

Francis Oakley

*The humanities in liberal arts colleges:  
another instance of collegiate exceptionalism?*

Because liberal arts colleges are “in certain respects more diverse than any other type of higher education institution,”<sup>1</sup> and because their nature, history, generally shared characteristics, even their very number, are so often a matter of contention, I have learned over the years the wisdom, when attempting to say something about them, of beginning with a preliminary exercise in intellectual throat-clearing. Hence I offer these rather basic introductory stipulations.

The first concerns the nature of such colleges and the history of the category of institutions to which they belong.

Some of our liberal arts colleges began their careers as secondary schools of one sort or another (Williams College is one such example), and it is not only for Europeans that the term “college” has tended willy-nilly to evoke the image of an institution of secondary education. “The college will disappear, in fact, if not in name,” David Starr Jordan, founding president of Stanford University, confidently predicted a century ago. “The best,” he added, “will become universities, the others will *return* to their place as academies” – return, that is, to being advanced-level secondary schools.<sup>2</sup>

But even when they did in fact originate as schools, once they became *colleges* such institutions did not trace their

---

Francis Oakley, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1998, is president emeritus and Edward Dorr Griffin Professor of the History of Ideas at Williams College. He is also president emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies. His most recent publications include “The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300 – 1870” (2003), “Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights: Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas” (2005), and “Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment” (2006).

---

© 2009 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

1 Alexander W. Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999): 78. For their assistance in my preparation of this paper, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude my indebtedness to the following colleagues at Williams for access to and help with Williams’ enrollment statistics and two sets of comparative institutional data: Chris Winters, director of institutional research, Office of the Provost; Keith C. Finan, associate provost; and Charles R. Toomajian, Jr., associate dean of the College and registrar.

2 Quoted in Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 68, 443.

lineage back to any sort of academy for secondary education. Their institutional forebears, instead, were the constituent colleges of Oxford and Cambridge and, more precisely, beyond them the single-college universities that had appeared in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Spain, Scotland, and Ireland. Those institutions, unlike the Oxbridge (or, for that matter, the medieval Parisian) colleges, though still colleges were also something different in that they were granted the crucial and distinctive prerogative attached to university status: namely, that of granting degrees. Sigüenza in Spain, accorded that prerogative in 1489, was a classic example. So, too, later on, was Trinity College, Dublin – or Dublin University, as it was sometimes called, or, better, and with greater legal and institutional precision, the University of Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>3</sup>

The sharp distinction between “college” and “university” that people like President Jordan instinctively advanced, and that we today all too often assume, was something, in fact, of a late-nineteenth-century American innovation. It was spawned by the enormous contemporary admiration for the German research university and by the concomitant attempt at places like Johns Hopkins, Clark, the Catholic University of America, Cornell, Chicago, and Stanford to replicate its particular characteristics on American soil. That distinction has not always been a helpful one. It has

tended to promote the idea that the free-standing, residential liberal arts college is something *less* than the modern American university rather than something *other* than that. And it has encouraged the colleges themselves to permit others to define them in terms of what they lack (great research libraries and laboratories, graduate and professional schools, for example) rather than in terms of what they proudly possess: a firm, unwavering, and undistracted commitment to bringing to the education of *undergraduates* the full resources proper to a small university. For that, in effect, is what they are: small college-universities devoted exclusively (or almost exclusively) to the teaching of undergraduates. And that fact is directly pertinent to the nature of the contribution they make to the well-being of the humanities in American higher education.

The second stipulation concerns the matter of institutional diversity, even within the traditional category of liberal arts colleges. For that factor shapes, conditions, and qualifies the nature of the collegiate contribution to the overall health of humanistic studies. The definition of the American college given above, while it emphasizes undergraduate teaching, says nothing about what, precisely, is being taught. In particular, it says nothing about the liberal arts (arts and sciences) let alone the humanities – and for very good reason. It turns out that many of the colleges traditionally labeled or self-styled as liberal arts colleges award less than half of their degrees in liberal arts/arts and sciences (as opposed to vocational or preprofessional subjects). These are the institutions now categorized in the *Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education* (2000 edition) as Bac-

3 Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20–21. Similarly, the constituent colleges of the University of Toronto, originally independent, freestanding universities in their own right and still intent on protecting their right to confer certain degrees, call themselves the University of Victoria College, the University of St. Michael's College, and so on.

calaureate Colleges – General. (That category overlaps with or bears a reasonably close relation to the category designated in earlier editions either as Liberal Arts II or as Baccalaureate Colleges II.<sup>4</sup>) And given the fact that the bulk of their students are not majoring in liberal arts subjects, the Baccalaureate Colleges – General designation more accurately describes the type of education in which these colleges are predominantly engaged than does any sort of collegiate label invoking the liberal arts.

Nor does that particular manifestation of diversity within the group of institutions lumped together traditionally as liberal arts colleges exhaust their variety. Diversity among them, in fact, extends further and well beyond the normal distinctions between private and publicly controlled, single-sex and coeducational, non-sectarian and religiously affiliated, historically black institutions and the rest. It reflects also differences in the degree of racial and ethnic diversity in their student bodies, differences in curricular structure and favored pedagogic mode, differences in the degree to which their faculties are committed to and actually engaged in scholarly research and writing, and differences in the level of academic preparation characteristic of the students they admit. This last differential is linked further with markedly varying levels of selectivity in the admissions process, as well as with other differences flowing from the highly un-

even distribution of financial resources across the entire universe of colleges.

