



CRACKS IN THE IVORY TOWER?

Francis J. Gavin

In his introduction to Volume 7, Issue 1, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, reflects on the joys of being a professor and the importance of higher education. He also expresses concern about the health of American universities and calls on them to defend values such as asking big questions and encouraging debate.

I love being a professor. To paraphrase something Allan Bloom wrote four decades ago, I am beyond grateful to live in a world that allows me to read, think, write, and teach young people.¹ I have spent much of my adult life in universities and will continue to be there until they drag me from the classroom. It has been a wonderful adventure. Which is why I am so worried about the current state of higher education.

It was not inevitable I would become an academic. My grandfather on my dad's side immigrated from County Mayo, Ireland, and became a Philly cop. Most of his sons became mailmen or cops as well. My dad, the youngest of ten, was the first and only one in his family to go to college — locally and for a business degree. My grandfather on my mom's side dropped out of school in sixth grade to work at what was, at the time, the world's largest shipyard, Hog Island in South Philadelphia — the sandwiches brought by the immigrants to work were called "hoagies" — before spending the rest of his career as a lineman for Bell Telephone. There were no scholars in the extended Gavin-McBride clan, nor did anyone know any academics — if they did, they would simply assume they were some malevolent combination of stuck up, foreign, and communist. Informing my family that I hoped to quarterback the Philadelphia Eagles would have made more sense, and seemed more plausible, than becoming a professor.

For one thing, they never really understood why I stayed in school so long. When I went to Oxford for a master's degree, one uncle (another Philly cop) asked how I could attend a university located in a country, the United Kingdom, that had historically persecuted my Irish Catholic people. When I was admitted for a Ph.D. in history at the University of Pennsylvania, with free tuition and a modest stipend, my father asked whether I wasn't already overeducated. Still, they were proud. When I was awarded tenure at the University of Texas, my mother told everyone I had "ten-year," as if I had paid off my passage to the new world and could now operate my own blacksmith shop. To be fair, tenure is a hard

concept to describe. When my daughter, then in kindergarten, asked if I could be fired, I said no. "What if you don't wear pants to work?" After considering the question, I said, "I'd receive a warning but would not be fired." I found out later she told her friends that her father didn't have to wear pants to work, which helped explain why the other parents eyed me so suspiciously at school events.

It was my undergraduate experience at the University of Chicago that convinced me to pursue the life of the mind. To be clear, it was not a happy time — I was tall and gangly, decidedly uncool, and poorly read. Chicago was a dangerous city, it appeared to snow nine months a year, and the campus fully earned its nickname, "where fun goes to die." It was, however, the first place I had ever been where the most valuable, treasured item was ideas. Clarity of thought and the power of insight were rewarded, and wrestling with and debating complex, difficult, and controversial concepts and ideas was not only demanded — it was enjoyed. I did not know such places existed, but once I discovered they did, I never wanted to leave.

It was one class in particular that made the difference: Karl Weintraub's year-long course, the History of Western Civilization. The course was so popular that you had to sleep out the night before in-person registration to gain admission. Weintraub, who was part Jewish, fled Germany in the mid-1930s to the Netherlands, where he hid in a small attic during World War II. He immigrated to Chicago, supported himself with odd jobs, including being a hotel bellhop, while he went to the University of Chicago as an undergraduate, Ph.D. student, and professor, where he remained for the rest of his career.² Assigning only original sources, he was an intimidating, even terrifying presence, interrogating students in a Socratic method that made John Houseman's portrayal of the demanding professor in the 1973 film *The Paper Chase* look like child's play.³ He also believed that the best way to demonstrate his deep love for his students and their learning was to push them hard to question everything they thought they knew about

1 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 245.

2 "Campus Life: Chicago; A Tough Teacher Whose Classes are a Big Draw," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/27/style/campus-life-chicago-a-tough-teacher-whose-classes-are-a-big-draw.html>

3 "The Paper Chase: The Socratic Method," movie clip, accessed January 17, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE1lmlZpn_w



the world. In addition to the normal three hours of seminar, Weintraub required students to attend a 90-minute lecture on Wednesday evenings.

It was in that classroom in Cobb Hall that I first encountered the Ancient Greek concept of *arete*, or human excellence, and learned how the phalanx was both a powerful military innovation and reflected the cohesion and loyalty of citizens to their city-state. I was mesmerized by the portrayal of monasticism, especially St. Anthony of Egypt's extreme ascetic efforts in the desert to deny himself all forms of human pleasure and companionship, feats that Weintraub ironically pointed out made him the rock star of his age, followed everywhere by adoring woman, which tortured Anthony further. Weintraub took great delight in telling us that "for this miserable existence, he was rewarded with a life of 104 years!" The rise of manorialism, feudalism, and the battles over enclosure in medieval England produced a phrase I've never forgotten: "the sheep are eating the men."⁴ The image of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, kneeling barefoot in the snow, seeking pope Gregory's VII's absolution, captured a major theme of the course and Weintraub's worldview: how the unresolved tension created by the struggle between the City of God, Jerusalem, and the City of Man, Rome, shaped Western culture and its institutions, while driving its success as a civilization.

