



### ***3. The Meaning of a Liberal Arts and Sciences Education in the United States: Anachronistic Lessons from a Parochial Past***

ELI KRAMER  
UNIVERSITY OF WROCLAW

ROBERT FRIED  
UPPER VALLEY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE

*Abstract:* Although the United States is often heralded as the leader in the liberal arts and sciences model of higher education, the idea of a “liberal education” itself remains both loaded and vague. Do we yet have a consensus on its meaning and application today that does not rely on some appeal to a vaguely defined and putatively historic tradition? In this article, we sketch out the problem and trace its historic origins in the United States to better address one of the enduring and valuable meanings of a US liberal higher education. Our purpose is to illuminate the essential holistic and student-centered dimension of US small liberal arts college (SLAC) education, and why it is worth preserving through the current crises and pandemic. We draw from this dimension of the US liberal education tradition several helpful suggestions about how to escape our confusion surrounding the meaning of the idea: focusing on the character formation of individuals that can serve their communities, shifting curriculum away from mere breadth and depth in disciplinary knowledge and to breadth and depth of character development, supporting teacher tracks in higher education to foster this kind of student-centered learning, exploring the possibilities for liberal holistic learning in other contexts and at distance, and finally being unafraid to defend a robust holistic liberal education even if it demands a lot to carry out well.

*Keywords:* liberal education, liberal arts and sciences, Antioch College, Small Liberal Arts Colleges, holistic education, character education

## ***Introduction***

As early as 1924, John Dewey already saw the confusion that arises in attempting to define and defend a liberal arts and sciences education in the United States:

American colleges call themselves colleges of Liberal Arts. The historic reason for this use of the word is familiar. In its literal signification liberal means free and it means generous. Aristotle fixed the terminology over two thousand years ago in its application to education. To write, however, upon the liberal college in America and its prospects in narrow adherence to this point of view would be irrelevant, if not a cowardly evasion of burning issues. Yet, at the risk of being suspected of Laodicean indifference to burning issues, I am bound to say that I believe that the base—line of discussion of current actual tendencies in American education should be the ancient definition—interpreted out of abstract generalities so as to apply to present conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Almost a century after Dewey, not much has changed. Although many of us strive to defend “liberal education” as essential for responding to our present problems, we still cling to “abstract generalities” in order to do so. We seemingly do not have a consensus on its role today that does not rely on a vaguely defined and putatively historic tradition, or makes a vague ahistorical defense of whatever currently comes under the umbrella term.

It is an idea and model easy to defend and hard to articulate. As the eminent philosopher of education Harry Brighouse has put it, “the phrase ‘Liberal Arts Education’ requires interpretation. While used widely by educators and especially by higher education administrators, its meaning is not always clear.”<sup>2</sup> But in a country with more colleges and universities supposedly devoted to it than anywhere else in the world, *why* is it so hard to clarify and defend?

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, “The Prospects of the Liberal Arts College [1924],” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924: 1923–1924, Essays on Politics and Society*, Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 15, ed. by Jo Ann Boydton (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 201–202.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Brighouse, “How Can We Understand ‘Liberal Arts Education?’,” in *The Mellon Research Forum on the Value of Liberal Arts Education* (New York: Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2019).

This question is even more pressing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many liberal arts institutions struggle as they try to defend their value, while moving into online, hybrid, or limited residence learning. As students lose the opportunity for the full residential campus experience, other questions about the value of such institutions come to the forefront. To address this question at least in part, this article will attempt to explore the roots of a dimension of the US liberal education tradition that is essential for addressing the crises of today, and that ought to extend beyond the pandemic. By exploring both the current situation in the United States and its historic precedent, we can perhaps determine what we want to defend and promote, which generalities of description are no longer relevant to our needs, and how we can guide ourselves out of educational confusion. In turn, such a clarification can help us see what role the US approach to liberal arts learning can play in addressing our most pressing, social, political, ecological, technological, and ethical dilemmas.

Part of the difficulty in defining the meaning and value of a liberal arts education in the United States originates in a significant nineteenth-century shift in attitude toward the meaning and model of a liberal education. This led to a significant disjuncture from the European tradition of the liberal arts and sciences. What the United States initiated a century and a half ago, especially in the Midwest,<sup>3</sup> was a new model of small to midsized liberal arts colleges and universities, often referred to in the United States as SLACs (small liberal arts colleges).<sup>4</sup> These institutions have offered a very different model of education, a creative anachronism that has served different purposes than its European curricular forebears and led to a new conception of higher learning in the United States. SLACs focus primarily on undergraduate education, sometimes with modest graduate programs, and are celebrated for their emphasis on holistic self-cultivation of the heart, body, and mind—on what might be called in Europe “character education.” In the US context, at its best, such character education attempts to escape the dualism between self and community, and between social/emotional growth and intellectual development, that remains prevalent in the world today.

In the first section, we survey the confusion surrounding the meaning of a liberal education at US colleges and universities. Next, we explore how a disjuncture from previous approaches in the European tradition, initiated by mission-driven SLAC sectarian experiments in the Midwest of the United

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<sup>3</sup> The North Central United States, including: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

<sup>4</sup> Often included in this definition are relevant small liberal arts universities.

States in the middle of the nineteenth century, led to an alternative model of liberal education. We use the founding years of Antioch College as an exemplary disjunctural model. To illustrate our point, we turn to the philosophy of higher education as articulated by Horace Mann, the first president of the college, and then turn to student experiences in those early years. We conclude by reflecting on what lessons can be drawn from this holistic approach to liberal learning—simple to define but difficult to achieve.

### ***A Liberal Education Viewed in Three Characterizations and Three Dispositions***

Where has the idea of a liberal education been historically situated, and how does this context frame its possible meaning(s)? Today's idea of a liberal education in the arts and sciences is framed by the long and complex history of the classical European university. Since the medieval period, the liberal arts have been part and parcel of university life (including its colleges). Largely housed in universities, the liberal arts and sciences were transformed from a certain set of intellectual habits on the path of spiritual contemplation<sup>5</sup> (now revitalized in great books programs) to a very diverse range of programs and institutions, claiming both breadth and depth in the critical areas of disciplinary inquiry, while also attempting to serve vocation, social efficiency, and citizenship goals.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States, although the meaning of a liberal education has changed across its history and geography, we can attempt to paint in broad strokes three dominant characterizations of it, and three dominant dispositions in the Western philosophy of higher education in which it is situated. Brighouse has defined these dominant characterizations of liberal education as: (1) "Appeals to the kind of institution"; (2) "Appeals to the design of the course of study"; and (3) "Appeals to the educational aims and objectives of the course of study."<sup>7</sup> These characterizations of liberal arts education

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<sup>5</sup> For more, see: Matthew Sharpe, "Of Philosophy as a Way of Life in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Review Essay/Compte Rendu, Juliusz Domański, *La Philosophie, Theorie ou maniere de vivre?: Les controverses de l'antiquite a la renaissance*," *Academia.edu*: 26–27, accessed July 24, 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/35258692/Of\\_philosophy\\_as\\_a\\_way\\_of\\_life\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_Ages\\_and\\_renaissance](https://www.academia.edu/35258692/Of_philosophy_as_a_way_of_life_in_the_Middle_Ages_and_renaissance).

