Position Paper

Foundations of Wisdom, Virtue, and Liberty: Restoring Liberal Arts in the Core Curriculum

Center for Academic
Faithfulness & Flourishing

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Foundations of Wisdom, Virtue, and Liberty: Restoring Liberal Arts in the Core Curriculum

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Executive Summary

Increasing declines in public confidence and student enrollment suggest that prevalent approaches to undergraduate education have lost much of their currency. These developments present an existential threat to Christian higher education, whose unique mission depends upon successfully delivering a distinctive undergraduate experience rooted in the Christian worldview. In response to these challenges, this position paper argues for a recommitment to academia's traditional civilization-building mission of cultivating wisdom, virtue, and civic responsibility in students through robust liberal arts education. After tracing historical debates regarding the role and position of the liberal arts in undergraduate curriculum, the author explains why various institutional responses to the current moment have proven inadequate. The paper concludes by exploring strategies for restoring the purpose of Christian higher education, including placing a greater priority on the core curriculum, elevating the position and role of theology in the educational program, replacing training in critique with cultivation of Christian liberty, and reinforcing key distinctions between undergraduate and graduate degree models.

About the Author

David Rainbow is an Associate Professor of History at Colorado Christian University. An award-winning classroom teacher and expert on Russian history and literature, Dr. Rainbow previously served in the Honors College at the University of Houston. His academic work has been supported by fellowships and grants from a wide range of organizations, including Columbia University's Harriman Institute, the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia, the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, the American Councils for International Education, and the U.S. Department of State. Dr. Rainbow holds a B.A. in History from Fresno Pacific University, an M.A. in History from Drew University, and a Ph.D. in Modern European and Russian History from New York University.

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Director's Preface

Scholars, administrators, and policymakers have debated the purpose and role of general education in the undergraduate curriculum throughout the history of American higher education. Most recently, these debates have centered primarily on the economic value of the liberal arts, as concerns over runaway college costs, mounting student loan debt, and unemployment rates for recent graduates have taken center stage. The result in many cases has been the winnowing of the core curriculum to minimize requirements deemed impractical, such as courses in the humanities, which critics deride for lengthening a student's time-to-degree while adding little to the credential's economic premium. And yet, recent growth in Classical Christian Education and homeschooling suggests that the rising generation of students most predisposed to enrolling in Christian higher education is likely to value a robust core curriculum, a phenomenon calling into question the conventional wisdom of the past decade that promoted slimmed-down requirements.

Indeed, the shifting currents of student preference highlight how financial concerns have pushed aside the central purpose of core curriculum: achieving institutional mission. The core curriculum delivers the signature educational experience through which each college makes its own unique imprint upon every graduate, regardless of major. Moreover, the core curriculum serves as the chief mechanism for academically operationalizing the Christian college's raison d'être: cultivating a Christian worldview. As confidence in American higher education declines and market preferences turn toward finding value in permanence, the Christian academy should be well positioned to reap an enrollment harvest. But what of those institutions who adapted to gain the prior world only to lose their curricular souls?

The following position paper by David Rainbow addresses this question and proposes solutions for both recovering the purpose of Christian higher education and restoring the liberal arts to their rightful place within the educational program. He traces the movements and perspectives that have shaped the core curriculum since the founding of Harvard College in 1636 and explains how present challenges to undergraduate education are largely the consequence of overemphasizing practicality and credentialism. Against this backdrop, Rainbow offers four strategies to help campus officials reconsider the contours of their own core curriculum and chart a way forward that honors institutional mission while being mindful of the current moment. My hope is that his work will spur meaningful conversations across Christian higher education as its leaders seek to balance institutional persistence with institutional purpose.

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Introduction: Foundations of Wisdom, Virtue, and Liberty

Undergraduate education is in trouble. The public's confidence in its value has plummeted in recent years, and so too have enrollments.[1] The situation presents a rare—and likely temporary—opportunity for significant curricular reform. However, when faced with external threats, many colleges and universities engage in half-measures or pedagogical gimmicks. While such superficial performative acts may have satisfied critics in the past, their efficacy can no longer be assumed. Given the widespread public discontentment over higher education, it is evident that only those committed to real reform will survive the coming winnowing.

Individual colleges can restore confidence in higher education to the extent they are able to recommit to higher education's traditional civilization-building mission: cultivating wisdom, virtue, and civic responsibility in students.[2] A growing number of institutions of higher education—from large state universities to brand new "micro-colleges"—are striving

1 Jessica Blake, "Doubts About Value Are Deterring College Enrollment," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 13, 2024, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/retention/2024/03/13/doubts-about-value-are-deterring-college-enrollment; P. Jesse Rine, "A Guide for Our Moment," *American Reformer*, October 30, 2024, https://americanreformer.org/2024/10/a-guide-for-our-moment/.

2 P. Jesse Rine, "Not Whether, But Which," *American Reformer*, March 4, 2024, https://americanreformer.org/2024/03/not-whether-but-which/.

Only those committed to real reform will survive the coming winnowing.

in different ways to do this,[3] and others are being taken to task for insufficiently pursuing such steps.[4] More and more people are calling, as cultural commentator John Seel recently did, for "colleges and universities [to] confront the truth: the era of their assumed authority is over."[5]

Christian colleges are hardly immune to the crisis of public confidence. Yet they are also uniquely positioned to lead a recommitment to the traditional purpose of a university due to the historic and theological ties between liberal arts education and Christian civilization. The Christian liberal arts tradition stems from the ancient idea that the pursuit of truth is a universal and obtainable aim, that the study of different objects is interrelated even if varied, and that knowing the truth sets men free.[6] A primary purpose of Christian universities is to preserve and disseminate knowledge of the truth derived from the integrated study of the natural world and humanity. John Henry Newman's nineteenth-century lectures on "The Idea of a University" delineate these in terms of "the book of nature [which] is called Science, [and] the book of man [which] is called Literature." According to Newman, these two "nearly constitute the subject-matter of Liberal Education."[7]

The distinctively Christian component of higher education is that the knowledge of these two "books" is premised on theological knowledge of their Creator. As Newman puts it: "In a word, Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge."[8] Thus, undergraduates who receive a solid educational foundation in the Christian liberal arts will have the tools necessary to truly understand our world and its interconnectedness and therefore will

3 Classically oriented civics institutes have recently been established at several large universities, beginning with the founding in 2016 of Arizona State University's School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, which has provided a model for other schools (Paul Carrese, "A New Birth of Freedom in Higher Education: Civic Institutes at Public Universities," American Enterprise Institute, https://www.jackmillercenter.org/news/a-new-birth-of-freedom-in-higher-education). In 2024, Stanford University and the Hoover Institution inaugurated the Alliance for Civics in the Academy, involving numerous leading universities (https://www.hoover.org/research-teams/alliance-civics-academy). A small but lively collection of liberal arts universities are reviving (e.g., New College of Florida)—or starting from scratch (e.g., Ralston College, University of Austin)—a model of education committed to classical principles of the liberal arts. Still smaller "micro-colleges" are proliferating as well, with curricula based on classical liberal arts sometimes combined with vocational emphases (e.g., Gutenberg College, Hildegard College, Excel College).

