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Importing the American Liberal Arts College?

Kristine Mitchell and Cotten Seiler

The liberal arts model of higher education is simultaneously under attack in the United States—the place where it is most entrenched—and being embraced, at least in part, elsewhere in the world. In this essay, we look at the utilitarian concerns that motivate these domestic and international shifts, paying special attention to what Chinese experiments with liberal arts education might mean for future developments in that country.

“Irrelevant”? The Attack on the Liberal Arts Model in the United States

In recent years, there have been a number of high-profile challenges to the funding of liberal arts disciplines in American public universities. Allocation of public funds to these fields is portrayed as wasteful and decadent by a number of prominent and vocal critics. Florida governor Rick Scott said in a 2011 interview that he wanted to shift funds away from programs like anthropology (his daughter’s major!) and instead “spend our money getting people science, technology, engineering and math degrees. That’s what our kids need to focus all of their time and attention on: Those type of degrees that, when they get out of school, they can get a job [*sic*].”¹ The idea was echoed more recently by North Carolina governor Pat McCrory. In a (February) 2013 radio show, he belittled gender studies and foreign language programs, asking, “What are we teaching these courses for if they are not going to help get a job?”²

Liberal arts education is often caricatured as a foolish, irrelevant diversion of an out-of-touch elite, not something to be pursued by anyone interested in employability. As Scott told his audience, anthropology is “a great degree if people want to get it, but we don’t need them here [in Florida].” McCrory remarked, “If you want to take gender studies that’s fine. Go to a private school, and take it. But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job.”

Scott and McCrory ignore, however, the good reasons—discussed here—to believe that the liberal arts model is excellent preparation not just for a life of philosophical contemplation but for a lifetime of work. But the idea that the purpose of higher education is to slot graduates directly into a currently popular professional niche has become pervasive, leading some to advocate cutting public funding for higher education, or as a 2012 article in *Forbes* magazine suggested, “eliminating the departments that offer majors that employers do not value.”³

The comments of Scott and McCrory (and others) are representative of the most recent attack on liberal arts institutions and curricula—but targeting liberal arts institutions is far from new. In fact, the critique of liberal arts education in America is nearly as old as the institutions that provide it. The most influential historiography of US higher education puts the heyday of the liberal arts college at around 1820, before the advent of Jacksonian democracy and the industrial revolution. Denominational, insular, and resolutely elitist, these eighteenth-century institutions prepared propertied, white male students for leadership in local and regional political-religious communities, and in the larger civic life of the nation. The curriculum combined the classical with the ecclesiastical, the intellectual with the ethical, to produce the types of virtuous citizens the new republican form of government required. In the historian Richard Hofstadter’s recounting of the emergence of academic freedom, the replacement of the tradition-bound “old-time college” by the dynamic, progressive university based on the German model in the latter decades of the nineteenth century was the best thing to have happened for the sake of American knowledge, industry, and democracy.⁴ As the university emerged as a force in US higher education, it portrayed itself in opposition to the liberal arts college, which university officials cast as, in the words of one Stanford president, “antiquated, belated, arrested, starved.”⁵ The university, by contrast, was said to foster industrial growth and social change, by providing students with a more applied and diverse curriculum, severing most ecclesiastical ties, and revising the hidebound policies of most liberal arts colleges that excluded women and people of color.

Driving most of these changes were the two industrial revolutions that transformed the

US economy and society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the first, the emergence of industrial manufacturing and the market economy; and the second, the expansion of and intensification of control over the productive process by means of technology and “scientific management” of labor. These revolutions created the need for the university and shaped its mission of generating practical and specialized knowledge and training effective technicians and professional managers for the new corporate economy. The early twentieth century saw an intensification of the disdain with which the universities and their supporters regarded the liberal arts college, with its curriculum of subjects irrelevant to these technocratic and bureaucratic ends. Progressive reformers, too, saw universities as the key sites of activist scholarship, mostly in new social sciences such as sociology, geared toward the amelioration of the social problems generated by industrial capitalism.