Of the several hundred institutions traditionally viewed as constituting the universe of liberal arts colleges, fewer than fifty fall into the favored group of so-called “medallion institutions,” which regularly attract a surplus of well-qualified applicants and have no difficulty at all in peopling their freshman classes with students who are academically well-prepared. By far the larger group of colleges, however, finds itself hard-pressed to fill classes with students who are not only adequately qualified but also capable of paying the standard tuition rates. Such institutions operate, in effect, an open (or quasi-open) admissions system and are condemned, even then, to an annual exercise of juggling anxiously the bleak equations of tuition pricing and tuition discounting.<sup>5</sup> Even within the highly favored medallion group, the colleges truly able to operate in unqualified fashion on the basis of *both* need-blind admission and need-based financial aid amount to no more than a handful. Taking the collegiate sector as a whole, it is a dramatic testimony to the unevenness in the financial resources at their disposal that the most affluent of the colleges are able to spend no less than five times as

4 *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition (Menlo Park, Calif.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2001), 1–2 (Category Definitions) and 6 (Table 2). Cf. *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 1994 edition (Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1994), xi and xiv (Tables 1 and 4) and xix (Category Definitions).

5 For an instructive glimpse into the marked disparities in the financial resources of institutions in the collegiate sector, see Lucie Lapovsky, “The Economic Challenges of Liberal Arts Colleges”; Roger T. Kaufman, “Discounts and Spending at the Top Liberal Arts Colleges”; and Michael S. McPherson, “Response”: all in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2005), 50–86. Cf. Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, “The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999).

much per student as can their less well-endowed collegiate brethren.<sup>6</sup>

The third stipulation, if we are to speak intelligibly about our liberal arts colleges and the place the humanities enjoy within them, is that we have to be clear at the outset, not only about matters pertaining to their nature, history, and diversity, but also, and more fundamentally, about their very number. In this respect, the story across the past half century has been one of unquestionable decline. As recently as the mid-1950s the institutions traditionally classified (or self-styled) as liberal arts colleges constituted about 40 percent of the total number of institutions of higher education. By the early 1970s, however, they had come to account for no more than a quarter of all institutions. Over the subsequent years the shrinkage has continued, if at a slower pace, and the decline involved has not simply been proportionate to the size overall of the higher educational institutional universe. Between 1967 and 1990, in fact, some 167 private four-year colleges ceased to exist, whether by merger with other institutions or by outright closure.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the predominance at many of those remaining of vocational and preprofessional curricular offerings suggested the propriety (indeed, the necessity) of whittling down still further the number of those that could lay undeniable claim to the title of “liberal arts college.”

Over a decade ago, David Breneman, an expert in educational policy and eco-

6 Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 28.

7 Hugh Hawkins, “The Making of the Liberal Arts College Identity,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999): 15–16, 21.

nomics, pointed out that in terms of their prevailing curricular focus a majority of the 637 colleges listed in the 1994 Carnegie Classifications did not really appear to be liberal arts colleges at all.<sup>8</sup> The earnest proclamation by many such a college of a liberal arts educational mission did not appear to be matched by the curricular realities on the ground, which turned out instead to be predominantly vocational or preprofessional.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Breneman found that if one applied the admittedly “weak criterion constituted by the awarding of at least 40 percent of their degrees in liberal arts subjects,” the total universe of private liberal arts colleges had to be more than halved, thereby reducing the total to a mere 212.

While the tendency at the time was to integrate that sobering finding into yet another of the declension narratives of which academics seem instinctively to be so fond, it has since been pointed out that the tilt in the collegiate sector toward a focus on professional preparation long predated our recent era of educational discontent. At Union College in New York State it was evident in curricular changes introduced as early as 1827.<sup>10</sup>

8 David W. Breneman, “Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges?” *College Board Review* 156 (Summer 1990): 16–21, 29; David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), especially chap. 1, 1–19, and Appendix A, 138–161.

9 Michael Delucchi, “‘Liberal Arts’ Colleges and the Myth of Uniqueness,” *Journal of Higher Education* 67 (1997): 414–424, where he notes (at 414–415) that “under such changing circumstances, the retention of a liberal arts claim in the academic mission statements of these colleges becomes inconsistent with their professional curriculum.”

10 Thus Christina Elliott Sorum, “‘Vortex, Clouds, and Tongue’: New Problems in the

And “except for the altogether atypical period from 1956 – 1970” many of the institutions which came during that period to be classified as Liberal Arts II colleges had “never awarded a large percentage of liberal arts degrees.” Of the “317 institutions that did not meet Breneman’s criterion in 1987” and came to be reclassified, therefore, as “small professional colleges,” it turns out that at least 134 would not have met that criterion already in 1956.<sup>11</sup>

The shift of liberal arts colleges in the direction of vocational or preprofessional training, then, was neither as sudden nor as dramatic as Breneman supposed. But that notwithstanding, it still remains appropriate to distinguish within the collegiate universe those institutions at which the study of liberal arts subjects predominates from those at which it does not. And that is precisely what the 2000 edition of the *Carnegie Classification* does. Setting as its criterion for inclusion in the group to be designated by deployment of the liberal arts label the awarding of at least 50 percent of a college’s baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields, and, unlike Breneman, including in its totals publicly controlled colleges as well as private, that edition came up with a total of 228 Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts, assigning the balance of 321 to its Baccalaureate Colleges – General category, for an overall collegiate total of 549.<sup>12</sup> These are the

figures adopted by the ongoing Humanities Indicators Prototype sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,<sup>13</sup> and they are the ones with which we will be operating in what follows. Accept those figures and we must now take the Baccalaureate Colleges (old Liberal Arts I and II sectors) to amount to somewhat less than 15 percent of all American institutions of higher education. As for enrollments, whereas in the mid-1950s about 25 percent of American students attended liberal arts colleges (a figure dropping to no more than 8 percent by the early 1970s), by 2000 that figure came in at 6.1 percent. And if one limits oneself more precisely to the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector of 228 colleges, one has to remember that one is focusing on a group of institutions that constitutes no more than 5.8 percent of the entire higher educational institutional universe and enrolls no more than 2.5 percent of the American student population.<sup>14</sup>