4 See, for example, Christopher F. Rufo and Ryan Thorpe, "Inside Harvard's Discrimination Machine," *City Journal*, May 14, 2025, https://www.city-journal.org/article/harvard-university-discrimination-dei-hiring-trump.

5 John Seel, "The Great Higher Education Reset," Aaron Renn (blog), May 20, 2025, https://www.aaronrenn.com/p/higher-education-reset.

6 See John 8:31–32.

7 John Henry Newman, *The Uses of Knowledge: Selections from The Idea of the University*, ed. Leo L. Ward (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1948), 6.

8 Newman, *Uses of Knowledge*, 3. The supposition that religious and secular knowledge, or faith and reason, are sharply divided is a relatively recent one and stands in contrast to the long history of Christians' pursuit of truth in both "the book of nature" (i.e., science) and "the book of man" (i.e., literature). For a discussion of the integration of faith and the pursuit of knowledge in the Christian tradition, see David S. Dockery and Timothy George, *The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

prove more, not less, successful in building businesses, contributing to culture, positively utilizing new technology, participating in politics, and generating wealth in ways that strengthen society in the long run.

The liberal arts should advance Christian virtue and liberty, a goal that Christian colleges are uniquely suited to accomplish.

One effective means of buttressing Christian colleges is to focus (or refocus, in some cases) on the centrality of a core liberal arts curriculum—an integrated set of courses in theology, history, politics, literature, philosophy, science, and art that are required for all students—for the cultivation of wise, virtuous, and responsible graduates capable of pursuing various vocations. A strong liberal arts core curriculum for the purpose of educating truth-seekers in theology and the natural and human sciences can help restore the university's role as an institution that strengthens society by creating free people capable of exercising Christian freedom. Reclaiming this role will assist in arresting the decline in the quality and reputation of higher education. The liberal arts should advance Christian virtue and liberty, a goal that Christian colleges are uniquely suited to accomplish.

Below is a brief review of historical debates over the role of liberal arts in undergraduate education; the reader will note that the decline in liberal arts education is not something that happened overnight. This review is followed by a consideration of some of the current challenges faced by colleges and the institutional responses that have proven inadequate. The paper closes with several broad recommendations for restoring a vision of undergraduate education founded on the Christian liberal arts tradition, including suggestions for implementation. Institutional character and history vary across American Christian higher education—a great strength of the sector—which means that the teaching of core curriculum will naturally vary according to local context. However, the goal of restoring and/or strengthening the teaching of universal knowledge through a recentered liberal arts education is a worthy pursuit for all Christian colleges and universities, regardless of institutional particularities.

History and Philosophy of the Core Curriculum

Debates over the role and nature of the liberal arts have been a mainstay of American higher education for hundreds of years. The early American colonies inherited the Oxbridge model of higher education (that is, the precedents set by the University of Oxford and Cambridge University in England), which had prioritized study of the classical liberal arts—grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—since their emergence in the Middle Ages.[9] America's educated elites were shaped by classical virtues and Protestant Christian political theology, which were mobilized in the late eighteenth century to justify revolution and institutionalize political independence.[10] Already during this time, however, some advocated moving away from classical liberal arts education toward more practical studies. Most famously, Benjamin Franklin designed the College of Pennsylvania (later the University of Pennsylvania) with a truncated classical liberal

9 P. Jesse Rine, *Meeting the Moment: Reconstituting Christian Higher Education for a New Era* (Greenville, SC: Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing, 2024), https://whitepapers.faithfulcolleges.org/Meeting-The-Moment-Reconstituting-Christian-Higher-Education-For-A-New-Era.pdf.

10 Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer, *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Gary L. Steward, *Justifying Revolution: The American Clergy's Argument for Political Resistance, 1750-1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

arts component in favor of newer disciplines, such as history, politics, trade and commerce, and natural philosophy, in response to the expansion of knowledge creation during the period.[11] America needed practically minded elites, according to Franklin, not more philosophers or grammarians.

Debates over the role and nature of the liberal arts have been a mainstay of American higher education for hundreds of years.

As the scope of higher education extended to include new and ostensibly more applied fields of study, the President and Fellows of Yale University issued a report in 1828 responding to growing disagreements across the country about the purpose and content of higher education. The report took a firm line in favor of distinguishing between classical liberal arts, on the one hand, and professional, mercantile, mechanical, or agricultural studies, on the other. It did not deny the importance of pursuing non-liberal arts education for a broader swathe of the population (a position supported by public opinion), but suggested that the college was not the place for it. "Why should we interfere with these valuable institutions? Why wish to take their business out of their hands? The college has its appropriate object, and they have theirs."[12] The object of college, the Yale report argued, was to "*lay the foundation of a superior education*," which "must be broad, and deep, and solid." This was for the purpose of "form[ing] in the student a proper *balance* of character."[13] A college degree, in this conception, was synonymous with a liberal arts education. *All* of the college curriculum was core.

Two developments in the second half of the nineteenth century pushed colleges in America away from the Yale report's vision of the liberal arts as comprising a necessary element of the curriculum. In 1862, the federal government granted proceeds from the sale of public lands for the purpose of building public state universities. These new "land-grant" institutions carried out their public mandate, in part, by tending toward career-oriented studies, especially in the agricultural and mechanical arts.[14] Land-grant universities retained electives in general education in the curriculum, but these were secondary in importance to the courses designed to train professionals.[15] Accelerating this trend, an influx of Americans returned from Germany having received doctorates of philosophy—new, highly specialized degrees in research—and took up many of

11 Clifton F. Conrad and Jean C. Wyer, "Liberal Education: A Dynamic Tradition," in *College and University Curriculum: Developing and Cultivating Programs of Study That Enhance Student Learning*, eds. Lisa R. Lattuca, Jennifer Grant Haworth, and Clifton F. Conrad (Boston, MA: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), 61.

12 "The Yale Report of 1828," in *College and University Curriculum*, eds. Lattuca, Haworth, and Conrad, 102.

13 "The Yale Report of 1828," 98-99.

14 V. James Mannoia Jr., *Christian Liberal Arts: An Education That Goes Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 96.

15 Joan S. Stark and Lisa R. Lattuca, "Recurring Debates About the College Curriculum," in *College and University Curriculum*, eds. Lattuca, Haworth, and Conrad, 70.

the growing number of professorships at the new universities.[16] Yale University awarded the first American doctorate in 1861, and Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876, was the first American university designed explicitly on the German research model, rather than the Oxbridge model of liberal arts education that had previously been the norm.[17] Other research universities followed suit.