<sup>6</sup> For more on these three aspects of American Higher Education, see: David Labaree, "College – What Is It Good For?" Lecture, 55th Annual John Dewey Lecture, John Dewey Society, at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Brighouse, "How Can We Understand," 3.

become the central, intertwined foci for three overarching traditions in the philosophy of higher education in which they are situated: (1) Those who follow Cardinal John Henry Newman in advocating the “life of the mind” separated from instrumentalized culture, as the heart of higher learning, a time and a place to contemplate what is of fundamental value and importance in life via studying the arguably greatest books that civilization has to offer (a legacy of Catholic Thomism/Aristotelianism); (2) those who follow Wilhelm Von Humboldt, who envisioned higher education as the cultural nexus of *Bildung*, the critical awakening of the capacity of persons to organically advance and serve cultural life<sup>8</sup> (a legacy of German Idealism and Protestant Liberalism); and (3) those who, following Bill Readings and other higher learning nominalists, reject any unifying center to the modern university and who propose viewing the university as a heterogenous super-complex that can be defended as such (a legacy of post-structuralism and Burkeian conservatism). For those who identify predominately with the latter tendency, living in the ruins of the ideas of previous models is useful in that it provides room for the pluralism needed to resist neoliberal hegemony.<sup>9</sup> Some also see these ruins as a place for revolutionary efforts and the decolonizing of knowledge production.<sup>10</sup>

The current university, while entangled in these varied traditions in the philosophy of higher education, is without doubt a super-complex behemoth.<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Church famously said that it is “a collection of disparate interests held together by a common plumbing system.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time as universities grow ever more complex, SLACs are falling victim to demographic and vocational pressures as they struggle to cover the skyrocketing costs of the amenities-driven residential campus. Degrees in the liberal arts (i.e., bachelors of arts and bachelors of sciences) in the United States,

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the first two tendencies, see: Aaron Stoller and Eli Kramer “Introduction: Towards a Philosophy of Higher Education,” in *Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University: Toward a Philosophy of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For more on this tendency, see: Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> For more, see: Dylan Rodriguez, “Dylan Rodriguez on Contested Revolutionary Spaces in Higher Education,” *The NAB Project Podcast*, July 2, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> For more on super complexity in the university, see: Ronald Barnett, “Supercomplexity: The New Universal,” in *Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1999); Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Church, “Knowledge and Power: American Higher Education in the Twentieth Century,” in *History of Education Annual* 7 (1987): 99.

especially in the humanities, have declined sharply as a share of all bachelor's degrees to 6.1 percent in 2014, the lowest level since record-keeping began in 1948.<sup>13</sup>

Globally, higher education is prodded by neoliberal forces to become a fully monetized and consumer-focused educational commodity.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, faculty face the pressure to become a contemporary kind of disciplinary subject, bounded by academic citations and measured for worth by references in high-end journals.<sup>15</sup> Outside of the campus, there are the crises of civilization, public distrust, and rampant anti-intellectualism, further undermining a vision of a pluralistic and open-minded culture. On top of all this is the catalyzing force of the COVID-19 pandemic, pushing SLACs already on the edge of an enrollment crisis over the cliff, financially, unable to meet their anticipated enrollments of on-campus students during the pandemic. This situation further illuminates the difficulties liberal education faces in justifying its existence.

A vast literature attempts to address these divergent models of higher learning, and especially the challenge of situating the liberal arts within them in the United States. It ranges from economic analyses of the explosive growth in funds and enrollment that came to US higher education in the 1960s (as well as a later reaction to the Great Recession of 2007–2012), and that led to the vast array of US liberal colleges today<sup>16</sup> to studies of how the American concept of professionalization gave higher education a critical and unique role in legitimizing middle-class identity. This latter current is often blamed for our present toxic professional culture, whereby scholars in the disciplines have a direct interest in reproducing their disciplinary practice (despite a glut to unemployed PhDs), while displaying little interest or ability to devote their efforts to whole-person and learner-centered teaching in liberal colleges and universities, and who reinforce a culture of overreliance on putative expertise.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Belkin, "Liberal Arts Colleges, in Fight for Survival, Focus on Job Skills," *The Wall Street Journal* (April 24, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> For more, see: Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner, "Bibliometrics: The History of Notation and the Birth of the Citational Academic Subject," *Foucault Studies*, no. 25 (October 2018): 146–173, DOI: 10.22439/fs.v0i25.5578.

<sup>16</sup> See: Louis Menand, "The Humanities Revolution," in *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 59–92.

<sup>17</sup> See: Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976).

Others have explored the pluralism of the American college and university system as one of its essential values.<sup>18</sup> We have also seen the emergence of new disciplines focusing on neglected and oppressed communities, global inequities, and the legacy of genocide, colonialism, and white supremacy that have dominated the world in the last four or so centuries.<sup>19</sup> In this vein, some have sought to point to the culpability of North American universities in their reliance on slavery and the subjugation of indigenous populations for their profit, and even of their use of liberal education to justify their own heinous practices.<sup>20</sup>

In light of such challenges, and in response to the justifiably perceived hegemony of the Western male perspective, there are calls to decolonize our institutions,<sup>21</sup> to find a new genuinely multicultural model of the disciplines and curricula for liberal education.<sup>22</sup> In nearly all cases, however, a liberal education is heralded as of critical importance (even if it needs to be radically decolonized), but there is little to any agreement on what a liberal education, however its curricular dimensions, should mean in this deeply contested and economically fragile environment.

In this context, it become increasingly difficult to view the congruity of United States liberal college and university education amid its complex history, divergent philosophies, decolonial reform, curricular heterogeneity, economic vulnerability, and its diminishing footprint in the face of narrowly pragmatic vocational training (for most), alongside an increasingly elitist university system (for the affluent), fostered in large part by *U.S. News & World Report* rankings.<sup>23</sup> Add to this mix a hostile and explosive world political,

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<sup>18</sup> Gerald Grant and David Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> For example, at least as it relates to humanism, see: Randall Auxier, “Cassirer: The Coming of a New Humanism,” *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 3, no. 5 (November 2018): 7–26.