Decades later, I no longer believe Weintraub's thesis, informed by his admiration of St. Augustine of Hippo. Yet one of his most haunting Wednesday evening lectures, inspired by this theme, has stayed with me: a lesson portraying the great Christian humanist, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, who tried to bring the best of both Jerusalem and Rome, faith and reason, together, to save a broken world. I recently revisited the fading notes of that address, delivered on a cold, wintry Wednesday evening in early 1986.

Weintraub explained that while Erasmus, a Catholic priest, was deeply religious, he believed Socrates was a saint, saw Cicero as exceptional, and considered Plato a Christian thinker. Erasmus was a scholar of great wit and insight, whose "In Praise of Folly" was a 16th century sensation marked by an early Renaissance sensibility. But he lived in a time of great polarization, passion, violence, and anger. Many seethed at the excesses and corruption of the religious elite and the Church in Rome. Erasmus was sympathetic: He too saw the Church and its practices as deeply flawed. But unlike the Protestant revolutionaries — John Calvin and especially Martin Luther, with whom he corresponded before they fell out — he did not think human beings were inherently bad or sinful. Weintraub explained that Erasmus

believed man had a kind and benevolent nature, possessing a free will but hindered by institutions. He recoiled at the radicals whose "pens dipped in blood" spread overheated rhetoric like an uncontrollable virus through the new technology of the printing press, stirring up those less knowledgeable and fueling the desire to burn down flawed but vital institutions that had survived a millennia and a half. Erasmus was clearly a hero to Weintraub, who, as a refugee from Adolf Hitler's Europe, understood what horrors radicalization and revolution could deliver and believed in the redeeming, ennobling qualities that civilization conveyed upon humanity. Erasmus loathed conflict, loved peace, and preached tolerance. He was, however, a moderate in an extreme age, disliked and mocked both by the reactionaries within the Church and the reformers from without. It goes without saying that our current world could use more figures in Erasmus' mold.

How common are classes like Weintraub's today? His course offered a vast scope — over two and a half millennia — while focusing on facts as narrow as the milk production of a typical 12th-century cow. The class made controversial choices — to even discuss something like the rise of Western civilization might draw hackles on some campuses today, as would the explicit recognition of the power of religious faith to drive human progress. Weintraub made it clear that civilization was, at heart, about morality, the effort to create shared, ordered systems of ethics, rules, and explanations to help humans make sense of their world and their place in it, with all its mysteries and complexities — and, particularly, to instruct them on who they should be and how they should behave, while preserving and improving their societies for future generations. He demanded his students leave behind their own assumptions and pre-conceived notions about what mattered, what was right and what was wrong, and to visit the past as it was and take it seriously on its own terms. Weintraub's class is why I became a professor.

Who Should We Be?

There are, of course, many hypotheses about why the modern American university is, in many respects, flailing, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Wokeness, politicization, arguments over free speech, the bureaucratization and financialization of universities, the narrowing of disciplines, and their disconnect from the world outside of the ivory tower: all are likely culprits. At heart, however, I believe higher education is struggling because it fails

to satisfactorily address a simple question: What is the purpose of education and learning?⁵

Given the spiraling costs of higher education, graduates, their parents, and society at large understandably demand that expensive tuition dollars be converted into skills that lead to stable, even lucrative, jobs and vocations. Universities, in other words, are judged by career outcomes and contributions to the economy. Students obtain competencies that translate into things you can do in the world. Contemporary American universities and colleges are, in other words, all about *what* you should be. When I think about what is best in a university, however, and what is absolutely essential about learning in general, it is not about *what* to be: It is about *who we should be*.

It is not a coincidence that the college experience takes place when young people are wrestling with this very question: *Who* are they? Questions of identity, justice, loyalty, service, affinity, belonging, ethics, friendship, and love become the core issues young people struggle with, all while they separate from their families and try to form their own selves. As an undergraduate, my friends and I read and debated novels, philosophy, and history while exploring new music, art, travel, fashion, and food. We did so less as academic exercises and more because they complemented what we learned from great texts and inspired professors in the classroom, all part of trying to make sense of our place in a complex, confusing world. Perhaps the most difficult class I took at Chicago was focused on one book, Georg Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, taught by the legendary political theorist Joseph Cropsey in the spring of 1987. Today, I couldn't tell you a thing about Hegel's impenetrable classic, but I remember Cropsey saying that, if we wanted to understand Central Europe and the profound changes it was undergoing, we should read a newly translated Czech author, Milan Kundera. My friends and I devoured his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and soon thereafter I read everything of Kundera's I could get my hands on. In my advanced age, I have a less generous view of Kundera's oeuvre now — one of the great points of learning is to change our minds. For years, however, Kundera was a touchpoint for discussion and often fierce debate about identity, love, and commitment, closed versus open societies, the interplay between larger historical forces and individual choices, memory and narrative, and the role of philosophy in everyday life.