All of that said, and still keeping an eye on the importance of the distinc-

---

of Baccalaureate – Associate, it placed in the collegiate category overall, for a total of 606, an additional 57 colleges at which baccalaureate degrees accounted for at least 20 percent of undergraduate degrees, but at which “the majority of conferrals are below the baccalaureate level (associate’s degrees and certificates)” ; see Categories Definition, 1.

---

Humanities,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999): 241.

11 See Joan Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts College – Is It Really an Endangered Species?” *Change* 27 (1995): 41 – 42; italics mine.

12 *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition, 6 and 20, Tables 2 and 5. Introducing the new subcategory

13 For the background to this project, see the essays by Robert M. Solow, Francis Oakley, Phyllis Franklin, John D’Arms, and Calvin C. Jones collected in *Making the Humanities Count: The Importance of Data* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2002).

14 *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition, 6, 20 – 21, and Tables 2, 5, and 6.

tion to be drawn between Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General, we may now ask what sort of judgment (or judgments) can properly be passed on the state of the humanities in the collegiate sector, on the distinctive achievements of that sector, on the type of example it sets, and on the contribution that example might potentially make to the overall vibrancy of American higher education.

Given the fact that faculty attitudes and commitments, educational programs and practices, and overall intellectual atmosphere characteristic of these colleges clearly shape everything that goes on within them, I will dwell first on those characteristics in general before narrowing the focus to the position occupied by the humanistic disciplines in particular. The more so in that of recent years much attention has been devoted to those characteristics, especially by research groups centered on the University of California, Los Angeles; Indiana University; and the University of Iowa. And the picture that has emerged from the research conducted is one of quite marked exceptionalism in more than one dimension of collegiate life.

So far as the faculties of these colleges are concerned (Baccalaureate Colleges – General as well as Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts), the presence of part-time and adjunct appointments is less prominent than in any other sector of higher education.<sup>15</sup> Because of that,

15 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 94. So far as American higher education as a whole is concerned, there is some evidence to suggest that the trend toward employing part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty may be “especially pronounced in the humanities,” with “the proportion of part-time faculty . . . [being] . . . especially high in English, history, [and] modern languages.” See James C. Hearn

and with no teaching cadre of graduate students readily at hand, the vast bulk of the teaching in all subject areas, the humanities not excluded, is done by full-time faculty members, the great majority of them tenure-track or tenured. And, so far as the percentage of their time committed to teaching as opposed to research, consulting, and other pertinent activities goes, those faculty are surpassed only by faculty teaching at the two-year colleges.<sup>16</sup> Among those faculty, moreover, those who hold appointments at the leading highly selective and better-endowed colleges in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector appear also to have achieved some sort of optimal balance between teaching and scholarship. In an intriguing study, which Alexander Astin and Mitchell Chang, professors of higher education, published in 1995, they found that the top eleven institutions that ranked highly on *both* research and student orientation were all of them private, highly selective colleges from that sector.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, despite salary levels that have long fallen, at least in aggre-

---

and Alexander V. Gorbonov, “Funding the Core: Understanding the Financial Contexts of Academic Departments in the Humanities,” in *Tracking Changes in the Humanities: Essays on Finance and Education*, ed. Malcolm Richardson (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005), 13.

16 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 94 – 96.

17 Alexander W. Astin and Mitchell J. Chang, “Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching: Can You Have Your Cake and Eat it Too?” *Change* 27 (1995): 45 – 49. Later on Astin noted that “what was especially intriguing about this study was that it had, in effect, ‘rediscovered’ the selective liberal arts college by conducting a purely statistical search for institutions that are best able to emphasize both teaching and research”; “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 91. For the

gate, below those prevailing in most other sectors in American higher education (the two-year colleges at times not excepted),<sup>18</sup> data from the last (1989) of the faculty surveys conducted over the years by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education indicate that faculty teaching in the collegiate sector were prominent among those who were at the highest end of the institutional loyalty and commitment scale, who felt least “trapped in a profession with limited opportunity for advancement,” and who evinced accordingly the greatest enthusiasm about their work. Those data also revealed the collegiate sector to be the one possessed of the highest measure of agreement about the standards of good scholarship and the highest degree of commitment to the importance of institutional service, student advising, and the delivery, evaluation, and rewarding of effective teaching.<sup>19</sup>

All of this, of course, serves to underpin the forceful claims often made for

---

larger context in which this issue should be understood, see Francis Oakley, *Scholarship and Teaching: A Matter of Mutual Support* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1996).

18 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 94–96. Also Francis Oakley, “The Elusive Academic Profession: Complexity and Change,” *Dædalus* 126 (4) (Fall 1997): 49–50.