A college degree, in this conception, was synonymous with a liberal arts education. *All* of the college curriculum was core.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, pre-professional courses of study in universities grew to include nursing, engineering, business, and others. Responding to the trend of ever-increasing specialization in undergraduate education, a committee at Harvard University published its own "philosophy of American education" in 1945. The statement, published as *General Education in a Free Society*, called for balance between the growing push for specialized, career-oriented education and "general education." It dispensed with the term "liberal arts"—the arts necessary to make men free—because of its association with slave-owning societies, which sharply distinguished between those who work and those who govern.[18]

According to Harvard's statement, modern society was such that no one could master every field of knowledge, yet mastery of any field of knowledge required specialization. The solution, then, was to cultivate "traits of mind" through general education necessary for all free citizens (covering "effective thinking, communication, the making of relevant judgments, and the discrimination of values"[19]) and, at the same time, to train specialists equipped for increasingly complex occupations. This was a middle ground between the empiricists, who advocated fact-based specialization, and the classical view, which held that "reason is a self-sufficient end."[20] The Harvard statement also justified general education as establishing a foundation for making practical decisions outside one's areas of expertise. The statement illustrated the point in the following way:

16 Over the course of the nineteenth century, more than nine thousand American students moved to Germany for advanced university training. Many of them received German Ph.D.s and returned home to become faculty at American universities (Conrad and Wyer, "Liberal Education," 62). In the nineteenth century, the only degree offered by the state-run German universities was the Ph.D. The German model of education, however influential, did not get transplanted into the United States without modification. Over time, the influence on higher education between the two countries became mutual (Anne J. MacLachlan, "Lost in Translation: The Flow of Graduate Education Models Between Germany and the United States," in *Nachwuchsförderung in der Wissenschaft*, ed. I. von Bülow (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2014), 82, https://cshe.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/vonbulow2014_anne_lost_in_translation_excerpt.pdf.

17 MacLachlan, "Lost in Translation," 81.

18 Harvard Committee, "Theory of General Education," in *College and University Curriculum*, eds. Lattuca, Haworth, and Conrad, 109–110.

19 Harvard Committee, "Theory of General Education," 119.

20 Harvard Committee, "Theory of General Education," 120. James L. Ratcliff, "Quality and Coherence in General Education," in *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Comprehensive Guide to Purposes, Structures, Practices, and Change*, eds. Jerry G. Gaff, James L. Ratcliff, and Associates (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 141.

> I must trust the advice of my doctor, my plumber, my lawyer, my radio repairman, and so on. Therefore I am in peculiar need of a kind of sagacity by which to distinguish the expert from the quack, and the better from the worse expert. From this point of view, the aim of general education may be defined as that of providing the broad critical sense by which to recognize competence in any field.[21]

Thus, general education could help you become a doctor, and choose a plumber, too. Ironically, for all the attention Harvard's report received, the philosophy of general education it espoused was never implemented there.[22]

In the ensuing decades, pedagogical debates morphed into even broader cultural debates. The boom in enrollment thanks to the post-WWII G.I. Bill combined with technological advances in industry and Cold War national security threats put more pressure on colleges to justify their curricula in pragmatic terms, which favored increasing specialization. Even if Aristotelian logic could help a graduate hire a good plumber, as the Harvard statement asserted, it was becoming more difficult to imagine, for some people, how a general education could help someone identify expertise in the age of nuclear fission and computers—let alone get anyone a job in those fields. The push for specialization grew.

As college enrollments increased in the 1960s and '70s, students demanded more choice in the curriculum, which contributed to universities adopting relaxed requirements that reduced the number of prescribed general education courses. Universities were under pressure (and incentivized through federal funding) to accommodate more students, and these students were often less well prepared than in previous generations. General education meant taking a smattering of courses distributed

21 Harvard Committee, "Theory of General Education," 111.

22 Lisa R. Lattuca, Jennifer Grant Haworth, and Clifton F. Conrad, "Introduction," in *College and University Curriculum*, eds. Lattuca, Haworth, and Conrad, xii.

across various domains.[23] More and more, an undergraduate degree was coming to be seen as a product: universities selling a la carte courses that students buy based on preference.

Pedagogical debates merged with culture wars, hitting a crescendo in the 1980s. A new dimension of the controversies came from the cultural left. Liberals advocated a pluralist and multicultural model of general education, lamenting the "Eurocentrism" of Western Civilization courses and arguing that education should point students toward multiple versions of "truth." Further to the left, theorists of "critical pedagogy" railed against the canon for its backwardness and "problematic" chauvinism. Leading voices such as Henry Giroux opposed advocates of liberal arts education such as Allan Bloom on the grounds that the traditional liberal arts and the Western canon were part of a "cultural inheritance" responsible for "social practices that exploit, infantilize, and oppress."[24] Both critical pedagogues and traditionalists pushed against the advocates of education-as-job-training, an approach leftists dubbed "neoliberalism."

The educational culture wars in the 1980s and '90s were a dispute over the big questions: What *are* truth, goodness, and justice? And what does this mean for how we educate? Instead of drawing on the past, as the traditionalists advocated, Giroux and other left-wing critics pushed for utopian educational reform that pointed forward. "This is, after all," Giroux wrote, "what university life should be all about: the politics and ethics of dreaming, dreaming a better future, and dreaming a new world."[25] This view, with no small measure of success, has cast the inheritance of Western Civilization and Christianity as hierarchical and anti-democratic, a tradition that should therefore be dismantled, not preserved.

An undergraduate degree was coming to be seen as a product: universities selling a la carte courses that students buy based on preference.

The preceding survey demonstrates that debates over American higher education have oscillated between breadth and specialization, tradition and utopia, and elitism and commercialism. The purpose and content of the liberal arts curriculum have often been at the center of the debates. And colleges today still bear the marks of these debates. The near-universal view that college is primarily about job training, and colleges' role (in the now-ascendant view of society) as de facto social justice training grounds, are indications of which perspectives have had more success.

23 The approach to general education as a "distributional plan of course selection" had been around since the late nineteenth century. It spread in the second half of the twentieth century because it is a pedagogical approach that harmonizes with the "bureaucratic and impersonal higher education system catering to rapidly increasing numbers of students" (Ratcliff, "Quality and Coherence," 145-146).

24 Henry A. Giroux, "Decentering the Canon: Refiguring Disciplinary and Pedagogical Boundaries," in *College and University Curriculum*, eds. Lattuca, Haworth, and Conrad, 234.