<sup>20</sup> For more, see: Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> For a succinct overview of this topic, see: Shannon Stein and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, “Decolonization and Higher Education,” in *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, ed. Michael A. Peters (Singapore: Springer, 2016), DOI:10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\_479-1.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see a recent proposal in the field of philosophy: Bryan Van Norden and Jay L. Garfield, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> For more on this subject, see: Cathy Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

health, and ecological situation, and cultural upheavals that destabilize democratic and humane values, and it becomes difficult to articulate what remains of value within the US liberal education tradition.

In the face of this dilemma, we intuit the value of these schools, and have plenty of data to back up our claims,<sup>24</sup> but save for requiring breadth and depth in the arts and sciences and utilizing seminar classes that foster student participation, the most well regarded of US liberal colleges and universities differ widely in terms of curriculum, aims, and institutional contexts. No wonder it is hard to defend them all under the same “liberal education” heading; their diversity, and historic complexity and complicity threatens any common identity. Understandably then, much of our robust defense of liberal education falls on deaf ears for not only the public at large but also among intellectuals caught in the vortex of isolation, nostalgia, and despair.

So what meaning(s) does the liberal arts possess that is critical to preserve? By turning to early US SLACs, we think we might find one—not in fealty to “the classics” or in some venerable tradition, nor in a clearly defined and commonly espoused liberal theory of higher education. To the contrary, such meaning can be found by attending to what is often considered a provincial period in the history of US education. We believe that a key ingredient that makes US liberal education distinctive, as exemplified in SLACs, derives from its initial status as a provincial backwater of the Eurocentric intellectual world in the nineteenth century, which allowed certain institutions to develop an alternative idea of what liberal higher education can and should be.

### ***A Holistic Approach to Liberal Education***

The Protestant sectarian-generated SLACs, from Oberlin to Antioch, that exploded across the Midwest in the nineteenth century were not doing what their European forebears had done nor did they replicate what their European counterparts were currently doing. Their emphasis was on what today is called integrative, formative or whole-person, character education. Their aim was to build institutional communities and design curricula that would nurture deep persons, with rich and vibrant existential orientations, which were needed for US youth navigate the complex social, cultural, moral, emotional, and intellectual domains of the nineteenth century, while maintaining a sense

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<sup>24</sup> We can even do so by more reductionist measures, such as by “better” economic success. For example, see: Catharine B. Hill and Elizabeth Davidson Pisacreta, *The Economic Benefits and Costs of a Liberal Arts Education* (New York: Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), 201.

of provincial harmony and spiritual identity.<sup>25</sup> The means and ends of this education were fully accomplished, pragmatic, dignified, and spiritually whole citizens. Although the founders of this approach rooted their schools in the organic model of *Bildung*, and still saw critical value in the study of the classics, and although they recognized and utilized their structural affinity to the European tradition of liberal arts and sciences, they were not sophisticated interpreters of these models. Rather, they were creative misinterpreters of those traditions, and their creative misreadings led US higher education, and liberal education in particular, in new directions.<sup>26</sup> This creative misreading of liberal education was blended with other theoretical orientations, from the holistic insights of US transcendentalism and experimentalism to the determinism of the sinister social Darwinism popular at this time.

The emergence of this approach to liberal education is a long and complex story, one we will not be able to fully flesh out here. It is worthy of a book length study. What we can offer is an illustrative example of this alternative vision of a liberal education, beginning with a brief historical overview of the formation of the nineteenth-century US SLACs. We do so through the lens of Horace Mann's philosophy of higher education, and student experiences during the founding years of Antioch College, one of America's most famous (or, to some of its critics, infamous) proponents of a whole-person-based liberal education. Its founding years will provide insight into trajectories that would shape it and other SLACs in the US Midwest.

### ***A Distinctive "Backwater" Liberal Education***<sup>27</sup>

There is good reason why the United States' parochial past is overlooked when considering the meaning of liberal education. The US SLACs developed from dogmatic seminaries in their early days in the seventeenth and

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<sup>25</sup> For more, see: Eli Kramer, "Utopia and Human Culture: Alternative Communities of Higher Learning in America," Master's Thesis (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> This American tradition of misreading liberal education is analogous to what has happened in the history of philosophy. As Pierre Hadot, in the tradition of Whitehead, has well argued, philosophy has grown only through a series of creative errors of interpretative exegesis of philosophers addressing previous philosophers. So too goes the philosophy and even the policy of higher education. For more, see: Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy, Exegesis, and Creative Mistakes," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 126–144.

<sup>27</sup> The next three sections are largely cribbed, with modification, from one of the co-authors master's thesis. For more, see: Kramer, *Utopia and Human Culture*.

eighteenth centuries to boarding schools for privileged, often idle adolescent boys by the early nineteenth century, with dull, endless rote learning carrying over from one century to the next. College life then was very different from today. Early US SLACs existed somewhere between what we now think of as today's high school and today's undergraduate college. Commonly boys were sent to college at 16 years old, and sometimes as young as 13. These boys were closer to their mischievous medieval predecessors than to today's students. They make today's US higher education party culture look prudish in comparison.<sup>28</sup>

Ironically enough, the East Coast Ivy League schools at this time were supposed to help young (almost exclusively white) gentlemen steer clear of "bad influences" during their formative years. Antioch would attempt to genuinely carry out this work in practice, but for all genders and races. Unlike Antioch, the Ivy League Colleges largely offered recitations of the classics, where debate club played far more of a role in students' critical thinking than did coursework. Most pre-Civil War American colleges and universities were thus pedagogically and socially dysfunctional. An alternative was needed, and Antioch, among other new Midwest residential SLACs like Oberlin and Berea, would attempt to provide one.

In addition, the curricula at places like early Antioch, Oberlin, and Berea, does not seem on first glance to offer much promise for leading us out of our confusion about the meaning of a liberal education. It included only a smattering of the coursework we now find in US SLACs, and had no fully formed conception of the disciplines.<sup>29</sup> So what of lasting value might come out of studying these parochial institutions, and why should we care about rudimentary SLACs such as nineteenth-century Antioch?

In contrast to the rote learning of classical texts offered at elite institutions (the Ivies), with ample time for mischief and mayhem, many of these nineteenth-century midwestern colleges emphasized a holistic and integrative vision of liberal education, one that shaped all aspects of life and left less time for getting into trouble. They had a curriculum structured toward the development of character, including the very practical needs of effective adulthood in a still primarily agrarian and prudish Midwest. This approach to liberal education was the primary lure for students (and their parents) at SLACs like Antioch.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For a colorful example, see: Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 235.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see the early records of curriculum in: *Historical Sketch of Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Greene County, O.* Due to the condition of the original copy of this book at the Antioch College Archive, some page numbers could not be determined.

<sup>30</sup> For more, see: Kramer, "Utopia and Human Culture," 54–85.