There were (and are) real differences between the university and the liberal arts college, but the nineteenth-century critiques of the liberal arts colleges were misleading. The elitism charge applied to universities, as well. Despite their rhetoric of democratization, they tended to be sites of reproduction of elite power and privilege. And the liberal arts college changed significantly during the Progressive Era. Pressed to respond both to the university’s critique and the political and economic upheavals and ethical dilemmas of the century, the majority of surviving liberal arts colleges evolved into more ecumenical places over the course of the nineteenth century. Led by pioneering progressive institutions like Oberlin, Middlebury, and Spelman, liberal arts colleges began to educate both women and African Americans in increasing numbers. Even the more religious colleges shed much of their asceticism as they responded to these pressures, and as the sects that they served took up more of a worldly mission themselves.

Moreover, despite characterizing the liberal arts as outdated, by the first decade of the twentieth century, many universities had begun to incorporate or emulate liberal arts colleges and to praise their merits as feeders to and partners with the universities. Harvard president A. Lawrence Lowell, speaking at his 1909 inauguration, called for a resuscitation of the liberal arts

college, which he described as giving “a freedom of thought, a breadth of outlook, a training for citizenship, which neither the secondary nor the professional school in this country can equal.”⁶ Indeed a number of educators and intellectuals in the Progressive Era and the interwar period rebelled against what they saw as an increasing instrumental higher educational system. This system might be producing effective “professionals,” but it was failing at a more profound educational mission, which, in the words of Antioch College president Arthur Morgan, speaking at a 1931 conference, was “to orient and to integrate personality, to develop the entire mind of the student.”⁷ On the eve of World War II the liberal arts college had emerged as the institutional locus of experimental pedagogy within US higher education, drawing inspiration from the theories of John Dewey and others that stressed creativity, autonomy, and a democratic ethos in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge. The Deweyan insistence on experiential rather than received learning, and on the student’s intellectual self-discovery, continues to animate most liberal arts colleges to the present day.

In recent decades, however, the tide of public sentiment has again turned against the liberal arts. Today, well-intentioned parents and guidance counselors often advise students that—especially in a tough economy—it’s “safer” to pursue a degree in a professional field like health or business rather than indulge in the “luxury” of a liberal arts major like biology, American studies, or politics. Numbers of liberal arts majors have declined, and demand for professional and technical degrees increased, even at institutions that claim to offer a liberal arts education.⁸

Indeed, it’s not just the larger public institutions that are backing away from the liberal arts model in the United States. The private liberal arts colleges that are nearly unique to the United States have increasingly adopted the pre-professional model of higher education, either alongside or in place of the traditional liberal arts model. And where pre-professional programs have been adopted, they have often taken over. One researcher found that, by the 1990s, two-thirds of institutions claiming to offer a liberal arts education were, in fact, dominated by students studying in professional programs.⁹

In 1990, the economist David W. Breneman posed the question “Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges?” in a controversial article of the same title in *The College Board Review*. Breneman answered in the affirmative, finding that of the approximately 600 institutions the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching listed as liberal arts colleges, only 212 could be defined as such under the more rigorous criteria he used. According to Breneman, liberal arts colleges were “distinguished by a mission of providing four-year baccalaureate education exclusively, in a setting that emphasizes and rewards good teaching above all else,” by “their offering a curriculum that does not cater to current student concerns with the job market,” by their small enrollments, and by their lack or dearth professional programs. Breneman argued that the nearly 400 institutions he had excluded had veered from the liberal arts model in response to economic pressures, becoming, “for want of a better term—small professional colleges.”¹⁰ A 2012 study reapplied Breneman’s criteria to the remaining 212 liberal arts institutions and reaffirmed that the liberal arts had become increasingly decentered as a result of expanding professional programs at approximately 70 of them. These researchers found that despite the “liberal arts” moniker, many of these institutions no longer distinguished themselves by “a curriculum based primarily in arts and science fields; small classes and close student-faculty relationships; full-time study and student residence on campus; and little emphasis on vocational preparation or study in professional fields.”¹¹

What Makes a Liberal Arts Education Unique?

While there is often disagreement over precisely what the term “liberal arts” refers to in higher education, we submit—on the basis of our reading of literature on the subject and our personal experiences with the liberal arts model—that there are four characteristics that distinguish the liberal arts model from the alternatives.