This leads to another wonderful feature of my undergraduate education at the University of Chicago: a common core. We were required to take a year-

long series in the humanities, physical, biological, and social sciences, as well as math, language, and history courses. The core offered a broad sense of the known world of knowledge and provided a chance to discover and satisfy an intellectual interest an 18 year-old might never have known they had. More to the point, it gave smart young people with diverse backgrounds, values, and interests a common set of courses, ideas, concepts, and, most importantly, questions over which they could debate, argue, and learn amongst each other. Common cores are controversial, especially in the humanities and social sciences, because there is an understandable concern over who gets to select what is read and what thinkers, groups, or ideas are marginalized or ignored. This reasonable worry, however, misses a more important point. The art, culture, and writing of many societies in most times center around common human themes: struggle and strife, identity and belonging, tradition and novelty, power and justice, choice and fate, meaning and purpose, while trying to understand and tame the natural environment. These are shared elements of the human experience. It is less *where* the core comes from and more that it provides a shared learning experience, allowing young people to come together, inside and outside the classroom, to wrestle with, explore, try on, and dispense or keep new ideas, while they try to figure out who they are and what their place is in the world. It also teaches them how to identify the most compelling questions, while furnishing them with the tools to discuss and debate — at times ferociously but always respectfully — the perspectives and views of those who understand the world differently. That is the way we learn.

Scholarship Still Matters

There are several reasons why a journal devoted to national and international security, foreign policy, and grand strategy should be concerned about the state of higher education. As an academic outlet, we rely on scholars, many who reside and most of whom were trained in the ivory tower, to provide us with their best, most insightful work. And as this excellent issue demonstrates, an extraordinary pipeline of innovative, cutting edge, and important scholarship and policy commentary still exists. In these pages, Verónica Bäcker-Peral and Gene Park explore alliance commitments in a period of increased polarization. Risa A. Brooks, Michael A. Robinson, and Heidi Urben confront the challenge of balancing between free

4 The origins of this term are uncertain. Charles Clay Doyle, "Sheep Eat Men: A Retrospective Proverb," *Moreana* 51, no. 197-198, issue 3-4 (2014): 166-179.

5 Again, the University of Chicago is a notable exception. Every year since 1961, my *alma mater* asks a faculty member to deliver an address, "The Aims of Education," to incoming students, who then return to their residence halls to discuss and debate. <https://college.uchicago.edu/student-life/aims-education>



speech amidst polarization and shifting norms. Jon R. Lindsay highlights the unexpected consequences that may emerge from institutionalizing emerging technologies for battlefield use.

The trends lines in the academy, however, are not entirely encouraging. The study and practice of international relations depends on the scholarly fields that are most connected to it — political science, history, sociology, law, economics, anthropology, etc. If those fields incentivize subjects, methods, and perspectives that are at odds with the values of this journal, then we are in trouble. Those values include asking big questions while engaging the public sphere in meaningful and accessible ways and encouraging sharp, vigorous debate to generate smarter policy and better outcomes in the world — and they remain crucial to high-quality scholarship and informed policy.

There is a deeper issue. The health, or lack of health, of higher education reflects the health of our society. American universities and colleges produce the world's best-trained engineers, journalists, scientists, doctors, programmers, lawyers, and financiers, fueling an innovative, powerful economy that generates unimaginable wealth and data. More than at any time or any place in human history, we know how to produce things, including information, and we know how to measure and count those things. This impressive outcome takes place in a society, however, that appears increasingly polarized, divided, and unhappy, that lacks a sense of common purpose and cohesion, which denigrates the moderation and tolerance of an Erasmus and that often seems at war with itself and adrift in the world. We rarely ask why or to what end we make the things we do, while failing to understand that data and information are far from knowledge and wisdom. Our unparalleled ability to produce, count, and measure things often appears to do little to make us happy or fulfilled or answer the questions that vex us most.

Generative artificial intelligence, no matter what its future capabilities, will never fully explain who and why we love, the sources for our rage and the driver of our conflicts, and who we truly are and how we relate to the world around us. It will remain as confused as we are as to why some experiences tie us together in a common humanity, while others drive us to see and understand the world completely differently. Human-made technology will fail, as we have failed for millennia, to resolve once and for all divergent worldviews and perspectives and the great tensions between power and justice, innovation and inequity, and our individual desires and our collective responsibilities — in other words, what it means to be human.

Indeed, the reason ChatGPT will not find answers to these and other fundamental questions is because they have no final answer. It is, however, in the often contentious act of wrestling with these core issues of who we are and what we are doing, questions of meaning and historical direction, power and purpose, identity and belonging, that humanity reveals itself at its best, and, when done poorly, its worst. These issues are an often underappreciated driver of how individuals, leaders, states, cultures, and, yes, even civilizations engage with each other, their histories and imagined futures, and the world around them in ways that bring human triumph and often unimaginable tragedy. How these debates and discussions unfold is often the true measure of art and scholarship, of learning and thinking, and of higher education. Facilitating these conversations in a serious, honest, and rigorous way is the noblest, most important role that the ivory tower — and journals such as the *Texas National Security Review* — can play. 🏰

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⁶ For the image, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hull_Gate,_University_of_Chicago_\(9440409204\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hull_Gate,_University_of_Chicago_(9440409204).jpg). For the license, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>.