19 The results of the 1989 survey are tabulated in Ernest J. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the Professoriate* (Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), Appendix A, Tables A-3, A-6–7, A-11–13, A-18, A-23, A-32, A-35, A-37, A-39–40. In a rather hands-on study (involving some direct fieldwork), which Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster conducted in the mid-1980s and at the low point in the trajectory both of academic salaries and academic morale (*American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled* [New York and Oxford: Ox-

the very positive “educational outcomes” delivered by these colleges. At its best, it has been said, the liberal arts college – small, residential, comparatively intimate in scale, relying for its teaching on fully qualified and committed faculty – “remains almost a unique embodiment of a certain ideal of educational excellence.”<sup>20</sup> And that claim is surely warranted. Commentators on these colleges have remarked on the importance attached to their single-minded focus on the education of undergraduates; on the enhanced measure in which their students actually complete bachelor’s degrees; on the unusual strength of their orientation to student needs; on the extent to which their students are themselves “more satisfied with the faculty, the quality of teaching, and the general education program” than are students attending other types of institution; on their incorporation of “a wide range of exemplary educational practices in their educational programs”; and on their ability to “produce a pattern of consistently positive student outcomes not found in any other type of American higher education institution.”<sup>21</sup> Those outcomes do, indeed, appear to be very impressive, none perhaps more impres-

---

ford University Press, 1986], 140), they had similarly found excellent conditions for work and continuing high faculty morale on the highly selective Liberal Arts I campuses they had visited. The situation at the Liberal Arts II campuses in their sample was apparently less satisfactory.

20 McPherson and Schapiro, “The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges,” 73.

21 See in general the essays gathered together in volume 128, number 1 (Winter 1999) of *Dædalus* on Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges, especially, and in order of citation, McPherson and Schapiro,

sive (if still surprising to some) than the well-attested collegiate record of being “twice as productive as the average institution in training” those who go on to take PhDs in the natural sciences. That record presupposes, of course, their success, the nationwide decline in student interest in the sciences notwithstanding, both in attracting students who are interested in the natural sciences and graduating them as science majors. Further than that, and focusing especially on those scientific racehorses who have been honored by election into membership of the National Academy of Sciences, it would appear that liberal arts college graduates not only go on to obtain PhDs in disproportionate numbers but also succeed in excelling in their respective fields of research at a rate at least two times greater than bachelor’s degree recipients in general.<sup>22</sup>

Among those involved in education-  
al research, however, inferences made

---

“The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges”; Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 83, 77; Susan C. Bourque, “Reassessing Research: Liberal Arts Colleges and the Social Sciences,” 265, where she notes that “with [the 1998] data weighted for size of institution,” eight of the leading ten institutions producing people who go on to PhDs in the social sciences are liberal arts colleges; and Thomas R. Cech, “Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education?” See also Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 91–93; Astin and Chang, “Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching”; and Richard Ekman, “Selective and Non-Selective Alike: An Argument for the Superior Educational Effectiveness of Smaller Liberal Arts Colleges,” in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, 151–171.

22 Thus Cech, “Science at Liberal Arts Colleges”; Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 91–93. Something roughly comparable appears to be the case with the social sciences, too. Thus

from alumni outcomes to the quality of the undergraduate education received at college tend to be greeted with a robust measure of skepticism. “The major problem with making inferences about the quality of undergraduate education from differences in the capabilities or accomplishments of alumni,” Ernest Pascarella, professor of higher education, points out, is “that one has to assume that all institutions start with the same level of students.” And, of course, they do not, even when they belong to the same higher educational sector. “Far and away the best predictors” of “educational outcomes” are the characteristics of the individual student when he or she enters college. To put it somewhat brutally, “input” turns out to be “the best predictor of output” – so much so that “by far the best predictor of students’ Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores when they graduate from college is their ACT/SAT scores when they enter college.”<sup>23</sup>

Hence the importance, so far as the overall quality of the education provided by our liberal arts colleges is concerned and, accordingly, the quality of the instruction they provide in the humanistic disciplines, of the picture that has emerged from the growing body of research pursued of recent years (along with a broad array of collaborators) by such leading scholars in the field of high-

---

Bourque, in “Reassessing Research,” using the 1998 Higher Education Data Service figures on the baccalaureate origin of those who go on to receive PhDs in the social sciences, notes (at 265) that “with data *weighted for size of institution*,” eight of the leading ten institutions producing those PhD candidates are liberal arts colleges; italics mine.

23 Ernest T. Pascarella, “Identifying Excellence in Undergraduate Education,” *Change* 33 (3) (2001): 19–20.

er education as Pascarella himself, Alexander W. Astin, and George D. Kuh. What they have done in that impressive body of work is to shift the focus of attention helpfully, when it comes to indices of educational excellence, both from institutional resources and external reputation and also from alumni accomplishments, to the presence within the institutions concerned of those educational practices and processes that have been shown empirically elsewhere to be “significantly and positively linked to desired aspects of cognitive and non-cognitive growth during college.”<sup>24</sup> The focus, that is to say, is now directly on what students experience at college or university, and on the effort the institution itself makes to “maximize good [educational] practices and enhance students’ academic and social engagement or effort.”<sup>25</sup> Summing up in 2005 the growing body of research findings on the topic, drawing on the data assembled by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) from some 730 four-year universities and colleges and from more than 430,000 students, and focusing specifically on the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector, George Kuh concluded that “students at liberal arts colleges generally are more engaged across the board in effective educational

24 Ernest T. Pascarella et al., “Do Liberal Arts Colleges Really Foster Good Practices in Undergraduate Education?” *Journal of College Student Development* 45 (1) (2004): 58. Cf. Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).