25 Giroux, "Decentering the Canon," 228.

Decades of expert attention to curricular reform[26] have nevertheless left American colleges ill-equipped to confront new existential challenges. Voluminous and varied, these challenges include the following: college is too expensive; the public has lost faith in its value; the population of eighteen-year-olds is declining; many institutions are shutting down; others face lawsuits for discriminating against majority populations; alumni of once-venerable institutions are withdrawing their support; and viable alternatives to four-year college education are growing. In the midst of these formidable challenges, Christian colleges should seize the opportunity to reevaluate their distinct contribution to our civilization and to do what is necessary to ensure that it lasts.

Debates over American higher education have oscillated between breadth and specialization, tradition and utopia, and elitism and commercialism.

26 Between 1987 and 1997, 90 percent of colleges undertook curricular reform, with little to show for it (Ratcliff, "Quality and Coherence," 142).

Current Challenges and Opportunities

Undergraduate education at large is in trouble today not so much because it is failing, but because it has succeeded. It has succeeded at shifting its purpose, as well as the public perception of its purpose, to be the selling of credentials for jobs and cultural status. To accomplish this purpose, higher education in America has replaced the cultivation of wisdom, moral virtue, and civic responsibility with specialized job training and the progressive value of "critique." Our colleges produce graduates who have some practical skills coupled with a code of ethics that respects all perspectives (except the "dogmatic" ones), systemically "critiques" traditional structures of power, and plumbs the depths of their own and everyone else's subjectivities. These graduates enter the marketplace equipped with the values and vocabulary approved by the managerial class of American life. Ideally, they will be able to contribute to the economy, pay lip service to justice and equity, and have the courage to denounce those who seek (let alone find) objective truth and goodness as threats to pluralism.

While all but a small handful of schools have retooled since the end of the nineteenth century, and especially since the end of the Second World War, to market and sell these credentials, it turns out that the credentials rarely serve the student-customers well.

It has become less and less attractive to go into debt in exchange for academic mediocrity and ideological indoctrination.

The vast majority of college freshmen (80 percent in 2023) consider getting a job to be a "very important" reason they enrolled.[27] However, ten years after graduation, only around half of graduates are working in a job that requires a college education.[28] This is an embarrassing indictment of the instrumental approach to a college education, which styles itself as the indispensable step to a lucrative career. In fact, a leading reason why more and more people are pursuing master's or even doctorate degrees is to remediate the growing deflation in value of the undergraduate credential.[29] What used to be research degrees are also increasingly marketed and sold as credentials, which subjects them to the same deflationary pattern. Higher education is a victim of its own "success."

Given all this success, it is unsurprising that Americans continue to lose faith in higher education, which has resulted in reductions in both educational supply and educational demand.[30] Since 2011, more than 1,400 colleges or universities in America have permanently closed.[31] In addition, fewer American eighteen-year-olds are going to college.[32] It has become less and less attractive to go into debt in exchange for academic mediocrity and ideological indoctrination, especially when a college diploma does not guarantee gainful employment in one's field of study. Disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the enrollment decline. Widespread remote learning exposed inferior educational products to millions of parents and students, further degrading public confidence in higher education. In short, selling college degrees as tickets to lucrative careers is not entirely honest.[33]

Many institutions, both Christian and otherwise, have responded to these troubling trendlines in ways that do not address the underlying issues. They pursue shinier amenities and pedagogical fads to increase

27 "2023 CIRP Freshman Survey," *Higher Education Research Institute*, https://heri.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/DATA-TABLES-TFS-2023_updated.pdf.

28 Sara Weissman, "More Than Half of Recent 4-Year College Grads Underemployed," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 22, 2024, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2024/02/22/more-half-recent-four-year-college-grads-underemployed.

29 Kay Hymowitz, "More Students Than Ever Chase a Graduate Degree—and Society Is Suffering," *New York Post*, August 14, 2021, https://nypost.com/2021/08/14/more-students-chasing-graduate-degrees-isnt-good-for-society/.

30 The efforts to "nuance" this reality are unconvincing. Jessica Blake, "Have Americans Actually Lost Faith in Higher Education?" *Inside Higher Ed*, September 24, 2024, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/2024/09/24/report-nuance-needed-analysis-higher-ed-polls.

31 Justin Ménard, "What Christensen Right?" ListEdTech, August 9, 2023, https://listedtech.com/blog/was-christensen-right/.

32 Blake, "Doubts About Value."

33 For a bracing critique of college education, including on economic grounds, see Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

enrollment.[34] Moreover, online education, with its promise of low overhead and scalability, entices administrators faced with meeting financial obligations at their brick-and-mortar institutions. More recently, the "skills-based hiring movement" has animated those who see better job training as the solution. Proponents of this approach call for overhauling college curricula to keep up with industry titans, such as Tesla, Walmart, Netflix, IBM, and others, who are eliminating college degrees as requirements for more and more of their jobs.[35] The idea is that colleges must revamp their curricula to keep pace with the demands of industry; in other words, they must improve the educational product they are selling. However, traditional colleges and universities—institutions developed in the Middle Ages to teach universal knowledge—are not equipped to compete with billion-dollar industries reinventing themselves each fiscal quarter, nor should they try.

The current challenges to higher education are a reminder of the extent to which the undergraduate curriculum has lost its pedagogical and theological coherence. In the never-ending quest to grow enrollment, many colleges seek to be all things to all people so that they might collect tuition from the largest possible prospect pool. For instance, marketing materials often highlight the number of "programs" offered, as if quantity self-evidently equals quality, instead of detailing the curriculum and its civilizational mission of seeking truth about God, creation, and humanity in which students will be trained to participate. Efforts to convert prospective students into paying customers have damaged the historical foundation of liberal arts education for several generations.[36]

Efforts to convert prospective students into paying customers have damaged the historical foundation of liberal arts education for several generations.

34 Rod Dreher, "LSU Up a Lazy River," *The American Conservative*, October 19, 2017, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/lsu-up-a-lazy-river/.

35 Jason Wingard, "Companies Are Hiring Fewer College Grads—So Why Bother with School?" *Forbes*, April 30, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonwingard/2024/04/30/companies-are-hiring-fewer-college-grads-so-why-bother-with-school/.

36 Russell Kirk identified this phenomenon as already taking root in the early 1950s. The problems have changed little since then. Russell Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning: An Episodic History of American University and College Since 1953* (South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1978).

Recovering the Purpose of Christian Higher Education

The theological commitments and distinctive mission of Christian colleges uniquely position them to redress this deepening crisis in American higher education.[37] If they are to capitalize on that position, they need to rethink the educational novelties that have hardened into orthodoxies over the past eighty years. Colleges that recommit themselves to the centuries-old Christian liberal arts tradition will thrive into the new millennium. Curricula characterized by the pursuit of wisdom, virtue, and civic responsibility grounded in the Christian tradition will produce graduates equipped to shape the ongoing technological and cultural revolutions in positive ways, rather than to merely survive them.