First, a liberal arts education has a particular objective, namely, to *educate* individuals for a life of learning and intellectual growth rather than to *train* them in preparation for a certain type

of career. Liberal arts education is not about offering certification or credentials, although to be sure, the BA functions as such as surely as an MBA or a JD. While reasonable people may disagree about whether this major or that is “really” a liberal arts discipline (computer science springs to mind, but at our institution, international business and management is even more hotly contested), to our minds, what is more important is the institutional objective for teaching a subject, and—relatedly—the approach to teaching it. When a subject is taught with the aim of imparting marketable skills that will attract employers after graduation, it enters into the territory of vocational training—whether the skills in question are the ability to speak Mandarin, perform econometric analysis, write computer programs, or take blood samples. Because the objective is skills transfer, training rarely moves beyond the mechanical “how-to” level. This is not to imply that such training is in any sense basic; on the contrary, the topic may become quite advanced and the techniques extremely sophisticated. Yet so long as the primary objective is the development of a set of practical skills, this is best characterized as vocational training. In the Middle Ages, such training was referred to as the *artes mechanicae*—the mechanical or practical arts.

Now, to be clear, such training is the prerequisite of all education, regardless of discipline or educational objective. At the most fundamental level, one must be trained to read. Beyond that, classicists have to learn the mechanics of Latin and Ancient Greek, historians have to learn names and dates—there’s no way around it. The question is really about whether the training has a utilitarian objective (this will get me a better job) or whether it is intended to serve as a stepping-stone toward further intellectual inquiry and growth. For when these skills are learned, not as an *end* in themselves but as the *means* to investigate the world around us—well, now we are in the realm of the liberal arts. When students learn, not only the foundational knowledge or the mechanics of a subject but also how to be critical of those foundations, how to challenge the conventional wisdom, and how to use insights from other disciplines to pose new questions and answer old ones, then they are learning within the tradition of the *artes liberales*—the liberal arts—whether the subject is computer science, classics, or anthropology. For the primary

objective of a liberal arts education is to teach students to think for themselves.

The second characteristic of liberal arts education is its distinctive curriculum, which privileges academic breadth. In contrast with the dominant model in global higher education, where students specialize early (often prior to arrival at the university) and pursue a single course of study throughout their degree, a liberal arts education hinges on the idea that students with knowledge of multiple disciplines are able to translate insights from one field to others, to think creatively about problems, and to find connections that specialists in only one area might otherwise miss. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) defines a liberal education as one that “provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest.” What this means is that students not only complete a major in their chosen field but also complete a core curriculum or satisfy distribution requirements that expose them to the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. In short, while students complete a major that aims to provide academic depth in a single subject, this specialization is *complemented* by exposure to other fields of study and areas of inquiry.

A third distinctive element of a liberal arts education is its pedagogy, which is premised on the idea that there is a synergy between academic research and teaching, and that the best source of knowledge about a subject is the scholars who actually shape that discipline. Faculty are neither exclusively teachers, nor “mainly” researchers who also spend a few hours every week lecturing to undergraduates. They are contributors to their field who equally prize the opportunity to share their knowledge about their fields—or perhaps more accurately, join with students in a process of inquiry. Because liberal arts pedagogy is animated by this spirit of joint inquiry, it requires engagement on the part of both students and faculty. Students are expected to be more than vessels into which knowledge is poured; they are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. Faculty are expected to be not just the talking head at the front of the room but facilitators who assist each student to navigate his or her way through the complexity of the

subject at hand and to see connections between phenomena that may, at first glance, appear to be disparate. The liberal arts classroom is a place of two-way exchange between students and faculty rather than a one-way transmission belt from faculty to students. Cultivating this type of relationship between students and faculty means that large lecture halls must (for the most part) be traded for small classes where interaction can actually occur, where—on a daily basis—students contribute, and where faculty monitor students' progress, modifying the course as necessary to account for students' responses.