The main currents of the liberal arts tradition in these colleges were drawn, firstly from a loose understanding of German Idealism (and classicism) as interpreted by Transcendentalists, Spiritual Millennialists (including secularists), and Whig Progressives.<sup>31</sup> In addition, by a peculiar set of circumstances, utopian communities like Brook Farm and Oneida, which represented one branch of millennialism, became a template for these SLACs, at the same time that they blended the *Bildung* approach to self and communal cultivation, a commitment to the Western classics, burgeoning American progressive politics, and a smattering of interests in the lessons from the development of the experimental sciences, into their approach to a liberal education. These schools were soteriological in outlook, drawing anachronistically on other traditions (including the traditional European models of the liberal arts), when they needed to do so.

Because of an important transformation happening in the United States at that time, the Midwest was the geographic center of this nineteenth-century movement. Although there would eventually be many such SLACs on the East Coast and elsewhere, the Midwest would be the heart of the movement, due to the wealth and opportunities created by colonial expansion and violence. Once New Englanders, along with newer European immigrants, invaded yet again the land of First Nations peoples and pushed them further west (while committing unconscionable acts of violence against them), a Western-style exploitative wealth began to spread in the newly conquered Midwest territories.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, it is this dark heritage that in fact many SLACs, even in their earlier days, were trying to address in their own ways. For example, SLACs like Berea and Oberlin would in their early days become centers for the abolitionist movement.<sup>33</sup>

Communities in Ohio, Illinois, and Kentucky, were eager to develop and become cultural and economic players on the North American continent and beyond. As the original colonies seemed to be languishing, due largely to poor farming conditions, what we now think of as the Midwest was ever growing. Different Protestant sects, from the Baptists to even the Unitarians, saw dominance in the Midwest as the key to their future hegemony in US religious and social life.

Where does Antioch fit in to this movement? The *Christian Connection*, an organization founded by an American sect of Protestantism, that called

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<sup>31</sup> For more, see: *Ibid.*, 37–53.

<sup>32</sup> One should not ignore how US higher education still sits on largely stolen lands and was constructed on the backs of slave labor. For more, see: Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*.

<sup>33</sup> Kramer, *Utopia and Human Culture*, 86–107.

themselves, simply, the “Christians,” founded Antioch on the ashes of the previous Owenite utopian experiment in Yellow Springs, Ohio.<sup>34</sup> Originally, the *Christian Connection* had planned to open the school somewhere in the northeastern United States (New York State was a favored option), but upon receiving a generous offer of land to open up the college in Yellow Springs, they decided to plant their college, and their ideology, firmly in the burgeoning Midwest. Later the Unitarians would take on the charge of funding the college so they too might gain a foothold in the newly conquered territories.

The “Christians” saw themselves as “a revolt against extreme formalism in religion and left each member free to interpret the Bible according to his own experience and conscience.”<sup>35</sup> They were more progressive than many of their counterparts on issues of women’s rights and racial equality. Despite this progressivism, Antioch would probably have not been a leader in creating a new trajectory for liberal education had they not offered the first presidency of the SLAC to the famous statesman and educator Horace Mann.

### *Mann’s Philosophy of Higher Learning for Antioch College*

Horace Mann was one of the most important leaders in developing the SLAC model of whole-person character education. He is also considered to be one of the “founding fathers” of the public education movement in the United States. As a public intellectual, politician, and educational leader, and as perhaps the quintessential representative of this eclectic misreading and blending of traditions into US liberal education, Mann greatly shaped the US intellectual backwater at this time.

This very blending of views often derived from the tensions, perhaps one might even say inconsistencies, in his character. His stern, rigid moral standards included a deep and abiding, elitist and practical conservatism. Yet, he was considered in his day one of the most progressive intellectuals in the United States, and he led the Whigs’ work to end slavery and carry out significant social welfare projects. At the same time, although he was a leading voice to end slavery, he found abolitionists too “radical,” and held significant racist prejudices and even justified them through then contemporary

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1972), 541. Owenism was a philosophical utopian movement founded by Robert Owen. It had ties to the Union Movement and was cooperative and quite radical.

<sup>35</sup> Joy Elmer Morgan, *Horace Mann at Antioch* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1938), 66.

theories of inferior biological and cultural antecedents. In particular, he was a phrenologist as that pseudo-science took a sinister Social-Darwinist turn, and was unsure of how much interracial coupling and living should be permitted. Despite being a non-sectarian, Mann was a devoted Christian and firmly believed Christianity was a demonstrably superior religion. He was an egalitarian insofar as he believed every human to have the same latent genius; however, this was all the more reason to “educate the masses” who could otherwise too easily undermine Anglo-Saxon morality, cultural heritage, biological vitality, and democratic governance that he cherished. He thought all schools should be co-educational, although he also believed that there are “essential” differences between the genders, with women being the “superior” gender. He embraced a holistic model of education that was built upon its idealistic and medieval predecessors, but at the same time he constructed most of his intellectual thought out of the psychological theory of his time that explained mental and physical powers as manifestations of physiological laws. Scientific knowledge of these laws he thought should guide the healthy and holistic development of mind, body, and character.

This sensibility deeply shaped his leadership at Antioch College and framed Antioch’s liberal education. While there is much to criticize in his views and character, his leadership at Antioch was pivotal in the mid-nineteenth century when a number of historical forces converged to foster a distinct approach to the US liberal education tradition. For example, Mann greatly shaped and regularly reaffirmed Antioch’s mission:

First by fostering co-education, the school would attempt to elevate the entire human race rather than just half of it. As far as possible, it also would teach and require good health habits. A third objective would be the achievement of excellence as measured by intrinsic merits rather than by competition and emulation. And lastly, the school would stress sound ethical and moral principles rather than attempt an indoctrination in religious dogma.<sup>36</sup>

Co-education, focusing on mutually supported self-cultivation, including that of the body, with a strong commitment to embodying a broad non-sectarian ethics (reflected in the social justice commitments of Antioch College today), would be the hallmark of Antioch for generations to come. Mann would not allow his college to be the Brown University of his undergraduate years; there would be no recitations of the classics as self-justifying liberal education.

In his view, this SLAC character education was meant to foster persons who exemplify and illuminate moral truth; only moral persons can *know*, in

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<sup>36</sup> Messerli, *Horace Mann*, 543–544.

the fullest and most vital sense: in Mann's platonic<sup>37</sup> worldview, knowledge and morality are conjoined. Mann thought that a college has the task of ethically guiding the development of self-disciplined, dignified, and moral persons to be positioned to advance moral progress.<sup>38</sup>

This progress was not abstract for Mann. It meant graduates going out into their communities as forces for change through being progressive exemplars of virtue: "From college halls, graduates bring forth infection or healing and scatter through the ranks of society. Emphatically, then, they ought to be free from all those vices which infest and scandalize the community, and they ought to be living examples of all those virtues which will turn our theoretical Christianity into a practical one."<sup>39</sup>

This "practical Christianity" was to be maintained by and through a healthy lived embodiment. In the religious millennial utopianism of the nineteenth century, the emphasis on a healthy body was quite common. In this vein, Mann asked those at Antioch to "think for a moment what mankind would gain were they relieved from early decrepitude and from the weakness and bondage of earlier bodily ailments. What elasticity would be given to muscle, what vision to mind, what pinions to genius!"<sup>40</sup> In addition to the influence of Christian millennialism, this view was also shaped by his problematic phrenological and psychological investigations, whose legacy diminished over the years. What would endure is a commitment to developing exemplarity in all aspects of life, which would also become a hallmark of Antioch's approach to liberal education.

