



Revitalizing the University in an Age of Decline

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This essay is a compressed version of a talk Dr. Petranovich prepared for the Harvard Club of Warsaw.

What is the aim of a university? What is its *telos*, and what is its *modus operandi*? In our discussions throughout the year with students, faculty, and the broader community, these questions come up again and again. And as higher education comes under increasing scrutiny in the public eye, is it crucial that we ask ourselves what education at the college level is all about.

Today, education is commonly framed as the marriage of science and industry for the sake of financial gain, professional development, and technical skills. None of these are bad things in themselves, and they do in fact produce great advancements in research and economic growth. However, as top universities face enormous pressure to maintain their leadership in increasingly narrow fields of study amid fierce worldwide competition, they may be losing something more foundational. Within this framework, many students and faculty risk becoming intellectually isolated by the very success of their disciplines, which leaves deeper questions—questions of humanity, culture, and the human person—by the wayside.

Widespread hyper-specialization can lead to fragmented knowledge, and an interdisciplinary pursuit of knowledge can become muddled. While some universities still insist on core curricula or survey courses in philosophy, history, and literature, in most cases, students are left to choose their own paths at random. Even when courses are compelling and well-taught, students—particularly in the humanities—often experience them as intellectually compartmentalized and narrowly focused. This leaves students fragmented and disoriented, unmoored from any sense of a cohesive intellectual inheritance. The modern system of siloed departments and pressure toward narrowly-specialized expertise threatens to deprive students and teachers alike of any sort of integrative framework. This limits their capacities to make important judgments about the larger social order and to determine the contours of a life worth living. Add to these issues the imperiled status of academic freedom, limited intellectual diversity, the rise of credentialism, the widespread loss of public trust, and the looming threat of AI, and the trajectory of higher education looks bleak indeed.

In recognition of the current landscape of academia, the Abigail Adams Institute (AAI) seeks to make a contribution to humanistic inquiry into the distinctive constitution of the human person, the nature and limits of our powers and faculties, and the ends to which we are drawn as we live out our lives. Through philosophy, literature, languages, history, theology, classics, and the arts, we believe that a good college education ought to shape the intellectual and moral character of young people by forming them in the best that has been thought and said.

As part of its efforts to examine the interrelationship of specialized academic disciplines and their implications for the common good, AAI seeks to support students and faculty in ways otherwise unavailable within, but consistent with, the mission of the university. Each year on the recommendations of upperclassmen and young alumni, we produce *A Course Guide for the Harvard Humanist*, which is meant to be useful to any Harvard student who wants to make the best use of the College's academic resources in the humanities. It is our attempt at encouraging a shared academic foundation in the liberal arts.

In addition, since its inception, AAI has promoted the creation, preservation, and enhancement of introductory survey courses in the humanities at Harvard University. In the absence of a formal core curriculum, we believe that survey courses are an imperative way of shoring up a student's cultural-intellectual grounding. Courses that offer a broad view of a subject are essential for foundational instruction and academic orientation. When done well, they can spur a student's imagination, initiate him into a larger tradition of inquiry, and prompt a quest for lifelong learning. These courses are instrumental in fostering an understanding and appreciation of our inheritance as a civilization. And given the staggering technological shifts facing the next generation, it is wise to invest in these vehicles of basic cultural continuity; only when we know where we come from can we know where we ought to go.

In addition to our work with the university, AAI provides our own supplementary seminars diving deep into foundational texts. From Plato to Jane Austen, Adam Smith to Friedrich Nietzsche, our students explore culturally and historically significant works across disciplines, with an understanding that the humanities work together towards wisdom and integrated human formation. With our supplementary courses, we aim to fill the gaps in our students' university educations with cohesive and immersive liberal arts programming.

The Abigail Adams Institute was founded to help recall the university to its older and deeper vocation of educating students not just for careers, but for flourishing lives. Even if the utilitarian approach of modern research universities succeeds in producing well-prepared, economically productive graduates, college students, for their own sake and the sake of society as a whole, ought to—and deserve to—receive a much richer and more formative education during these crucial years of young adulthood. The university should be not just a factory churning out graduates, but rather a beacon of academic vitality and rigor in a tradition of free and open inquiry. At AAI, through both our supplementary programming and our work with Harvard faculty, we hope to uphold and support this vision of humanistic intellectual formation in the university.