Finally, the fourth distinctive trait of a liberal arts education is its commitment to educating the whole person, both inside and outside of the classroom. The residential college, where students live together on campus, provides numerous opportunities for students' intellectual and personal development: student clubs for virtually any conceivable interest (some of which have faculty participation as well); rich cultural opportunities; extracurricular speakers; all manner of sports, athletic, and fitness activities. The whole point of the residential experience is to foster a sense of community and place, where students are free to develop their intellect and discover (or create) who they are going to be as adults. This is not considered to be peripheral to the liberal arts mission but fully a part of it. Indeed, what happens outside the classroom can have as profound an effect on a student's intellectual growth as what happens inside. Surely this emphasis on educating the entire individual stems from rootedness of the liberal arts model in the Christian tradition. In the medieval European universities—the first liberal arts colleges—the entire intellectual endeavor was geared toward better understanding God and humans' relationship with the divine. And the small independent liberal arts colleges that sprang up in North America in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were most often tied to specific confessional groups or sects. But though the liberal arts model has been almost completely secularized, the ideal of cultivating the entire person has endured.

The four characteristics that make a liberal arts education distinctive—its nonvocational objective, its broad curriculum, its pedagogical commitment to faculty-student exchange, and its

promotion of extracurricular development of the whole individual—together comprise a liberal arts ideal. But does that ideal matter? Why should we care if the liberal arts model flourishes?

There are two characteristic defenses of the liberal arts model, a civic one and a utilitarian one. The civic rationale is predicated on the idea that a liberal arts education produces good citizens. The notion that liberal education is the cornerstone of citizenship goes back to ancient Greece and persisted through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and into the Modern Era. We believe it is still relevant today. Liberal arts students have the tools to become full signatories to the social contract: they are educated to be historically astute, confident about human potential but leery of hubris, simultaneously loyal to the nation and attuned to an egalitarian justice that transcends national borders. Let's call these claims the Jeffersonian defense of the liberal arts, as Jefferson envisioned a republic composed of citizens educated to practice public virtue.

In recent years, however, this Jeffersonian rationale has been eclipsed by what we might call an instrumentalist defense of the liberal arts. According to this comparatively recent line of reasoning, those trained in the liberal arts are particularly well poised to rise to prominence in their professional lives, precisely because their education enables them to recognize patterns, connections, and unfilled niches, to think creatively about problems, and to argue persuasively—to investors, customers, and courts—in the promotion of their particular enterprises. In contrast to the pessimism of Rick Scott, Pat McCrory, and others regarding the unemployability of liberal arts graduates, the instrumentalist defense of liberal arts education asserts that the dispositions of resourcefulness, versatility, and autonomy stressed in a liberal arts education sustain and advantage graduates as they navigate the job market.

Supporters of the liberal arts like to say that a liberal arts education prepares students for jobs that haven't even been invented yet. Indeed, a liberal arts education can provide liberal arts students with intellectual flexibility and an ability to think both critically and creatively. Whether they seek it out or not, students in a liberal arts program are exposed to different intellectual

norms and different methods of asking and answering questions. They learn to grapple with clashing opinions and contradictory points of view. They are confronted with the fact that what constitutes evidence, an effective argument, and proof varies widely from one context to another.¹² Ideally, this results in intellectual agility, as students learn to navigate such disparate areas of inquiry. Learning foreign languages (even Swahili, so derided by Governor McCrory) can provide a window into other cultures and provide fresh insights into the assumptions of one's own culture. Responding to Governor Scott's derision of anthropology, Michael Crow, the president of Arizona State University, wrote in *Slate* that, if we want students capable of technical accomplishment, "we need all of the skill sets from anthropology to zoology as well as transdisciplinary perspectives. . . . Inspired engineering, in other words, could come as a consequence of familiarity with the development of counterpoint in Baroque music or cell biology. Or even the construction methods of indigenous tribes." The goal of education, he continues, "should not be to produce predetermined numbers of particular types of majors but, rather, to focus on how to produce individuals who are capable of learning anything over the course of their lifetimes."¹³

It is one thing for college and university presidents to tout the utilitarian value of a liberal arts education, but recent surveys indicate that employers also recognize the importance of liberal arts training. A recent (spring 2013) survey of American employers conducted by the AACU finds that employers view graduates with both broad and field-specific knowledge and skills more favorably than those who are more narrowly specialized. Indeed, 80 percent of employers reported that every college student, regardless of major, should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences, and 74 percent said they would recommend liberal arts education as the best way to prepare for success in today's global economy.¹⁴ Furthermore, the liberal arts model has been making inroads in China, Japan, and Korea, where "employers have complain[ed] about the inflexibility of a workforce educated without a focus on creativity or problem solving."¹⁵ According to an education professor at the University of Hong Kong, "These countries realize

that, in order to become a global leader, you need a creative class.”¹⁶

It is fascinating that, at the same time that liberal arts education is pilloried in the United States, it has received increasing attention elsewhere. What is even more fascinating is that, while the liberal arts are too often dismissed in the United States as professionally irrelevant, the rise of the liberal arts abroad is driven precisely by utilitarian concerns. (This is in marked contrast to the civic and religious motivations that drove the creation of liberal arts colleges in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.) Among the recently developed international liberal arts programs with which we are familiar, the instrumentalist rationale is central for all but one (the exception being Quest University Canada).