25 For example, “The focus and quality of teaching received, interactions with peers and faculty, writing experiences, involvement in coursework, level of academic and social engagement and the like”; thus Pascarella, “Identifying Excellence in Undergraduate Education,” 20 – 21.

practices than their counterparts at other types of institutions.” In relation to the five NSSE benchmarks as well as to other measures, “liberal arts colleges,” he reports, “score consistently higher than any other type of institution.” And those favorable results are “net of” (that is, irrespective of or controlled for) such distinguishing student characteristics as age and gender and such distinguishing institutional features as size, residential nature, and selectivity in admissions.<sup>26</sup> This last is particularly important in that it strongly suggests that “output” may not altogether be a function of “input” but may reflect also the supportive nature of the intellectual atmosphere prevailing at such colleges, as well as the range of their curricular offerings and the educational programs and practices characteristic of them. So that, “in many respects ... [and] ... in terms of effective educational practice,” or so Kuh claims, “liberal arts colleges set the bar for American higher education.”<sup>27</sup>

Insofar as this says something very positive about the general quality of the ed-

26 George D. Kuh, “Built to Engage: Liberal Arts Colleges and Effective Educational Practice,” in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, 124 – 125. NSSE grouped “questions about student and institutional performance into five clusters or benchmarks of effective educational practice”: (i) academic challenge; (ii) active and collaborative learning; (iii) student-faculty interaction; (iv) enriching intellectual experience; and (v) supportive campus environment. For further details on these benchmarks and for scores on them calibrated by the Carnegie institutional classification, see Appendices A and B, 141 – 145. Cf. George D. Kuh, “What We’re Relearning about Student Engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for Effective Educational Practices,” *Change* 35 (2) 2003: 24 – 37.

27 Kuh, “Built to Engage.”

ucation these colleges provide, it should say something very positive also about the quality of the education they provide in the humanistic disciplines – to the extent, of course, that they focus their institutional resources on instruction in humanistic disciplines, and to the extent to which their students choose to avail themselves of the instruction on offer in those subject areas. Here a particular point that Astin makes is especially pertinent. In relation to the baccalaureate colleges in general and the highly selective liberal arts group in particular, he identifies the very strength of what he calls their “humanities orientation” as a component crucial to the prevalence on their campuses of good educational practices. By humanities orientation he has in mind (variously) such things as the “frequent use of interdisciplinary and humanities courses (especially history and foreign languages),” the offering (or strength of) general education courses, the importance attached to the teaching of “the classics of Western civilization,” the use of essay examinations, the practice of seeing written work through multiple drafts, and so on.<sup>28</sup>

The strength of that humanities orientation is particularly evident in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts group of some 228 institutions. While at those colleges students in a particular semester may occasionally be denied entry into one or other humanities course because of temporary overcrowding, one does not encounter in this institutional grouping the sort of routine inability to

meet student demand for such courses that has become depressingly evident at some of our large state universities over the past decade and more. (At the University of Washington, for example, such a routine incapacity to meet demand has led to a pattern of course denials in the humanities reaching occasionally as high as 25 percent and fluctuating on a continuing basis in the neighborhood of 15 – 20 percent.<sup>29</sup>) And that, in turn, reflects the fact that commitment to the humanistic disciplines evidenced by the presence of proportionately larger cohorts of faculty in those disciplines appears to bulk larger in the collegiate (Liberal Arts) group than in any other institutional sector.

Taking American higher education as a whole, faculty in the humanistic disciplines have constituted over at least the past ten years no more than 14 percent of the entire faculty universe, with 29 percent of that group concentrated in the Doctoral – Research University sector, and 11 percent in the entire collegiate sector (that is, embracing both Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General). But if one shifts the angle of approach and inquires into the distribution of faculty across fields *within* the institutional sectors in question, the picture changes significantly. One finds then that humanities faculty amount to no more than 11.5 percent in the overall Doctoral – Research University sector but constitute 20 percent in the overall

28 Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 86, 91 – 92, where (at 86) he attributes the excellent performance of students on the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) largely “to the strong humanities orientation at these institutions.” Cf. Astin, *What Matters in College*, 45.

29 Donald C. Summers, “Prospects for the Humanities as Public Universities Privatize their Finances,” in *Tracking Changes in the Humanities*, ed. Richardson, 68 – 71 and Figure 11. During the same period (1994 – 2003) the rate of course denials in the social sciences actually exceeded the rate in the humanities, while in the natural sciences and professional schools it often fell short of 10 percent.

Baccalaureate sector, outpacing in the latter sector both natural and social scientists (at 18.2 and 12.6 percent, respectively), and easily surpassing the percentages of humanities faculty in each of the other Carnegie-defined sectors.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the fledgling Humanities Indicators Prototype, from which I draw these percentages, does not in this connection break down either the overall Doctoral – Research University sector or the overall Baccalaureate Colleges sector into its pertinent subdivisions. But I would speculate, and with considerable confidence, that the aggregate percentage of humanities faculty at the 228 colleges that make up the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts group far surpasses the 20 percent recorded for the entire Baccalaureate Colleges sector. Certainly, figures for faculty collected from a representative sample group of leading research universities and highly selective liberal arts colleges (over thirty institutions in all) reveal that the percentage of humanities faculty at the universities in question reaches the 20 percent recorded for the Baccalaureate sector overall, while the percentage for the colleges in the sample exceeded 40 percent.<sup>31</sup>

30 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-10a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx\\_\\_topIII10](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-10a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx__topIII10): Part III. *Figure III-10a: Distribution of Postsecondary Faculty across Academic Fields, by Type of Educational Institution, 2004*, and [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-11a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx\\_\\_topIII11](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-11a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx__topIII11): *Figure III-11a: Full-Time Faculty as a Percentage of All Postsecondary Faculty, by Primary Teaching Field, 1993 – 2004* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008).

31 For these figures I must content myself with referring to correspondence with Dr. Keith Finan, associate provost, Williams College.