The current disruption in higher education means that now is an opportune time for Christian college leaders to substantially reform the undergraduate curriculum and place it upon a firmer foundation that will outlast present challenges. The following four recommendations and their related action steps should be implemented by campus leaders who seek to rise above the existential threats posed by the external environment.

37 Nate Fischer, *The Antifragile Christian College: Turning Disruption into Advantage* (Greenville, SC: Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing, 2024), https://whitepapers.faithfulcolleges.org/The-Antifragile-Christian-College-Turning-Disruption-Into-Advantage.pdf.

Prioritize Core Curriculum

A liberal arts core curriculum, typically consisting of the first two years of undergraduate education, should be the foundation of the Christian college experience. Marketing, recruiting, internal awards, faculty status, and other reflections of the priorities of the institutional culture should reinforce this primacy. At too many schools, it does not. There are several reasons for this.

While most colleges tout the primary nature of required "gen-eds," in practice their position in the curriculum is primary only in a chronological sense.[38] Gen-ed requirements are often seen as impediments standing in the way of students' specialization or major, which is the actual credential that promises to land them a job. This underscores that gen-eds have secondary status and are less important than upper-level courses. Instead, colleges can, and most should, still offer majors, but these should be secondary—not only chronologically, but also pedagogically—relative to a liberal arts core.

The "general education" should be replaced with a liberal arts core curriculum. Gen-eds and the widely despised survey courses that comprise them are an artifact of the explosion in university enrollments following World War II. "Behemoth Universities" (Russell Kirk's phrase) and their industrial-scale pedagogical methods were created not for effectiveness or to maintain curricular purpose, but simply to accommodate the swelling ranks of the student body.[39] Now everyone from college tour guides to admissions counselors to high-level administrators sell students and their families on how easy they have made it to avoid having to take gen-eds. In fact, bypassing gen-eds has become a powerful recruiting tool, and the sales pitch goes something like this: "Come to our college, where we'll count the online courses you took in high school as equivalent to the courses that our full-time faculty members offer." This serves status-conscious administrators, too, since graduating students more quickly bolsters an institution's statistics in ways that often affect college rankings.

Colleges that recommit themselves to the centuries-old Christian liberal arts tradition will thrive into the new millennium.

The result of these tendencies has been to devalue courses from multiple academic disciplines that are required during the first two years of college. Instead of providing a foundation upon which to build wisdom, virtue, and more advanced study in various domains (i.e., majors), the first two years of college are regularly taken up by a smattering

38 Most colleges and universities still require some sort of "general education," many in the form of distribution requirements (Stark and Lattuca, "Recurring Debates," 74). A mere 5 percent of American colleges offered a "core curriculum" by the end of the twentieth century (Ratcliff, "Quality and Coherence," 158). There are recent efforts that could increase this number (see footnote 3 above, and Stanley Kurtz, Jenna Robinson, and David Randall, "General Education Act: Model Legislation," *Ethics & Public Policy Center*, November 12, 2023, https://eppc.org/publication/general-education-act-model-legislation/.

39 Russell Kirk's term (see *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*, 20-29).

of large survey courses disconnected in content and purpose from one another. Meanwhile, the lucrative industry of selling "college" courses to high schoolers enables many of the most academically gifted students to satisfy their gen-ed requirements prior to stepping foot on a college campus. Anyone not proactive enough to knock out college courses in high school is left having to jump the gen-ed hurdles before getting to the job-training portion of their undergraduate education. Consequently, students who do enroll in survey courses are likely to be ill-equipped, disinterested, resentful, or a combination of all three. Predictably, some faculty accommodate this reality by lowering academic standards in the survey courses they are required to teach, or by trying to avoid having to teach such courses in the first place.

The otherwise self-defeating practice of colleges outsourcing their classes to high schools is driven, above all, by the ever-increasing costs of higher education. What might be called the "accelerated credential industry" of Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, International Baccalaureate, and similar programs profits from this trend. Students and parents are not to blame for wanting to accelerate time to graduation in order to make college more affordable. But colleges, rather than finding ways to lower costs or increase value to justify the expense, have instead bent over backwards to accommodate condensed models that grant their best incoming students credit for classes they completed in high school. Many colleges advertise fewer requirements as an educational benefit, yet the unintended consequence is to further lower the status—perceived if not actual—and dilute the cohesion of the general education program. The complex problem of high costs relative to perceived value must be addressed so that the outsourcing of college education is rendered unnecessary.

In the meantime, Christian colleges should guard and elevate the core curriculum as enacting the primary purpose of undergraduate education: to cultivate wisdom and virtue in the next generation of Christian leaders. Major courses of study should be regarded as secondary in the sense that they are built upon the intellectual and moral *foundation* of the liberal arts. Although restoring the primacy of core curricula may at first upset expectations from students, parents, admissions officers, and faculty—who are often accustomed to thinking of gen-eds as a smorgasbord of

interchangeable options, the content of which is irrelevant or a matter of individual faculty discretion—this short-term disruption pales in comparison to the long-term benefit Christian colleges will realize from resetting their educational program on firmer ground.[40]

Success in this area will require vision and leadership from administrators and key faculty who are willing to implement the following action steps:

» Create student cohorts in conjunction with core courses to establish the shared experience as foundational to their undergraduate career.

» Eliminate or reduce transfer credits satisfying core requirements to protect the core curriculum's role in crafting the signature intellectual experience of the college degree.

» Institutionalize core curricular design processes among faculty to ensure the program's consistency and coherence.

Recrown Theology as Queen of the Sciences

When Western universities established the teaching of the liberal arts in the Middle Ages, theology was widely understood to be the "queen of the sciences." This perspective established a hierarchy of knowledge (God above God's creation) and at the same time made sense of how the various liberal arts (grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) related to one another. The fundamental idea was this: truth, goodness, and beauty, wherever they are found, derive from, and therefore point to, God.

Today the humanities serve the ancient Greek notion bolstered by modern secularism that man is the measure of man, not the ancient Christian idea that the glories of man and the rest of creation reflect the glory of God.[41]

Christian colleges should guard and elevate the core curriculum as enacting the primary purpose of undergraduate education: to cultivate wisdom and virtue in the next generation of Christian leaders.

40 In response to recent state legislation passed in Utah to improve the core curriculum at public universities by teaching great books and Western Civilization, one English professor, upon learning of the new laws, reported "feeling staggered" at the news (Martha Harris, "Is the General Education Overhaul at USU an Academic Attack or a 'Rescue Mission'?," KUER, March 17, 2025, https://www.kuer.org/education/2025-03-17/is-the-general-education-overhaul-at-usu-an-academic-attack-or-a-rescue-mission).