Liberal Arts à la Carte

In the past fifteen years, there has been a growing international trend toward promoting the liberal arts as a means of promoting employability and driving economic development. Around the world, a number of new liberal arts programs have been created that are consciously modeled on the American liberal arts college. Sometimes these developments occur within preexisting universities, sometimes within completely new institutions. But despite their common roots in the American liberal arts college model, these new institutions have pursued a variety of paths, opting for certain elements of the liberal arts model while foregoing others.

On one extreme are institutions that adopt all four of the distinctive characteristics of the liberal arts model: the nonvocational objective, the curricular breadth, the centrality of pedagogy, and the extracurricular emphasis on community and development of the whole person. For example, at Quest University Canada, established in British Columbia in 2002, 425 students live on campus, where they spend half of their degree completing a core curriculum that ranges widely across the arts and sciences and then design their own inquiry for the second half. In the Netherlands, a host of so-called university colleges have been established since 1998. These honors colleges, which are appended to preexisting universities in Amsterdam, Leiden,

Maastricht, Middelburg, Rotterdam, Twente, and Utrecht, enroll some six hundred to seven hundred undergraduate students, who live together and take courses in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. The residential component is less central at Campion College, a Catholic institution founded in Sydney, Australia, in 2006, but establishing an intellectual community and providing for the education of the whole person are nevertheless clearly central to its mission. Campion bills itself as the “first Liberal Arts College in Australia” and offers a core liberal arts curriculum that includes Latin, literature, history, philosophy, theology, mathematics, and science.

However, the “whole package” of the liberal arts model is only rarely adopted. There are rather more examples of existing institutions that adopt certain liberal arts characteristics while leaving others aside. For example, a number of established European universities have seized, in particular, on the principle of academic breadth, while leaving aside the other elements of the liberal arts model. New undergraduate degrees in liberal arts or liberal studies are now offered alongside the traditional, more specialized, disciplines at more than two dozen European universities, including Charles University (Czech Republic), Jacobs University Bremen (Germany), Warsaw University (Poland), Gotland University (Sweden), and University College London (UK). The introduction of liberal arts degrees is a fairly radical departure from the “Continental” model of higher education, which has traditionally emphasized specialized study within a single discipline and, often, an early differentiation between academic and practical education.¹⁷ In Germany, for example, the separation of educational tracks into academic and vocational begins already at the late-primary level, while in France and Sweden certain types of vocational training begin at the secondary level.

If existing universities are experimenting with the adoption of a liberal arts curriculum, there is also a trend of establishing new institutions that are influenced by aspects of the liberal arts model, even when vocational training remains the major focus of undergraduate education. For example, Ashesi University, founded in 2002 in Accra, Ghana, provides its six hundred students a degree in business administration, computer science, or management information

systems—disciplines intended to be vocational. But its founder, a Ghanaian alumnus of Swarthmore College and former engineer at Microsoft, insists the required core curriculum in the liberal arts “nurtures ethical thinking and fosters critical thinking” and will eventually help to “educate a new generation of ethical, entrepreneurial leaders in Africa [and] to cultivate within [its] students the critical thinking skills, the concern for others and the courage it will take to transform a continent.”¹⁸ Beaconhouse National University, founded in 2003 in Lahore, calls itself the “first liberal arts university of Pakistan.” In reality, its School of Liberal Arts comprises only one of nine faculties (the rest being professionally oriented). But its policies promote the curricular breadth, pedagogical style, and extracurricular development of the whole individual that are characteristic of the liberal arts model. For example, Beaconhouse offers credit for coursework done outside students’ own degree programs; fosters the creative and performing arts; and emphasizes small, interactive classes, faculty mentorship of students, and the use of frequent written assignments rather than comprehensive exams as the basis for student evaluation. Certainly its claim that “students are encouraged to question assumptions, listen to diverse opinions and challenge convention” is inspired by the objective of liberal arts education.¹⁹