In addition, this view of Christianity also led Mann to see an abiding relationship between scientific and religious progress.<sup>41</sup> Mann believed that a genuinely practicable Christianity (i.e., or moral life) ought to be guided by whatever was revealed in the progress of science. Only an obsession with "the preservation of old mummies literary or psychological"<sup>42</sup> had made religion (and early American colleges) an enemy of science. Although Mann would be a demanding and controlling president, it was his openness to whatever

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<sup>37</sup> In the sense that he believed that true knowledge leads to moral growth, and not in the sense of any direct connection with the platonic philosophical tradition.

<sup>38</sup> For more, see: Horace Mann, "Demands of the Age on Colleges," in *Horace Mann at Antioch* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1938), 289.

<sup>39</sup> Horace Mann, "Relation of the Colleges to Community," in *Horace Mann at Antioch* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1938), 545.

<sup>40</sup> Horace Mann, "Dedicatory and Inaugural Address," in *Horace Mann at Antioch* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1938), 214.

<sup>41</sup> For more, see: Mann, "Demands of the Age on Colleges," 318.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

the future of ethical inquiry might hold—his “practical Christianity”—that allowed Antioch enough latitude to maintain a unique progressive and personalist ethos that would ultimately supersede the influence of his white supremacism.

Despite his commitment to the abiding effect of biological law on our condition, he was also deeply committed to the idea of the inherent holistic potential of all persons, as guided by intellect, or what Mann thought of as the “genius”; the latent power that could rid humanity of the infirmity and violence of past ages, and could bring in a new age of perfectibility.<sup>43</sup> It was to our shame that we had not yet fostered the potential of all persons: “Ah! Nowhere else has there been such waste and loss of treasure as in the waste and loss of human faculties.”<sup>44</sup>

His famous closing words, in his last public speech at Antioch’s graduation ceremonies,<sup>45</sup> the “1859 Baccalaureate Address,” can now be properly understood:

So, in the infinitely nobler battle in which you are engaged against error and wrong, if ever repulsed or stricken down, may you always be solaced and cheered by the exulting cry of triumph over some abuse in church or state, some vice or folly in society, some false opinion or cruelty or guilt which you have overcome! And I beseech you to treasure up in your hearts these my parting words: *Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.*<sup>46</sup>

Mann was not simply suggesting to his students that the only way to live a meaningful life was through social-justice activism, though he obviously thought one should certainly be involved in such work. He was also telling them what their very holistic education would do for the world. It is through the character formation and resiliency that would be fostered at Antioch College that they would be able to ameliorate evil from the world (in Mann’s millennialist picture). Even if they failed in some respects, their strenuous efforts themselves would provide moral exemplarity that would pave the way for the others to continue the long march of moral progress. Their very character would in different ways lead to victories for humanity.

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<sup>43</sup> For more, see: Mann, “Dedicatory and Inaugural Address,” 230.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>45</sup> This speech (in a way) was really his “closing words”. Preparing for the graduate celebrations and the speech, exhausted him, and perhaps lead to the sickness that would kill him shortly thereafter. The final line of the speech would become Antioch’s school motto.

<sup>46</sup> Horace Mann, “Baccalaureate Address of 1859,” in *Horace Mann at Antioch* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1938), 389.

Mann was not simply theorizing, he threw all his personal energies into turning his idea of the college into a reality, and perhaps killed himself in his own process to “win this victory for humanity.”<sup>47</sup> He put his greatest energy into Antioch’s curriculum and pedagogy, while leading through his psychological sermons and courses:

Mann set a model of a more individualized instruction, first introducing a subject in general terms, then soliciting specific interests from students, and finally launching them on their own study projects, the results of which they reported back to the class at a later time. He also expanded the walls of the classroom, urging his biology instructor to use the glen below the campus as an outdoor laboratory and taking pride in Austin Craig’s efforts to visit jails and hospitals as part of the course in political science.<sup>48</sup>

Mann’s focus on pedagogy and experiential learning was part of his broader vision of the school itself as a hub to create new teachers who could continue his normal school program throughout the Midwest. Thus, serving others by cultivating their whole character was at the heart of Antioch’s vision of liberal higher learning. The school’s curriculum and pedagogy became novel, not through its reorganization of the trivium and quadrivium in some new fashion, but in its attention to its students as full persons.

While he drew on the philosophical tradition that sees higher education as the “life of the mind,” and especially the one that sees higher education as the force of *Bildung* in the broad *Kulturstadt*, Mann’s own view heralded a disjuncture from these models. He integrated these views into his own holistic and personalistic philosophy of liberal higher learning. As he put it, a college’s highest function was “to act more or less upon all human interests and relations.”<sup>49</sup> But how did students experience this education? Further, if and what legacy and lessons does it provide us today in our own attempts at meaningful heuristic(s) for US liberal education?

### ***Student Experiences at Antioch College***

The written legacy of early Antioch students and faculty reveals how essential the institution was to them and how it really did promote a liberating whole-person character education. Adelaide Shepard’s (a member of the first graduating class in 1857) letters to Mary Richardson (class of 1859) are

<sup>47</sup> See: footnote 44.

<sup>48</sup> Messerli, *Horace Mann*, 557–558.

