

**Liberal Arts at the Brink**, by Victor E. Ferrall, Jr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 304 pp., \$25.95 hardbound.

## Teetering

**John Agresto**

Published online: 29 April 2012

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012

I guess it's hard these days to write a cheerful book about the liberal arts, and this book is no exception. Victor Ferrall, president emeritus of Beloit College, has put together a useful, data-laden volume on the fall of one important segment of the liberal arts universe—the small, teaching-centered, generally residential, often rural liberal arts college. In other words, those institutions that once were seen as the jewels in the diadem of American higher education. Of 4,352 colleges and universities in this nation, these small colleges number under 250. Yes, just about one-half of 1 percent. All the great and

once-great names are here—Amherst, Williams, Oberlin, Pomona, Denison, Drew, Knox, Sweet Briar... Some of these will survive more or less as we now know them. But many others, especially those poorer institutions of lesser note and smaller size, will be lost. Perhaps not lost physically—the buildings and quads might still stand—but they will be changed in their essences: They will no longer be primarily Liberal Arts Colleges.

What will become of them you might easily guess—they will become regional places giving instruction in vocational and technical areas. Education, computer services, and, above all, business courses will become their stock-in-trade. Nor is this a prediction—the great majority of those colleges Ferrall puts in the third and fourth tiers are already there.

Okay, so things change. Why be concerned, especially because this hardly means the end of the liberal arts, only the passing of the small residential liberal arts college. They still teach science, math, philosophy, and French at Princeton, Yale, UNC, and Stanford, don't they? But here Ferrall has a point and we all know it—it has been in the liberal arts college, purposefully small and residential, where teaching—not research, publication, or specialization—has

**John Agresto** is a political scientist who has taught at and been president/provost of numerous universities in America and abroad; [Jagresto@newmexico.com](mailto:Jagresto@newmexico.com). He is currently finishing a book entitled *Do the Liberal Arts Serve Any Public Function?*

always reigned. It was, moreover, in those institutions where the salutary link between teacher and student, and not just student and peers, held sway. And it was in these small colleges where character and some sense of civic regard was cultivated.

Moreover, the liberal arts have historically produced more than a few of our leaders and statesmen. Yes, by limiting himself just to liberal arts colleges, Ferrall is forced to put aside perhaps our best-educated presidents—Madison, Jefferson, Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, and both Adamses—and give us a more mixed picture of liberal arts colleges as a preparation for statesmanship: William Henry Harrison, Pierce, Buchanan, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, McKinley, Harding, Coolidge, Nixon, Reagan, and Obama. (Then again, there's always the enigma of our best and most liberally educated president, Lincoln, who never set foot in a college classroom. If Lincoln's presidency is a puzzle, it may be less so for the liberal arts than for our teaching and our universities.)

Still, as Ferrall shows, even this glory is fading, if for no other reason than that the students are no longer there. The culprits in this are many, though Ferrall tends to aim his artillery at the most conventional targets. First, there's "the culture." Yes, our contemporary American

culture, which gets hammered for its "commercial" nature, its lack of imagination and creativity, its emphasis on money, glitz, and business success. In culture's wake come students and their parents—"careerists" nearly all. Then, of course, the business community, which looks for students it can take directly into the workforce.

But, after this parade of the usual suspects, it gets interesting. Who or what else has been undermining liberal arts colleges? Well, high school teachers, who with their education degrees from big universities sometimes have nary a clue about the virtues of the liberal arts. Or perhaps even more, high school guidance counselors, to whom small liberal arts colleges are simply not on the radar screen. Nor should we forget the high schools themselves, many of which are becoming increasingly career-centric. (Just this month my own state announced a new charter school that would concentrate on aeronautics—with successful graduates getting their own pilot's licenses. Now, seriously, what fourteen-year-old can resist that?)

What else? Well, richer colleges and universities, deeply discounting their tuitions and buying as they can the best students, are increasingly marginalizing their less affluent brother and sister institutions. Still, as Ferrall notes, even the richer

colleges are becoming irrelevant. To use the language of that ol' debil Business—the “demand” simply isn't there for the product they're selling.

And now it gets even more interesting. Why do so few want this product any longer? After all, if Ferrall is right, the product is simply super—liberal arts grads possess critical self-examination, a command of graceful disputation, compassion, an appreciation of creativity, a commitment of service to others, social responsibility, an examined life, and so on.

Okay, let's stop there for a minute. Maybe that list of excellences is true, and maybe it isn't. Maybe when we in the liberal arts talk like that we sound like self-promoting phonies. Do our students really have greater compassion than nursing students? Greater creativity than those immersed in modern technology (or aeronautics)? And I've heard enough of the sneering arguments of the pc/social justice crowd to dispute—very respectfully, of course—their command of graceful disputation.

Let me put it differently, and in my own words. The biggest problem the liberal arts have today may not be the world of business, not the attraction of professional courses, perhaps not even miserable high schools. The worst problem may not be in others

but in ourselves. We no longer have the ability to explain exactly how the liberal arts are truly of value to either the individual student or to society at large.