If, turning now to the student side of the equation and the degree to which undergraduates are enrolling in the humanities courses that these faculty offer, we find ourselves, unfortunately, still bereft of stable, reliable, and comprehensive statistical data.<sup>32</sup> Instead, we have to content ourselves with taking patterns of successful majoring as an admittedly rough proxy for what such data might reveal. In this respect, the American Academy's Humanities Indicators Prototype (hewing to the 2000 *Carnegie Classification*) provides for the year 2004 some very helpful data revelatory of the distribution across our institutions of higher education of baccalaureate degrees completed in the humanities.<sup>33</sup> And the picture that emerges, while not counterintuitive, is still quite striking. Not surprisingly, given the number of undergraduates they enroll, the institutions in the Doctoral – Research and Master's Colleges and Universities sectors account, respectively, for 49 and 34 percent of the humanities degrees awarded, for a total of 83 percent. The Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General, on the other hand, account, respectively, for 12 and 5 percent of the humanities degrees awarded, for a combined total of no more than 17 percent (this exclusive of the 0.3 percent of such degrees awarded by the small, new category now designated as Baccalaureate – Associate).

32 Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIIA.aspx>: Part II. *Section A: Undergraduate Education, Introduction*.

33 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3a.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx\\_\\_topII3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3a.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx__topII3): Part II. *Figure II-3a: Distribution of Humanities Bachelor's Degree Completions among Types of Awarding Institution, 2004*.

By itself, admittedly, that does not tell us all that much. But if one folds into the analysis the distribution of the student population in general across the sectors in question the picture becomes more interesting. The Doctoral – Research and Master’s sectors enroll 28.1 and 21.4 percent, respectively, of the number of those studying for undergraduate or graduate degrees in the entire universe of American higher education, for a combined total of 49.5 percent. Though strongly tilted, of course, toward undergraduates, the comparable figures for Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General are 2.5 and 3.6 percent, respectively, for a combined total of 6.1 percent. Thus, when it comes to graduating students with baccalaureate degrees in the humanities, it is clear, when one takes overall enrollment patterns into account, that the Baccalaureate Colleges sector in general (and its Liberal Arts subsector in particular), in proportion to the size and distribution of the student population overall, are certainly outpacing the other sectors.<sup>34</sup>

If, however, one’s concern lies more precisely with the importance of the place occupied by the humanities in the institutions falling into each of the Carnegie categories (and especially the collegiate Liberal Arts subsector), then

the more significant, finely calibrated, and revealing picture is the one that emerges if we use the data now available for “Humanities Bachelor’s Degree Completions as a Percentage of All Bachelor’s Degree Completions, by Type of Awarding Institution.”<sup>35</sup> Doing so, we find that a significant divide opens up within the ranks both of the Doctoral – Research universities overall and, even more so, of the Baccalaureate Colleges taken as a whole (though, again, excluding the tiny Baccalaureate – Associate subsector). Thus, in this respect the second tier of research universities (Doctoral – Research Intensive) comes in with a figure of 12 percent, next to the bottom of the pack, while the top-tier research universities, with a figure of 15 percent, next to the top. More strikingly, the old Liberal Arts II group of colleges (now Baccalaureate Colleges – General), with a figure of 10 percent, comes in at the very bottom. Their Liberal Arts counterpart in the Baccalaureate sector, on the other hand, with a figure of no less than 31 percent – more than twice as high as any other sector – comes in easily at the top.

Insofar then as we are concerned with the prominence of the humanistic disci-

34 For overall enrollment patterns, see *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition, 21, Table 6; and for humanities degrees completed, Humanities Indicators Prototype, Part II. *Figure II-3a*. The above judgment reflects the ratios between enrollment by sector as a percentage of total enrollments nationwide and humanities degree completions in the same sector as a percentage of total such completion nationwide. Thus (i) Doctoral – Research sector 28:49; (ii) Master’s sector 21:34; (iii) total collegiate sector 6:17; (iv) Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector 2.5:12.

35 For which see Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3b.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx\\_topI3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3b.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx_topI3): Part II. *Figure II-3b: Humanities Bachelor’s Degree Completions as a Percentage of All Bachelor’s Degree Completions, by Type of Awarding Institution*, 2004. The ranking goes as follows: Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts, 31 percent; Doctoral – Research University – Extensive, 15 percent; Master’s Colleges and Universities I, 13 percent; Master’s Colleges and Universities II, 12 percent; Doctoral – Research University – Intensive, 12 percent; Baccalaureate Colleges – General, 10 percent; Baccalaureate – Associate Colleges, 6 percent.

plines in the educational life of the collegiate sector, these particular figures reveal how misleading it would be to lump together the Liberal Arts and General subdivisions of that sector. And, in this respect at least, as perhaps in one or two others,<sup>36</sup> the Liberal Arts group would appear to be a shade closer to the leading group of research universities than to any other institutional sector or subsector in higher education, their fellow colleges in the former Liberal Arts II group not excepted.<sup>37</sup>

If the percentage of baccalaureate degrees awarded in the humanities is one way of measuring the dimensions of the type of education the liberal arts colleges provide, so, too, is the percentage of those graduating from such institu-

tions who go on to complete PhD work in one or other of the humanistic disciplines. As we have seen,<sup>38</sup> the colleges, and especially the more selective among them, have long sent a remarkably high number of their graduates on to PhD programs in general. Something similar may be said in relation now to PhD programs in humanistic subjects, where the colleges (Liberal Arts and General) accounting for about 6 percent of overall student enrollments, are the baccalaureate source for 15 percent of those earning doctorates.<sup>39</sup> In gross numbers, of course, and understandably so given the overall size of their student populations, it is the large research universities that provide the bulk of the PhD candidates. At the University of California, Berkeley, alone, some 335 students from the 1995 – 1999 undergraduate cohort went on to complete doctorates in humanistic disciplines. By way of contrast, it took the comparable figures from four highly selective colleges combined (Wesleyan [Connecticut], Oberlin, Amherst, and Williams, at 129, 105, 94, and 83, respectively, for a four-college total of 411) to surpass that benchmark.<sup>40</sup> That is re-

