or business school curriculum.”<sup>43</sup> The BLS report on federal jobs does list political science and sociology among its preferred majors for employees, but they are vastly outnumbered by positions that require more technical skills – organizational leadership, managerial skills, and computer science.<sup>44</sup>

So where does this leave the social sciences in the American university? If social science majors are no longer taking the administrative state by storm, they appear to have returned to the helm of the liberal arts. The content may be different – quantitative and qualitative research skills are a far cry from Greek and Latin – but the *function* of social science has become the same as the classical curriculum of the old-time college. It is widely accepted as the study of the most essential human things.

But if the social sciences are considered liberal arts, how exactly do they “liberate”? According to UVA sociologist Christian Smith, the field is “devoted to showing that the ordinary world of everyday life as it seems to most people is not really what is going on – in short, to

---

<sup>38</sup> University of Michigan: Sociology Department <https://lsa.umich.edu/soc/undergraduates.html>

<sup>39</sup> Columbia University: Department of Political Science <https://polisci.columbia.edu/content/considering-political-science-major>

<sup>40</sup> University of Virginia, Political Science Department, <https://politics.virginia.edu/undergraduate-program/>

<sup>41</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, April 12, 2019 <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/sociologists.htm#tab-3>

<sup>42</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, April 12, 2019 <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/political-scientists.htm#tab-3>

<sup>43</sup> USAJobs.gov, “What is a qualifying educational institution or program?”

<https://www.usajobs.gov/Help/faq/application/qualifications/qualifying-education/>

<sup>44</sup> Olivia Crosby, *How to get a job in the Federal Government, Occupational Outlook Quarterly* (Summer 2004).

debunking appearances.” What could be more appealing to the nineteen-year-old mind? It is perceived as an initiation into the circle of right-thinking people, who take everything they have inherited and cast it off as so much nonsense – to treat all of reality as a grand conspiracy against the liberation-seeking individual. But here, the “furniture of the mind” is not trained to receive knowledge, nor is the ultimate reality we are meant to grasp anything metaphysical or spiritual; it is “better understood through the sociological reinterpretations,” which find nothing more absolute than “resource exchanges, status struggles, coping mechanisms, gender inequalities, class interests, social control, etc.”<sup>45</sup>

But, along with all of the statistics, empirical case studies, and sophisticated theories, and despite all of the atheistic tendencies of sociology’s founders, Smith argues that the discipline maintains a deeply spiritual sense of purpose. “Contemporary American sociology is, rightly understood, actually a profoundly *sacred* project at heart,” Smith claims. “Sociology today is in fact animated by *sacred* impulses, driven by *sacred* commitments and serves a *sacred* project.”<sup>46</sup> Though the content was different, the old-time college professor would no doubt describe his curriculum in much the same way. All of this shows the enduring legacy of the progressive era, and its attempt to recover an underlying sense of purpose for the university, and it seems to have come full circle. Social science deems itself “the whole of knowledge.” What this means for our students, for ourselves, and for the civilization we inherit and pass on deserves our greatest attention, and hopefully our most serious efforts at reform.

---

<sup>45</sup> Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ix-x.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*