Take, for example, our incessant blather about how we in the liberal arts have cornered the market (sorry...another business term...my bad) on “critical thinking.” Ferrall picks up on this problem with exactly the right touch. “Critical thinking is to a liberal education as faith is to religion”:

But what exactly is *critical thinking*? How does it differ from plain good thinking? Whatever critical thinking may be, why is it more likely to be learned by studying English or philosophy than business management? Why would one suppose that English literature or philosophy professors are more likely to inculcate critical thinking in their students than business administration professors?

Or take our quiet desperation to show that what we teach is really, really of great use. A liberal arts education, we tout, “is a good preparation for a life likely to include several careers.” *Is that so?* Apropos of this Ferrall gives a little

story—John graduated from college and sold encyclopedias. He and a friend subsequently opened a high-end bicycle shop. Based on this experience, he subsequently took a marketing position with a major outdoor sporting goods manufacturer and, attending school at night, earned an MBA. He soon moved up in the business to financial analyst. He was then recruited by a widely respected investment banking firm, rising to become an assistant vice president. He later ended his career as the senior sales VP for a large broadcasting company. John worked hard, made good money, was able to support a fine family, and loved every position he had. The question is: How did studying English literature, philosophy, some French, and geology “prepare” him for this career journey? There’s no saying it did, even though it might have cost John upwards of \$200,000. So the next question is: Are we deceiving prospective students—or ourselves?

So, if so much of the liberal arts’ defense of itself is shallow or rings hollow, where to from here? Ferrall has some helpful suggestions in a number of areas, on tenure, for example, and especially on trying to avoid hiring professors corrupted by the worst of graduate school training. But the most interesting suggestions come in the curricular area. Ferrall

knows that too many colleges have hoped to attract students by loosening requirements and by adding courses “designed for popularity.” But it hardly helps. (Perhaps not wishing to single anyone out for deserved opprobrium, Ferrall lists only fictional courses—“Ethnicity, Gender, and Television Studies,” “Post-Colonial Women’s Sports.” But a quick perusal of almost any college catalogue—even of his own Beloit’s—would have given him any number of actual examples to cry over.)

Rather than a new call for courage and rigor, Ferrall does the opposite: “An optimum liberal arts curriculum would simply require students to take courses with the college’s finest teachers, regardless of discipline or course content”; “Liberal Arts colleges...are purveyors of an attitude toward learning and knowing, not of specified knowledge.”

Now, of course, there are immense problems with this approach. If what’s important in a young person’s collegiate experience is the quality of the teacher and not subject matter learning, then all the more reason to go to a professional program or technical institution—I have no doubt there are great teachers there, and you learn a trade to boot. (After all, let us not forget, Ferrall has

already quite persuasively showed us the damage to good teaching inflicted on our colleges by specialization and graduate schools.)

But I sense there's more afoot in what Ferrall proposes than simply a shout-out to great teaching, though I'm not absolutely certain what it is. Perhaps the answer has something to do with the character of course requirements in those places that still demand such things. Ferrall mentions, unfavorably, such courses and course sets as "Exploring Diversity," "Recognition and Affirmation of Difference," and "Dynamics of Difference and Power." Clearly, it's courses like these that have told so many that going to a liberal arts college is not unlike going to a left-wing reeducation camp. Perhaps Ferrall understands that the insistence on the part of liberal arts traditionalists to have an extensive and solid core has turned out badly, and they might as well quit while they're behind. Sadly, little is more evident than that the demand for reestablishment of "the core" was easily taken over by the indoctrinators.

So look at what the liberal arts, in their infinite wisdom, have done to themselves: First, we proclaim how these arts are uncomfortable with America as it is—too commercial, too money-grubbing, perhaps too lowbrow, too "unfair." So students

who are not turned off by commerce or business or the character of American culture and freedom, go elsewhere. Second, just in case there are still students left who are willing to take some history or literature or philosophy courses, why not repel them, too—make sure history emphasizes American imperialism and oppression, literature underscores feminist, homosexual, and critical-interpretive themes, and philosophy begins and ends all important inquiries with Rawls and a critique of your country's/your parents'/and perhaps your religion's cherished beliefs. Hell, isn't that what you pay us for—to tear down all your values and make you see things our way?

I know that readers of this journal are, in general, strong partisans of a core, and I hate to be the first to point this out to you. Except in a few select places, to have a core means to have a politicized core, and the tradition and traditionalists have lost. For proof, just read the catalogs of even, or especially, the most highly acclaimed institutions.

Enough hand-wringing—back to Ferrall. While he says that the great majority of small liberal arts colleges are "at the brink," I do believe he knows, for most, the game is lost. No matter how loudly these colleges proclaim the quality of their teachers,

I doubt the situation will change. Their finances are too dire, their “customers” have dwindled, and their very ability to explain the value of what they do is no more. Except for a few places with the ability to buy the best students and entice them with their reputations—or those few truly fine religious colleges that have learned how to combine faith with solid liberal learning and can make the case without foolishness—the

remainder will falter. Perhaps some of these places will be able to find a way to combine professional training with some remnant of a liberal arts base. I actually think that’s more of an option than Ferrall seems to think exists, though even there we may have small reason to hope.

Perhaps it is as I said at the start—it’s hard to write a book these days on the liberal arts that has a happy ending.