41 One contemporary manifestation of this impulse is the radical educational reform collective called Human Restoration Project, which recently featured a keynote address by Henry Giroux at its Conference to Restore Humanity entitled "Critical Pedagogy in a Time of Fascist Tyranny." The full transcript of this address is found here: https://www.humanrestorationproject.org/podcasts/116-henry-giroux-critical-pedagogy-in-a-time-of-fascist-tyranny.

The fundamental idea was this: truth, goodness, and beauty, wherever they are found, derive from, and therefore point to, God.

Even among recent champions of classical liberal arts education, the goal of studying ancient wisdom is defined as "illuminat[ing] a person's lived experience" rather than seeking to find what is objectively true.[42] Liberal arts education has become a modern-day parable of what happens when one is "always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7).[43]

It is therefore insufficient to merely begin teaching "the classics" without a Christian foundation. Lacking a basis in Christianity, the liberal arts easily devolve into yet another mode of myopic self-discovery unmoored from truth.[44] For this reason and many more, theology must be recrowned as the queen of the sciences, the field of learning that justifies and illuminates the pursuit of all others. Theology makes it possible to bring all our thinking—as individuals and as a civilization—under the dominion of Christ (see 2 Cor. 10:5). Imagine what kind of Christian leadership would result in every field of life and study and work if such leadership were built upon a theologically robust study of the liberal arts for the purpose of cultivating wisdom, virtue, and civic responsibility.[45]

In place of theology, in which God and his revealed Word are primary objects of study, college curricula have moved toward an ever-deeper study of the self. Within the last decade or so, a conspicuous minority of undergraduate students started openly challenging their professors, demanding they stop harming them with words and ideas they did not like. People who were not in close contact with universities at the time were understandably surprised. These were early shots fired in the woke revolution, and they seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Many explanations for what led to the eruption have helped us make sense of it. Social media, smartphones, intersectionality, CRT—all of

42 Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 8.

43 Scripture quotations throughout are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

44 In his enthusiastic defense of the liberal arts, Montás describes how valuable his freshman-year encounter with Augustine's *Confessions* was in that it helped him see that he "must leave the evangelical faith and the church for good, perhaps for a different atheism than the one I came to America with, or perhaps for a higher sort of faith, one that grew from the soil of utter intellectual honesty" (*Rescuing Socrates*, 48).

45 Christian colleges should be leaders in reversing the continuing decline among American evangelicals in biblical and theological literacy. See Joe Holland, "Are We More Biblically Illiterate than Ever?" Ligonier Ministries, March 28, 2025, https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/are-we-more-biblically-illiterate-than-ever.

these played a role.[46] But the therapeutic turn in the culture of education began much earlier.[47] By the 1970s, "self-esteem" was an important pedagogical consideration, which in turn gave birth to self-care, self-discovery, and the obligatory and ceaseless talk of human subjectivities found in so many college classrooms today. These impulses in modern education point to the extent to which the student has become both subject and object of education. We are studying ourselves for the sake of ourselves. Standpoint epistemology has replaced *the*ology.

The therapeutic turn in education shows up most conspicuously in the humanities. However, courses of study in STEM fields, in which the centrality of subjectivity is less pronounced, are by no means immune to the same tendencies. Professors habitually seek to empower, affirm, and liberate students, sometimes at the expense of truth, reason, and rigor. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many professors were told that their role was to be "mental health first responders," meaning their classrooms were envisioned as sites of therapeutic observation and, ideally, healing. Accordingly, standards were lowered for the sake of reducing anxiety.[48] Such outcomes are unsurprising given the displacement of objective and transcendent truth from the central place they occupied in higher learning for a thousand years. Secular humanism has eroded ancient theological understanding about the relationship between God and the self.

Without a basis in Christianity, the liberal arts easily devolve into yet another mode of myopic self-discovery unmoored from truth.

In place of now-entrenched therapeutic purposes of modern undergraduate education, Christian colleges should restore a traditional approach to self-knowledge. Attention to knowledge of the self is hardly alien to Western and Christian thought and pedagogy. Ancient Greek wisdom seekers who went on pilgrimage to Delphi encountered the injunction "know thyself" inscribed on the Temple of Apollo, and Socrates established this maxim as a pillar of Western philosophy and ethics. The Bible includes numerous calls to self-examination and self-knowledge, with the psalmists in particular embracing

46 For an analysis of the causes of the proliferation of social justice activism on college campuses beginning in 2013, see Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2018). For an explanation that reaches further back in time to the work of Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), see Christopher F. Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything* (New York, NY: Broadside Books, 2023). For a treatment of how these trends have affected evangelical institutions, including churches, see Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (New York, NY, 2021), and Meghan Basham, *Shepherds for Sale: How Evangelical Leaders Traded the Truth for a Leftist Agenda* (New York, NY: Broadside Books, 2024).

47 For an illuminating consideration of the "triumph of the therapeutic" (Philip Rieff's phrase) in Western culture over the past several centuries, see Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

48 Jonathan Malesic, "My College Students Are Not OK," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/13/opinion/college-university-remote-pandemic.html.

introspection.[49] The Apostle Paul connects self-reflection to our understanding of God and his actions.[50] Augustine's *Confessions* sets a pattern for Christian self-reflection and emphasizes its inextricability from knowing God.[51] Calvin's *Institutes* begins with a section on the "Connection between the Knowledge of God and the Knowledge of Ourselves," concluding that "though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie, due arrangement requires that we treat of the former in the first place, and then descend to the latter."[52] In contrast, modern education has strayed from this traditional approach to self-knowledge. The humanities and sciences can be restored to their rightful place as powerful modes of furthering understanding about God if theology is recentered in Christian college curricula by implementing the following action steps:

» Require first-year courses that establish biblical literacy among all freshman or new students, such as a yearlong Old and New Testament survey course.

» Require theology courses focusing on foundational knowledge of historic Christian teachings from the early church fathers, the Protestant Reformation, and (where relevant) particular denominations.

» Integrate curriculum-wide teaching on the relationship of the liberal arts (including sciences) to theology.

Cultivate the Exercise of Christian Liberty rather than "Critique"

Academic freedom in higher education—rightly cherished as an inheritance of Western Civilization—does not imply complete

49 See, for example, Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" Cf. Psalm 77:6; 119:59; Job 13:23; Lam. 3:40; 1 Cor. 11:28, 31; Gal. 6:4.

50 "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (Rom. 7:21-25).

51 "Here I am climbing up through my mind towards you who are constant above me" (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 194.

52 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 50.

neutrality with respect to value judgments.[53] Freedom of inquiry (and conscience) emerged as a principle in the Christian West in part because of the theological understanding of humans as finite, fallible, and fallen: an individual's knowledge of the truth can always be improved.[54] Christian theology justifies both the commitment to the goodness of objective truth *and* epistemological humility. Together, these explain the priority of liberty in numerous Western institutions. We see these concepts in the writings of Paul, Augustine, John Milton, and many others who recognized the importance of freedom of conscience. This perspective on conscience is rooted in our divine image-bearing: we possess will. And it reflects our limitations: we are finite and fallen, which means that our understanding of truth is subject to error.[55] Christian colleges need to reclaim this heritage of ancient Christian liberty.