<sup>49</sup> Mann, “Dedicatory and Inaugural Address,” 198.

instructive in characterizing the life of being a woman and a student in the early days of Antioch. Shepard was a particularly interesting character.<sup>50</sup>

Ada became a teacher herself, and was for a few years an instructor in languages at her alma mater, along with the man she married in 1862, fellow 1857 graduate Henry Clay Badger, known as Clay. She hailed from Dorchester, Massachusetts, and from the time she arrived in Yellow Springs, Horace and Mary Mann took a particularly keen interest in her welfare. Such was their regard for her that following graduation they got her a job as governess for the children of Mary's sister Sophia and her husband, the author Nathaniel Hawthorne. Ada accompanied the Hawthornes to Europe as Nathaniel had received a diplomatic appointment as US consul to England from his old schoolmate from Bowdoin College, President Franklin Pierce, for whom he had written a stirring if not entirely factual campaign biography.<sup>51</sup>

Whitelaw Reid (a future editor and owner of the *New York Tribune*, and a later dignitary in France and England) was at the commencement of Shepard's graduating class. "Ada appeared third on the program, reading her essay, 'All Success Proves Partial Failure,' and thus probably became the first woman graduate of a coeducational college to read her own essay from the platform on commencement day."<sup>52</sup> Reid said of it: "Miss Shepard's essay was one of unusual beauty, one to which a hasty abstract would necessarily do great injustice. The fair author, thoroughly accomplished in all departments of college lore, is perfectly unassuming and modest in her deportment, and it is not strange that the students of Antioch should express their pride in her intellectual successes, which seem to be more than partial."<sup>53</sup> Throughout her life she would regularly receive such compliments. Later as professors at Antioch, both she and Badger were beloved and respected.<sup>54</sup>

In her letters with her friend Mary, she discussed everything from her philosophical thoughts on "illuminating the dark corners of history" to discussing their possible future careers (including but not limited to, preaching, engineering, surgery, and being a professor at a college), to discussing the

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<sup>50</sup> For more information on her remarkable life, see: Robert Lincoln Straker, "Ada Shepard and Henry Badger," in *Horace Mann and Others: Chapters from the History of Antioch College. With a Preface and an Introduction to the Antiochiana Collection in the Olive Kettering Library* (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch Press, 1963), 43–55.

<sup>51</sup> Scott Sanders and Adelaide Shepard, "Ada Shepard to Mary Richardson," in *Songs from the Stacks* (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch College, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Straker, "Ada Shepard and Henry Badger," 46.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> See: *Ibid.*, 52.

current situation of Antioch and how they might support the school.<sup>55</sup> For example, she suggested to Mary:

You must have some action in your profession. You want intellectual and bodily activity combined. I believe you would like to be an engineer. I think it is a noble calling and calculated to call out all the energies of body and of mind. Washington & Fremont were Engineers. In such employments where man deals with nature and immutable laws, there is no perversion of heart or soul as when man deals with man. No jealousies envying, and bickering.<sup>56</sup>

Not only do such letters show how these young women envisioned careers that went beyond the confines of what Mann would have been comfortable with, but they also show how seriously they took Mann's idea of a liberal education to heart. As Shepard suggested, bodily activity and intellectual activity must go hand in hand for a solid career and life. Further, her discussion of immutable laws echoes Mann's own views. The immutable laws are our higher calling, and careers that search for them are higher than careers on the lowly plane where "man deals with man."

As with most students of that time, she also wrote very fondly of Horace Mann.<sup>57</sup> Also like many other Antioch students, both before and after her (and many students at other holistically centered SLACs), as she grew older she became increasingly disappointed with the opportunities for holistically, liberally educated persons in the greater world of her day, especially the limits for women in the middle to late nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> Antioch was on a short list of unique, holistic liberal education centers in the United States at that time. The world outside was not so hospitable to her dreams and potential. Nevertheless, she persisted, and found success as a leader at Antioch itself.

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<sup>55</sup> For general discussions of their lives and work, see: Adelaide Shepard to Mary Richardson, January 20, 1859, Antiochiana Archive, Yellow Springs, OH; Adelaide Shepard to Mary Richardson, August 17, 1858, Antiochiana Archive, Yellow Springs, OH. For a discussion of school life, see: Adelaide Shepard to Mary Richardson, August 14, 1858, Antiochiana Archive, Yellow Springs, OH. For an example of career discussions, see: Adelaide Shepard to Mary Richardson August 8, 185 ... [?].

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> For example, see: Adelaide Shepard to Mary Richardson September 10, 185?, Antiochiana Archive, Yellow Springs, OH.

<sup>58</sup> For example, see: Adelaide Shepard to Mary Richardson, January 28, 1860, Antiochiana Archive, Yellow Springs, OH. Her life is truly remarkable and she was ahead of her time in many ways. Her suicide (committed in fear of insanity) was truly tragic. Her life, as is true of many early graduates of Antioch, deserves closer attention and study. For more on her biography, see: footnote 49 and 50.

The effect of the Antioch liberal education on these students is also indicated by how many of them would devote their careers to Antioch, for example, Reverend John Burns Weston (another student from the first graduating class in 1857), who would, after graduating, become the principal of the preparatory school, and a professor of rhetoric, logic, and Greek. He would even serve three times as president of the college.<sup>59</sup> Although many students did leave Antioch, they kept its vision and ideals in their hearts.<sup>60</sup> There are many other notable figures from this era such as Thomas Hill (the second president, following Mann, and a later president of Harvard), and Austin Craig (a professor and the third president of the college, after Hill).<sup>61</sup> In later years, the list of notable alumni would grow at a remarkable rate.

These early students and faculty members also recognized the negative aspects of the early Antioch experience, especially relating to Mann as an uncompromising and demanding moralist, with deeply problematic views. Despite the challenges that faced the school, and often despite Mann himself, Antioch did cultivate holistic students, who had dreams beyond the narrow confines of the era. Not only did Antioch succeed at supporting thoughtful and engaged women, but also it opened its doors to some black students (albeit in limited numbers).<sup>62</sup> Although life after Antioch was not always a success, the students exemplified more possibilities for human life and dignity because of their education at Antioch, which came to represent a new intelligible symbol of an alternative vision of liberal higher education. In 1890, Henry Clay Badger (Shepard's widower) gave a speech on "Our Antioch Ideals" at Harvard where he worked. At this time, Antioch was already developing a reputation at Harvard as an innovative liberal college shaping the schools to come in the Midwest. Badger concluded his speech by saying:

Show me another school in the world whose pupils were gathered from so wide an area, from so many States, which yet had such unity and such purity of life. Show me one that had within its walls so little vice. Show me one where women were held in higher honor. Show me one whose alumni were so largely teachers. Show me one that had, from the dawn of her day, so fair an ideal of home-life,

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<sup>59</sup> For more see: Scott Sanders and Reverend John Burns Weston, "Reverend John Burns Weston," in *Songs from the Stacks* (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch College, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> For example, see the story of Lucy Salisbury: Scott Sanders and Jennie W. Scudder, "Lucy Salisbury," in *Songs from the Stacks* (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch College, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> For more see: Robert Lincoln Straker, *Horace Mann and Others: Chapters from the History of Antioch College. With a Preface and an Introduction to the Antiochiana Collection in the Olive Kettering Library* (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch Press, 1963).

<sup>62</sup> For more, see: Kramer, *Utopia and Human Culture*, 72–74.

so sweet an ideal of Christ the Lord, or so high an ideal of what scholarship, womanhood, and Christian manhood should be. These ideals, these dreams have walked incarnate here!<sup>63</sup>

What “walked incarnate” was the actualization of a holistic liberal education. What Antioch offered was an education to liberate full personhood, and by that exemplarity culture was supposed to be advanced.