China represents a particularly interesting example of the selective application of liberal arts principles to an existing system of higher education. As in the other cases, the move to incorporate elements of the liberal arts model into Chinese higher education is motivated by utilitarian concerns. As discussed earlier, that rationale asserts that material benefits accrue to those individuals, and by extension to companies and nations, trained to see and think broadly, to navigate and process complex and disparate knowledges, to foresee and adapt to change, and to communicate effectively and persuasively.

Over the past decade, Chinese educational leaders have recognized the economic utility of the liberal arts education. Looking to models in US liberal arts institutions—which, like many US universities, have experienced a recent surge in matriculation of Chinese students—Chinese educators have taken to partnering with those institutions to create hybrid programs, creating their

own standalone liberal arts colleges, and introducing liberal arts curricula into the traditional professional and technical universities. Experimental institutions such as Yuanjing Academy in Chongqing, Bo Ya College at Guangzhou's Sun Yat-Sen University, Yuanpei College at Beijing's Peking University, and Zhuhai's United International College are state-sanctioned challenges to the Soviet model that has predominated in China since 1949. That model trains students in highly specialized fields oriented to industrial advance and military strength, and in the collectivist political philosophy of the state under Maoism. Its success in achieving for China the type of modernization its leaders then sought cannot be denied.

Many educational authorities in China today, however, argue that for the current phase of national transformation, the Soviet model has limited utility. As envisioned by the somewhat ironically named Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has retained its grip on the state and economy despite the transformational turn away from Maoist doctrine and toward state capitalism that began with Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s, the China-to-come will not merely participate in global modernity but shape it, setting templates rather than following them. Its economy—robustly capitalist, though tightly regulated by the state—will not merely serve a supporting manufactory role to the West's creative lead. The liberal arts institutions that have sprung up recently testify to the perceived need among elites for a means of fostering the type of Chinese citizens that will effect this transformation. The mission of these institutions appears to be one of familiarizing students with a more eclectic and multidisciplinary set of knowledges, instilling in them a salutary cosmopolitanism, and enhancing the imaginative faculties that will drive productive innovation and the generation of intellectual property. In presenting themselves to the world in their online materials, the colleges largely use the rhetoric of developing China's human capital, with a secondary focus on crafting of citizens and “critical thinkers” that animates virtually every US liberal arts college's mission statement.

The minimal purchase in China (as elsewhere) of what we've called the Jeffersonian defense of the liberal arts, and the prevalence of the instrumental defense, conveys something

important about the caution with which the CCP contemplates broadening the liberal arts college experiment. There is very likely a tension between the instrumentalist and Jeffersonian logics. Even as the civic values of liberal arts education are eclipsed by utilitarian objectives, the humanist values that a liberal arts education is likely to engender may ultimately clash with future (potential) opposition to the dispositions of market capitalism, and perhaps to other authoritative social structures and political regimes. Though the connection between a liberal arts education and American-style representative democracy may be exaggerated, it is apparent that liberal arts colleges in the United States have been, since their “heyday” in the mid-nineteenth century, sites of resistance to policies and laws perceived as unjust, and to social and economic inequalities. Moreover, a recent study of political orientation among higher education faculty in the United States found that professors at liberal arts colleges identify more strongly with antiauthoritarian and egalitarian politics than their colleagues at other types of institutions.²⁰ Another study has found “a modest global effect of attendance at a liberal arts college on the development of liberal political views” by students.²¹