Modern liberalism has promoted a different vision, one of neutrality and pluralism—both in the academic realm and in the public sphere. Over time, and perhaps unwittingly, this approach opened the door for the

Christian theology justifies both the commitment to the goodness of objective truth *and* epistemological humility.

evisceration of liberal arts through "critical" approaches to learning. "Critical thinking" is championed in every segment of the education industry.[56] It is taken as a self-evidently good aim of education, but, in fact, it has displaced wisdom. Academics are both trained to critique inherited wisdom and incentivized toward novelty. Students are rewarded for finding flaws in Shakespeare and problems in Aristotle before working toward thorough understanding of these authors' works. It is not as if tradition is above reproach, or that novelty in interpretation is unthinkable. The Western Christian tradition itself prizes intellectual discrimination and moral prudence, which require judgment presupposing knowledge. However, in current educational parlance, "critical thinking" too often incentivizes critique before

53 On the importance and distinguishing features of academic freedom in Christian universities see, David J. Ayers, *Academic Freedom in Christian Colleges* (Greenville, SC: Center for Academic Faithfulness & Flourishing, 2024).

54 Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College,* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 64.

55 "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (I Cor. 13:12). Also see John Milton's classic defense of freedom of the press in 1644, based partly on the premise that our grasp of the truth is partial and imperfect: "Truth indeed came once into the world with her Divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when He ascended, and His Apostles after Him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers, who, as the story goes of the Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb, still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming; He shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. Suffer not these licensing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity, forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn boy of our martyred saint" (John Milton, "Areopagitica," in *Areopagitica and other Prose Works* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2016), 29-30.

56 For a consideration of the problems with prioritizing critical thinking as an aim of liberal education, see Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 110-130.

Absent a theological foundation or commitment to the principle of objective truth, academic "knowledge creation" easily becomes little more than pointing out the supposed backwardness of the past.

comprehension, thus short-circuiting the formative power of understanding the past in the inevitable process of building upon it.

Absent a theological foundation or commitment to the principle of objective truth, academic "knowledge creation" easily becomes little more than pointing out the supposed backwardness of the past. Novelty is lionized as free thinking and becomes an end in its own right. This inclination has been a fount of esoteric, tendentious, and asinine academic jargon and scholarship for decades, the public awareness of which has increased significantly in recent years.[57]

The traditional Christian understanding of liberty is antithetical to this impulse. It is a guard against education degenerating into either libertarianism or deconstruction.[58]

Liberty in the Christian tradition is the capacity to govern oneself, to locate and choose the good. A life constrained by the truth is a life free from the oppressive restraints of tyrants, heretics, technocrats, taskmasters, and mobs.

The excesses of our recent era of "critique" have led us to absurdities, such as "decolonizing math."[59] In response to these industry excesses, some have argued for positioning Christian higher education as an "anti-woke" enterprise, a move that is necessary but insufficient to effect lasting change. In the long run, simply eliminating DEI offices will not reverse the cultural decay that led to them, let alone produce a positive vision for Christian culture-building. This is because modern liberalism filled the moral vacuum created by the retreat of positive Christian morality that began during the decades of what Aaron Renn has termed the "neutral world."[60] The result has been a culture shaped by modern liberalism's own culture-building initiatives, which are fueled by its method of pervasive critique. Against this backdrop, if Christian colleges wish to occupy a position of moral and intellectual authority both now and in the future, they must prioritize the positive virtue of Christian liberty and root it firmly among their pedagogical aims. Action steps for achieving this end include:

57 Yascha Mounk, "What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia," *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212/; Jack Grove, "Ph.D. Graduate Blasts Twitter After Her Dissertation Is Trolled," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 11, 2024, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2024/12/11/phd-graduate-attacked-her-woke-dissertation.

58 Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 125-30; Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 69.

59 "Why We Have Nothing to Fear from the Decolonization of Mathematics," *Nature* 614, no. 8, January 31, 2023, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00240-9.

60 Aaron Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024).

» Inculcate the virtue of pursuing objective truth in every domain, combined with epistemological humility, rather than privileging and systematically promoting "critique."

» Assess students on their comprehension of and fluency in presenting texts and ideas.

Distinguish Undergraduate from Research (Graduate) Degrees

One way to prevent training students to prioritize novelty over knowledge is to reestablish the traditional understanding of the purpose of undergraduate education. American universities since the nineteenth century have pursued two distinct missions, and these are not always in harmony.[61] The first mission, embodied in the medieval Anglo model, is to preserve and pass on existing knowledge, which requires teaching. The second, embodied in the German model, is to generate new knowledge, which requires research. Traditionally, taking a bachelor's degree falls under the first model, whereas master's degrees and beyond fall under the second—because the degree candidates themselves are conducting original research. It is from this pool that the next generation of college faculty are drawn.

If Christian colleges wish to occupy a position of moral and intellectual authority both now and in the future, they must prioritize the positive virtue of Christian liberty.

In recent years, however, colleges have established programs that prioritize undergraduate student research. Although this change is often presented as an undisputed good,[62] it is important to recognize how valorizing undergraduate research can minimize or devalue other fundamental elements of the educative task. In historical terms, the trend toward "undergraduate research" represents a tendency toward the research-oriented German university model and away from the teaching-oriented Anglo model. While original research at American universities has helped advance our knowledge about the world in countless ways, there are also benefits to reserving it primarily for graduate-level education. A continued focus on classroom teaching that affords students significant knowledge in a field before beginning substantial research is especially important today because most high schools fail to provide adequate training in the liberal arts.

61 See Rine, *Meeting the Moment*, 12-17.

62 For instance, Daniel M. Settlage and Katisha A. Settlage stated in 2021, "The importance of undergraduate research as a means of engaging students in higher order levels of thinking has become increasingly recognized in literature" ("Undergraduate Research as an Institutional Ethos-A Case Study Examining a Faculty-Sponsored Research Symposium," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 21, no. 1 (April 2021): 17). For an abbreviated history of the growth of undergraduate research, see Kerry K. Karukstis, "Analysis of the Undergraduate Research Movement: Origins, Developments, and Current Challenges," *Scholarship and Practice of Undergraduate Research* 3, no. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.18833/spur/3/2/8.

One way to prevent training students to prioritize novelty over knowledge is to reestablish the traditional understanding of the purpose of undergraduate education.