### ***Conclusion***

It was never our intent to write a hagiography of early Antioch, Horace Mann, or its students. The school was a product of its time, and faced many challenges, including teaching what would now be considered the basic elements of a K–12 education. It was also founded on land taken through settler colonialism, and its founder held eclectic views, including white supremacist ones, that at times are hard to reconcile with modern conceptions of a liberal education. Antioch existed well before the formalization of academic disciplines, the creation of accreditation and oversight processes for higher education, and most of the major reforms that have shaped our current situation. Throughout nearly its whole existence Antioch has also faced political backlash for its progressive ideals and students, and has continued to skirt financial disaster. In fact, it has almost continually been imperiled for the last 171 years of its existence and was forced to briefly close its doors from 2008 to 2012.<sup>64</sup>

Still, despite its many imperfections and antiquated context, we believe that Antioch’s founding experiences offer us insight into how to clear up our educational confusion surrounding the meaning and application of the liberal arts in the US context. In particular, we believe it suggests five insights into how to clarify and better defend what is of abiding value in US liberal arts education.

First, stemming from the creation of SLACs like Antioch, the term “liberal education,” within this approach to US higher education began to reference an aim, curriculum, and institutional structure meant to *liberate* the holistic potential of persons through a deep character education. This education was primed to empower character formation in all aspects of life, for a life of service. It would pervade the work of alumni through how they exemplified, in their respective communities, a rich way of life. In this vein, as this approach to liberal learning has developed since early Antioch, it has

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<sup>63</sup> Straker, “Ada Shepard and Henry Badger,” 55.

<sup>64</sup> For more, see: Kramer, “Utopia and Human Culture,” 54–85.

increasingly focused on defending the kind of socially constituted, mindful, and robust individualism that is needed for robust democratic public life. It is the very kind of social-individualism that Dewey advocated for in his life and work.<sup>65</sup> This clarification of one approach to liberal education helps guide the suggestions to follow, for it provides a heuristic for what to defend, a deep humane and democratic character education.

Second, while not being their defining characteristic, curriculum became for like-minded institutions in this liberal education tradition, a tool to untap the vital energies of persons for a better world. Depth and breadth were to be found not only in the disciplines, but in the depth of character and breadth of capabilities fostered in students to enable them to respond to their cultural situation. SLACs originally designed their curriculum to focus on such character development, as opposed to the emphasis within universities on replicating the breath of the varied disciplines and thereby “advancing” knowledge, and asking students to delve into one particular field, or set of related fields. While this approach to curriculum ought to be further developed and defended, this approach has struggled to be fully implemented at most US (and global) institutions, even at many SLACs, whose faculty are trained not as generalists but disciplinary experts, whose fields mostly hold the research university as the ideal.

This brings us to our third point. While holistic liberal education is of course still a well-known trope used to promote many different kinds of liberal arts programs, colleges, and universities, unfortunately, it has often been disingenuous in its application. This calls for a deeper commitment to fostering the kind of teaching that can focus on this kind of holistic learning as its main concern.

While most Colleges of the Liberal Arts in universities would proclaim some version of the liberally educated person as their aim, many instructors in such colleges may not have the liberally educated person as their aim. If instructors of breadth courses discipline their pedagogy by reference to those aims, then there is a fair chance that what actually goes on in the college meshes well with the aims. But instructors vary in what their aims are, and for some breadth courses (e.g., frequently, organic chemistry) gatekeeping regulates the pedagogy whereas, conversely, but equally unaligned with the aims of a liberal education, for others the aim of inducing students to major in the discipline, or to give students the

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<sup>65</sup> For more, see: John Dewey, “Individualism, Old and New,” in *The Later Work of John Dewey, 1925–1953: 1929–1930, the Sources of a Science of Education, Individualism, Old and New, and Construction of a Criticism*, Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

information they need in order to “shop” more effectively for a major, regulates the pedagogy. The actual behavior of the institution and the people within it is not necessarily aligned with the stated educational aims of the institution.<sup>66</sup>

To put it another way, because academic departments centered on distinct disciplines have evolved as the primary unit by which professors shape their teaching, research, and professional identity, the organizational culture of higher education, even at SLACs that value holistic liberal education, often has quite different aims than those stated by the institution. This organizational culture—dominated by faculty pressure to publish in their fields—thus promotes a politics of maintaining disciplinary prerogatives within the general education curriculum. The results of this political maneuvering will decide a disciplinarily framed department’s continued relevance in the institution, on which current and future departmental positions depend.

In such an academically politicized arena SLAC professors who are generalists, who specialize in holistic, liberal education, are all too often deterred in pursuit of this goal. Aside from teaching Freshman “honors” seminars, such teaching is not fully valued in calculating departmental advancement.<sup>67</sup> This organizational culture centered around disciplinarity is rarely challenged at universities, and perhaps should not be, given their essential role in the project of knowledge production. However, this disciplinary hegemony over curriculum at SLACs has diminished the potential for the sort of whole-person education that early Antioch helped initiate and exemplify and that has been an invaluable aspect of US liberal education ever since. While many wonderful teachers exist across the disciplines and their departments, the overall

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<sup>66</sup> Brighouse, “How Can We Understand,” 6. Brighouse is not alone in emphasizing this concern. The neo-classical reformers of higher education in the twentieth century, such as Robert Maynard Hutchins and Alexander Meiklejohn, expressed similar concerns about the domination of the disciplinary mentality. For more, see: Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936); Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College* (Harper, 1932). More recently, the American philosopher Bruce Wilshire wrote a scathing critique of the professionalized culture of the university: Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>67</sup> One of the authors of this essay was offered the following advice from his dean with regard to tenure: “Tenure, as you well know, is based on three categories: service, teaching, and publications. Service doesn’t count, and nobody knows what constitutes good teaching. You do the math.”

structure of disciplines as the primary organizational unit in SLACS, has been disruptive to what they do best.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, just as Antioch College in its formative years turned away from the stultified past toward unleashing the full potential of students, so we might pursue a similar mission. In our goal to co-create, implement, and guide SLACs to champion the holistic tradition of liberal arts education in the United States, we advocate developing and institutionally supporting teachers as generalists who work toward cultivating full person education. This would begin with graduate school programs across (and perhaps beyond) the disciplines that place a deliberate emphasis on preparing students who want to become professors whose work will be assessed on the quality of their pedagogical work, not mainly on their disciplinary publications. To defend this distinctive realignment of incentives requires what is now sometimes called “teaching-intensive tenure tracks.”