The specter of the 1989 student protests at Tiananmen Square, and the repression that followed, still haunts the CCP, which watches the Chinese liberal arts experiment closely, wary that it could produce not only, in the words of Beijing’s Yuanpei College website, “qualified graduates who impress schoolmates in graduate studies with their creativity and colleagues in corporations with their adaptability and leadership potential” but a formidable class of dissidents as well. The challenge faced by the CCP in the growth of liberal arts education in China is one of preventing the innovative and liberating ideas students are likely to develop from spilling over into the political arena; it seeks no revolutions there. From the CCP’s perspective, no promise of growth and transformation of the Chinese economy is worth the risk of social and political upheaval. Hence the Yuanpei College website assures the visitor that, in addition to inculcating creativity, freedom, and critical thinking, the college “simultaneously . . . administrates the students’ four-year in-college life and study, political theory education and party-league

activities.”²²

Neither Jeffersonian nor instrumentalist, the Chinese argument for the more centripetal component of a liberal arts education may be more properly described as *communitarian*, retaining the collectivist emphases of Chinese education and society more generally. Liberal and capitalist dispositions have the potential to corrode China’s social contract, one already compromised by several generations’ rigidly disciplinary education and indoctrination in Maoism, a doctrine which, though still officially powerful, has lost much of its credibility and vitality in everyday life. Perhaps the liberal arts can address a tendency, described here by a vice president of Fudan University in Shanghai, of “highly specialized education to often ignore ethical, cultural and moral values. Along with a lack of humanity, some students are missing a sense of social responsibility.”²³ Shoring up this sense is another component of preserving national harmony in a changing China, and of crafting a more flexible and socially conscious citizenry. Hence Zhuhai’s United International College’s “Whole Person Education” curriculum that includes modules in “emotional intelligence” and “experiential development” and summer opportunities for students to “serve in backward regions of Western China.”²⁴

As with the growing consumer and car cultures in contemporary China, the liberal arts educational experiment has been heralded in the US and Western media as evidence of a more general “liberalization” there. Such triumphalism is wrongheaded. As has been done elsewhere, China will borrow from the US liberal arts tradition not wholesale but selectively, developing a distinctive liberal arts ethos with, as Deng Xiaoping famously described his nation’s system of socialism, “Chinese characteristics.”

Notes

1. Quoted in Adam Weinstein, “Rick Scott to Liberal Arts Majors: Drop Dead,” *Mother Jones*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2011/10/rick-scott-liberal-arts-majors-drop-dead-anthropology>.

2. Tyler Kingkade, "Pat McCrory Lashes Out against 'Educational Elite' and Liberal Arts College Courses," *Huffington Post*, February 2, 2013,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/03/pat-mccrory-college_n_2600579.html.

3. Peter Cohan, "To Boost Post-College Prospects, Cut Humanities Departments," *Forbes*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/petercohan/2012/05/29/to-boost-post-college-prospects-cut-humanities-departments>.

4. Richard A. Hofstadter, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

5. Quoted in Hugh Hawkins, "The University Builders Observe the Colleges," *History of Education Quarterly* 11.4 (Winter 1971): 355.

6. Quoted in Hawkins, "University Builders," 359–360.

7. Quoted in Katherine C. Reynolds, "Progressive Ideals and Experimental Higher Education: The Example of John Dewey and Black Mountain College," *Education and Culture* 14.1 (Spring 1997): 2.

8. Professional degrees have outnumbered liberal arts degrees by two to one at least to the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, "Digest of Education Statistics" 2011, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_286.asp?referrer=report) and possibly since the 1940s. See Steven G. Brint, Mark Riddle, Lori Turk-Bicakci, Charles S. Levy, "From the Liberal to the Practical Arts in American Colleges and Universities: Organizational Analysis and Curricular Change," *Journal of Higher Education* 76.2 (March/April 2005): 151–180.

9. Michael Delucci, "'Liberal Arts' Colleges and the Myth of Uniqueness," *Journal of Higher Education* 68.4 (July–August 1997): 414–426.

10. David W. Breneman, "Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges?" *AAHE Bulletin* 43.2 (October 1990): 3–5. Originally published in *The College Board Review* 156 (Summer 1990).

11. Vicki L. Baker, Roger G. Baldwin, and Sumedha Makker, "Where Are They Now?"

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1.

12. See, for example, the former president of Smith College on this topic: Carol T. Christ, "Myth: A Liberal Arts Education Is Becoming Irrelevant,"

<http://www.smith.edu/docs/president/Spring2012Christ.pdf> (accessed July 16, 2013).

13. Michael M. Crow, "America Needs Broadly Educated Citizens, Even Anthropologists," *Slate*, October 21, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2011/10/michael_m_crow_president_of_arizona_state_university_explains_wh.html (accessed July 25, 2013).

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