36 So far as levels of research productivity go, at least in the humanities and social sciences, the leading group of liberal arts colleges comes very close to being aligned with the Ivy League research universities. For this, see the very hands-on investigation that McCaughey pursued, measuring the research activity of humanities and social science faculty in some two dozen liberal arts colleges against that of a control group of their colleagues at Columbia, Cornell, Princeton, and Yale. He did not claim, however, that that level of research productivity was characteristic of any more than a minority of the colleges in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts subsector. See Robert A. McCaughey, *Scholars and Teachers: The Faculties of Select Liberal Arts Colleges and Their Place in American Higher Learning* (New York: Barnard College, 1995), especially ix, 41 – 46, 92 – 93, and 103 – 105. Cf. McCaughey, “Scholars and Teachers Revisited: In Continued Defense of College Faculty Who Publish,” in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, 88 – 97.

37 Although the gap between the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts group and any of the other sectors/subsectors is far greater than those between any of the latter.

38 See above, page 42, and note 21.

39 I draw this datum from WebCASPAR (Integrated Science and Engineering Resources Data System; <http://webcaspar.nsf.gov>). While this system is focused on science and engineering, its data resources also provide helpful information on other fields and higher education in general.

40 I am indebted for these figures (which are based on the National Science Foundation et al., *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, and on data assembled from Williams College and nine other highly selective colleges) to Chris Winters, director of institutional research at Williams College, *A Comparative Analysis of Doctoral Achievement by Williams Graduates by Discipline and Over Time* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College, 2007), “Top Ten Schools by Number of Grad-

spectable enough, it may be, even in terms of the raw numbers. But when recomputed in terms of the percentages of those who graduate from that collegiate cohort going on to earn doctorates in the humanities, the figures become a good deal more striking. Recomputed in that way, it turns out that nine of the leading ten institutions nationwide are liberal arts colleges, with only one of the great research universities making the list. Nor is this some sort of new development. Thirty or so years ago (using the 1967–1971 undergraduate cohort), though the list of institutions involved was not identical, the picture overall was very much the same, with eight of the leading ten institutions being liberal arts colleges.<sup>41</sup> As a group then, and to a degree out of all proportion to their number and size, the liberal arts colleges play a long-established and highly significant role in the vital, ongoing process whereby the ranks of scholars in the humanities are replenished across time.

All of that said, this would appear to be the appropriate moment to post the routine (but by no means redundant) warning to the effect that there can be no safe inference from the aggregate figures for any given institutional sector or subsector to the putative conditions prevailing on the ground at any particular institution in the group. The scholars who have focused our attention on the unusually high degree to which “good

educational practices” are characteristic of our liberal arts colleges have been careful to draw our attention also to the flattening effect of aggregation on the numbers or norms they are reporting, and to remind us that there are instances where, in this respect, colleges in the Liberal Arts sector lag behind some of the institutions in the Doctoral–Research University sector. And something analogous is the case with other claims based on aggregated figures. If, for example, the top eleven institutions ranked in the Astin-Chang study as high on both student and research orientation were all of them leading, highly selective liberal arts colleges, it would be appropriate to note, too, that Astin and Chang also found that the eight institutions that were in the top 10 percent in student orientation but the bottom 10 percent in research orientation were also liberal arts colleges, but ones drawn, this time, from the old Liberal Arts II subsector.<sup>42</sup>

All of these institutions have their own sometimes long and very individual histories, which contrive to shape their own specific intellectual and educational profiles – and do so often in quite profound ways. The variations from institution to institution even in the same overall collegiate subsector can often be quite marked. And it may reasonably be supposed that such variability extends also to the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of individual colleges in their orientation to the humanities and the scope and quality of their instruction in the various humanistic disciplines.

Such a variability is certainly evident in the numbers of graduates the leading

---

uates Earning a Doctorate in Humanities,” Now (cohort 1995–1999) and “Total Doctorates Earned in Humanities (Highly Selective Coed Colleges).”

41 Ibid., “Top Ten Schools by *Percentage of Graduates Earning a Doctorate in Humanities*,” Now (cohort 1995–1999), and Then (cohort 1967–1971).

42 Astin and Chang, “Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching,” 45–49.

colleges send on to PhD work in the humanities, with Reed, Amherst, and St. John's College, Maryland, setting a blistering pace, which, in recent years, their competitor colleges have not matched.<sup>43</sup> A similar variability is equally evident when it comes to the presence of the humanities disciplines in the five majors most frequently chosen by students. In one set of leading, highly selective colleges, English is apparently the academic discipline most frequently included in the top five majors, with history, though fluctuating in its presence, a close second. At Williams, however, the pattern is clear, stable, and subject to few fluctuations. For the past eleven years three of the top five majors have consistently been in the humanistic disciplines (English, history, and art/art history), with the two remaining being biology and economics.<sup>44</sup> While in that consistency Williams is almost certainly not alone, I suspect it is more than a little unusual in the preeminence accorded to art history. And that fact may serve as a useful illustration of the type of educational singularity that one finds embedded in the distinctive educational histories of so many of the older colleges.