For the purposes of this article, “tenure” refers not only to the particular structures of faculty disciplinary reward structures that exist today, but to more inclusive principles of tenure as articulated by the American Association of University Professors in 1940: “After the expiration of a probationary period, teachers or investigators should have permanent or continuous tenure, and their service should be terminated only for adequate cause, except in the case of retirement for age, or under extraordinary circumstances because of financial exigencies.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, faculty ought to be offered secure jobs with due process rights after a probationary period.

How this may look in the future could be quite different from the current model. What will ensure the thriving of the US holistic liberal arts tradition is having teaching-focused faculty included in such job securities. By “teaching intensive” we mean that one track to achieve such occupational security should be through an emphasis on high-end holistic teaching practice, with publications (including articles on the teaching process itself) playing a reinforcing role to that emphasis. This track would include teaching residencies, review, evaluation, and research time that goes into effective teaching such as

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<sup>68</sup> For more on the disciplinary department as the primary unit of organization in higher education, see: Tony Becher and Paul Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines* (UK: McGraw-Hill Education, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> American Association of University Professors, “1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments,” *American Association of University Professors Reports and Publications*, April 1970, <https://www.aaup.org/file/1940%20Statement.pdf>.

reading groups, syllabus development, pedagogical workshops and trainings in specialized topics, as the essential criteria for tenure. While this happens at some liberal arts colleges *de facto*, for the development of a proper organizational culture it should be *de jure*. It should be seen as a respected alternative goal of their vocation.<sup>70</sup>

Our fourth suggestion is that holistic education remains a distinctive and essential option, including in other contexts and at a distance (at least some of the time). It represents a model that the much of rest of the world increasingly values and seeks to replicate (even in places where authoritarian regimes vilify liberal education). Beyond the disciplinary model of the research university, there is an increasing global interest in replicating holistic, student-centered, and integrative education for other contexts. One could look, for example, to the work being done by the European Union “For example, in Europe there is has been renewed interest in US student-centered liberal arts and sciences education as a way out of intellectual and societal pitfalls, and in response to a transforming economic situation. For example, one could look at the generously EU funded project: “Creating Responsive, Engaging, and Tailored Education with Students (CREATES)” Strategic Partnership. CREATES seeks to “enhance practices in higher education that foster co-creation and an engaging education for students. This approach helps students develop the dispositions and competences that are essential to thrive in the 21st century: innovation and creativity, participation and responsibility, as well as critical thinking and informed judgment.”<sup>71</sup> CREATES seeks to move European public higher education toward an holistic and student-centered liberal arts model, as best represented by US SLACs.

Such a whole-person emphasis appeals at a time where universities are being heavily criticized for their failure to offer direct routes to careers in many graduates’ major fields, and are urged instead to support creative, flexible, and highly adaptive students, who will likely be a part of a precariat class that does a variety of work across their lifetimes. What is striking is that it is

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<sup>70</sup> For an example model of how such teaching intensive tenure track lines might work, see: Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Appendix: Implementing a Teacher Intensive Tenure Track at Portland State University. For a defense of the need for tenure including teaching intensive positions, see: American Association of College and Universities, “Tenure and Teaching-Intensive Appointments,” *American Association of Universities Reports and Publications*, 2014, <https://www.aaup.org/report/tenure-and-teaching-intensive-appointments>.

<sup>71</sup> “About,” *Creating Responsive, Engaging, and Tailored Education with Students*, accessed September 9, 2019, <http://europe-creates.eu/>.

not the curriculum per se of US liberal education that is drawing interest, rather it is the quality of classroom experience, the close engagement with professors, the ability to engage with all aspects of life as character development, guided by critical reflection, and to engage with problems of the present in intercultural and interdisciplinary ways, that is of value.

Finally, early Antioch suggest something we know in US liberal education so well, yet also recognize there is no easy way to defend; that supporting the cultivation of full complex persons, feeding all aspects of their lives and character, in small classes with great teachers, is the heart of a great education. It is hard work that needs serious cultural and economic support to be successful on a broad scale. As those who are well acquainted with US SLACs know (including at Antioch and other SLACs grouped under the category of “colleges for students who want to change the world”) what makes the education is not the general education curriculum per se, nor the range of faculty, but the quality of the engagement of faculty with students.<sup>72</sup>

For this reason, we suggest that in pursuit of a revitalized liberal education for diverse twenty-first-century learners, we should not be guided primarily by the model of our most selective and elite higher education institutions. The overzealous focus on such places is part of the reason we have a difficult time positioning and articulating the role of SLACs today in order to better defend them as developing civic, cultural, and social leaders for the difficult times to come. We should look to those “parochial” smaller- and middle-sized local SLACs whose focus is on teaching and learning environments that are holistic, personalized, collaborative, and that serve as existential exercises to deepen our awareness of ourselves, and by that process, prepares us to serve the world.

These are the very institutions under threat due to the rapid changes in enrollment because of the pandemic. More importantly, their model is centered on the intimacy of the residential SLAC experience which is now far more limited because of the pandemic. Many have only modest financial resources and will not outlast this storm. Despite this challenge, we do find heartening models that put holistic liberal education at the heart of distance learning. These models were often out there well before the pandemic,<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For a similar argument, see: Frank Bruni, “How to Get the Most Out of College: They’re Privileged, Pivotal Years. Navigate Them with as Much Care as You Did the Path That Got You There,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/opinion/college-students.html>.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Prescott College’s distance learning program. For more, see: Matthew Ryg and Eli Kramer, “Reconstructing Dewey, Techne, and Educational Experience in the University,” *The Journal of School and Society* 2 (April 2015).

but now deserve especially close attention. The future of SLACs education depends on our ability to hunker down on these essentials for reform that center on continuing, and in some cases revitalizing, holistic liberal education: focusing on the character formation of individuals that can serve their democratic communities, shifting curriculum away from mere breadth and depth in disciplinary knowledge and to breadth and depth of character formation, supporting teacher tracks in higher education to foster this kind of student-centered learning, exploring the possibilities for liberal holistic learning in other contexts and at distance, and finally being unafraid to defend a robust holistic liberal education even if it demands a lot to carry out well.

The educational confusion around the meaning of liberal education in the United States has often disguised these essential priorities. They will help these schools survive and thrive and continue holistic liberating liberal education, in a time where the reduction of life to career, to consumer satisfaction, to answering tests properly becomes all the more dominant in our lives. These schools today are critical centers for holistic education that can continue to afford deep character formation that allows us to meet the challenge of the times in which we find ourselves.

Even though we should not be directly guided by Horace Mann's deeply problematic notions of higher education, nor Antioch's messy early days, we would do well to be inspired to continue the tradition they initiated. We should continue to foster the nurturing soil of personalized learning that is essential to the growth of humane and civic values. It is this holism that is worth preserving in an increasingly unstable and fragmented world.