The growth of research programs among undergraduates is the result of a number of factors. In most universities and colleges, virtually all institutional and individual faculty status comes from research. Undergraduate students, who are there to learn what is already known, are a burden to faculty and graduate students whose professional standing is measured largely by research output oriented toward discovery of new knowledge. Undergraduates, by design, do not generally produce new knowledge. In fact, they slow the process down—hence their typical station within research universities as "second-class citizens."[63] This is connected to low teaching requirements for faculty serving in prestigious institutions. At research universities, graduate students—not faculty members—grade undergraduate papers, meet with students, and perform other tasks that would distract their faculty advisors from the task of generating new knowledge. Only professors at less prestigious or less research-oriented institutions must teach full loads of courses and grade assignments. Although many great researchers are also great teachers, the professional hierarchy is clear: research is the path to professional achievement. Many incentive structures (i.e., promotion, tenure, grants, awards, and more) in higher education discourage doing both, at least with equal vigor. The result: the higher a person's status as an academic, the less he or she engages in the craft of teaching.

Typically, teaching undergraduates is relatively low status work in the academy; teaching required gen-eds is even lower status. And programs emphasizing undergraduate research naturally increase competition for the expertise and resources of faculty, thus distracting from and diluting the central pedagogical aims of the liberal arts: to cultivate wisdom and virtue, strengthen moral imagination, and develop civic responsibility among students. If these aims

63 Lattuca, Haworth, and Conrad, "Introduction," xvi.

If the pedagogical aims of the liberal arts are to be recovered in Christian colleges, the undergraduate curriculum must operate according to a different set of professional incentives and rewards.

are to be recovered in Christian colleges, undergraduate curriculum must operate according to a different set of professional incentives and rewards that align more closely with institutional mission. Research among undergraduates should be designed to showcase content mastery and limited primarily to projects that prepare students for entrance into a profession or advanced degree, such as the traditional senior capstone.[64]

In the long run, a Christian liberal arts education grounded on a coherent core curriculum will not *hinder* the production of future researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs, and professionals. Rather, it will *equip* them in their quest for new knowledge with a foundation of understanding about the past as well as the wisdom to wield it. Such an educational program can produce a generation able to resist the lemming-like acceptance of scientism and technocracy rampant among our current elites and empowered to avoid the breathtaking failures they have presided over during the last several decades.[65] One valuable step in this direction is to resist the trend of pushing students to research earlier and earlier in their education by taking the following actions:

» Reward excellence in teaching in the core curriculum.

» Reward excellence in student performance in the core curriculum.

» Cast vision among students and faculty for thinking about "core" and "foundational" curriculum rather than "general education" or "prerequisites for majors."

» Limit undergraduate research primarily to upper-level projects that prepare students for entrance into a profession or advanced degree.

64 Capstone courses used to be courses in moral philosophy taught by college presidents (Conrad and Wyer, "Liberal Education," 60).

65 The collapse of the Soviet Union, the global financial crisis in 2009, the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the outbreak and response to COVID-19 are examples of the hubris and failure of scientific and technocratic expertise with respect to prognostication. For an examination of scientism and the social scientists who are blind to its pitfalls, see Jason Blakely, *We Built Reality: How Social Science Infiltrated Culture, Politics, and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Restoring Liberal Arts in the Core Curriculum

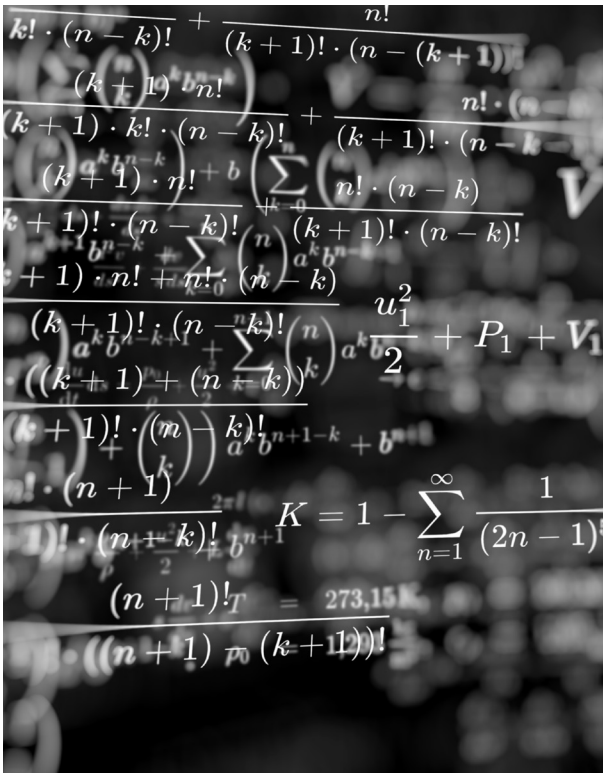
Christian colleges provide one of many paths for young Christians to address the variety of social and cultural needs of our generation. However, many Christian colleges have implicitly embraced the late-twentieth-century idea that college is the only normative path to a meaningful and respectable career. The effects of this reductionist thinking have been deleterious, both on Christian colleges, which too often succumb to the credentialing race, and on the professional trades, which have been unnecessarily stigmatized. Neither of these honors the American traditions of excellence in higher learning and mastery in the trades. If college curricula reinvention continues to be driven by efforts to grow enrollment, train workers, and produce credentials—a trend that began in the boom years of the mid-twentieth century as a way of capturing an influx of federal dollars—college education will continue to lose credibility.

Colleges need to return to a clearer and narrower civilizational mandate, one that leaves behind the era of credentialism. This renewed focus will necessarily result in a reduction of administrative staff and a remaking of institutional structures.[66]

66 On the out-of-control administrative bloat in higher education, see Michael Delucchi et al., "What's That Smell? Bull**** Jobs in Higher Education," *Review of Social Economy* 82, no. 1 (2021), 1-22.

Although short-term challenges may arise during the transition to this new focus, they should be embraced as an opportunity to arrest mission drift and strengthen institutions in the long run.[67]

One way or another, American higher education is returning to a more limited role in society. Whether this trend weakens or strengthens Christian institutions will depend on the extent to which administrators and faculty can adopt a vision for embracing rather than resisting the shifting tides. A posture of embrace will restore Christian colleges as institutions where the advanced study of the liberal arts serves as a foundation for excellence in ministry, medicine, law, engineering, business, academic research, technology, politics, the arts, and teaching. Administrators and faculty at Christian colleges who respond to the current upheaval in higher education by strengthening rather than diluting the liberal arts core curriculum as the basis of their institutional mission will position their institutions as shining lights within the darkening landscape and thereby ensure a more hopeful, mission-driven future.



Colleges need to return to a clearer and narrower civilizational mandate, one that leaves behind the era of credentialism.

67 On sharpening "missional focus" of Christian institutions in negative world, see Renn, *Life in the Negative World*, 103-107.

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