The prominence of art history at Williams is grounded in a long-established and widely celebrated tradition of cur-

ricular and pedagogic strength, bolstered by the presence at the College and in the vicinity of rich collections of art, and attested to by the extraordinary numbers of alumni who have gone on to positions of leadership in the art world at large and the museum world in particular.<sup>45</sup> Analogous nodes of distinctive curricular strength or pedagogic practice are to be found at many another college: classics at Bryn Mawr, music at Oberlin, foreign languages at Middlebury, in its heyday a justifiably celebrated general education program at Amherst, at Swarthmore a fine (and time-tested) honors seminar program involving the discipline imposed by resort to external examiners, to name just a few.<sup>46</sup>

Institutional singularities of this sort are endemic among our liberal arts colleges. Because of that, it would take a detailed, comparative study of the range and nature of the humanities courses offered at those colleges to flesh out the above appraisal of the strength and

43 Winters, *A Comparative Analysis of Doctoral Achievement*, "Top Ten Schools by Percentage of Graduates Earning a Doctorate in Humanities," Now (cohort 1995–1999). Though it would be fair to say that, given differing collegiate cultures, the ambition to match those colleges in this particular respect may have been lacking.

44 The colleges in question are Amherst, Bowdoin, Pomona, Swarthmore, Oberlin, Carleton, Grinnell, Smith, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr. See Sorum, "New Problems in the Humanities," 253–254. The Williams College statistics cover the years 1997–2007.

45 The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art are both in the vicinity, and both make internship opportunities available to Williams students. At the present time and in the recent past Williams graduates (the so-called "Williams Mafia") have held the position of director at many a leading American museum, from the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., to the Chicago Art Institute, and from the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to the Los Angeles County Museum.

46 Similarly, a tutorial program framed on the Oxbridge model, launched at Williams in 1987 and since much expanded, is now well on the way to becoming a signature component of the College's offerings. Each tutorial session is limited to two students who, in successive weeks, alternate the roles of essay reader and critic of the tutorial partner's essay.

quality of humanistic studies in the Liberal Arts collegiate sector as a whole. And, beyond that, if one had the further ambition of identifying the different modes of curricular and interpretative approaches in play, one would have to undertake microhistorical studies of particular humanities programs and of the fluctuating destinies across time of the various departments in the humanistic disciplines at a range of these colleges. A few such studies have indeed been attempted, and with intriguing results. They open a helpful window into the state of the humanities in this particular subsector of American higher education and into the strengths and distinctive weaknesses evident in the colleges studied. And weaknesses, it should be recognized, are sometimes no less deeply rooted than are strengths in the particular histories of the institutions involved.<sup>47</sup>

Enough, I suspect, has been said to attest to the health of humanistic studies in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts subsector taken as a whole and, further, to suggest that the humanities occupy a uniquely favored position in those leading, highly selective colleges,

47 For an interesting illustration of such a microhistorical endeavor, see Margaret Sabin, “Evolution and Revolution: Change in the Literary Humanities, 1968 – 1995,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 84 – 103, where she tracks in comparative fashion the divergent character of the changes undergone by the English curriculum at Amherst and Williams in the course of the theoretical turbulence characteristic of the quarter century between the late 1960s and mid-1990s. Similarly, the brief comparison of the English majors at Amherst and Wellesley by Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2001), 16 – 17.

where the humanistic disciplines occupy so very prominent a place, and the depth of commitment to high-quality undergraduate teaching is matched by an unusually strong orientation toward scholarly research and writing, especially scholarship of the sort that Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, labeled as “integrative.”<sup>48</sup>

Writing in 1999, Astin was bold enough to assert that “the selective private liberal arts college, perhaps more than any other institution of American higher education, exemplifies much of what has come to be known as best educational practice in undergraduate education,” and that “students who attend selective liberal arts colleges will enjoy unique educational benefits.”<sup>49</sup> In light of the findings reported above, no little part of that encouraging story, I would now suggest, is the strength and vibrancy of the orientation to the humanities evident at these colleges, their commitment to the maintenance of usually large cohorts of faculty in the humanistic disciplines, and the unparalleled degree to which their student bodies choose to avail themselves of the opportunities thus provided for the pursuit of humanistic studies.<sup>50</sup>

48 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 153 – 157; Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, 15 – 25, 53 – 64; Kenneth P. Ruscio, “The Distinctive Scholarship of the Selective Liberal Arts College,” *Journal of Higher Education* 58 (2) (1987): 205 – 222.

49 Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 92, 96.

50 And not simply those who choose to major in a humanistic discipline. I would note that in the past approximately three-quarters of the Williams student body elected to take English 101 (*The Study of Literature*) and half

So striking indeed is all of this, and so marked is the degree of institutional exceptionalism that it suggests, that by way of conclusion, one may be permitted to wonder, perhaps a bit ruefully, why those of us fortunate enough to have been associated with these “medallion” colleges have not reached out far more forcefully than we have to encourage and sustain the ongoing health of humanistic studies (often so beleaguered) in the secondary tier of education from which we are fortunate enough to have been able to draw so many truly gifted students. Unto whomsoever so much has clearly been given, after all, may not somewhat more be properly expected?

---

to take Art History 101 – 102 (Introduction to Art History). On the national scene, apart from a freshman composition course and a U.S. History survey course, no humanities course in the mid-1990s “attracted more than 32% . . . with most drawing considerably fewer”; Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIIA.aspx#topII6>: Part II. *Indicator II-6: Most Frequently Taken College Courses*. In more recent years (2003 – 2007) introductory English literature and art history courses have almost always appeared among the five most heavily elected courses at Williams.