

It's Time to Put Away the Parlor Games

What's Wrong with the Academy

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Using the annual pilgrimage to the academic professional conference as a backdrop, complete with its material and energy costs, this essay pokes serious fun at the narrowness of academic scholarship in light of the serious global issues we confront. More importantly, the essay addresses the myopic training of graduate students and the relentless quest of grants and publications by junior faculty driven by the tenure game and the increasing corporatization of higher education. The essay is inspired by Edith Hamilton's observation that "there has never been a generation better educated than the one that ushered in the end of Athens," and by Adam Smith's line that describes universities as "sanctuaries in which exploded systems and obsolete prejudices find protection after they had been hunted out of every corner of the world." Suggestions are provided for how the Academy and professional academic societies might more thoughtfully and practically pitch in to help rather than studying the nature of fire while the ecosphere burns.

On January 17, 2007 The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved its doomsday clock two minutes closer to midnight, "reflecting global failures to solve the problems posed by nuclear weapons and the climate crisis." Within weeks of the clock adjustment the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that "there is a 90% chance humans are responsible for climate change," mostly due to the burning of fossil fuels. In the parlance of scientific language, ninety percent confidence is a near certainty. One would think, then, that it's akin to good news when the world's leading petroleum geologists believe that in little more than a century the modern world has burned its way through half of the global supply of oil and natural gas, and that the other half may be gone in as few as thirty years. But it's not.

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These are serious challenges, among many, each with its own spiraling effects across social, political and educational infrastructures that form the operating system we call the modern world. The negative impacts are felt across the globe and in our local communities. They are in the food we eat, the cost of health care, our children's future, and in perpetual wars among nations and ideologies.

There has probably never been another time in human history more in need of the collective power of human intellectual capital to provide exit strategies, soft landings, alternatives, and solutions. And not just in the engineering, business and technology fields. The humanities and social sciences—collectively the Liberal Arts—will also need to supply their concepts, theories, and methods to the problems at hand. Considering the fix we're in, it's about as good as it gets to be a philosopher or sociologist.

I wish I could say with confidence that the academic disciplines known as the Liberal Arts are well prepared. They are not. Worse, judging by publications in academic journals the humanities and social sciences seem oblivious to the problems, uninterested in pitching in to help, or both. Further evidence of this disregard can be found at any one of the many annual conferences of the **American “Insert Discipline Here” Association**¹.

Evidence of America's still remaining, and immense, wealth—and the continued ability of its citizens to waste it—can be seen in any lobby of one of the large hotels and conference centers that host our gathering: hundreds milling about and discussing intellectual output that is largely irrelevant to the day-to-day workings of a world that, by

¹ For the purposes of this essay I will be focusing on the disciplines of Anthropology, Modern Language, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Religion, and Sociology. The academic conference is only one aspect of an educational system gone bad.

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nearly all objective indexes and measures, is falling rapidly and dangerously apart. Most flew to the conference, spending \$500-\$1,000 of their institution's money to discuss topics of interest to only a very small group of people, and all of them well-off enough to make the trip, to eat luxuriously, and to spend hours of leisure time discussing esoteric topics. Participants look forward to getting together with like-minded colleagues, old classmates and teachers, and to feeling like the intellectuals that they imagined themselves to be when they started their academic careers. It is the sort of work that is not suppose to be particularly practical, and they're not suppose to be particularly anxious about using this work to fix any big social problems. The academy, after all, is a safe haven for staid traditions and steady truths. A quick glance at any academic conference program and its many paper titles is proof enough of what I am saying.

Let's start with the numbers. By an estimation that is admittedly rough, about 40,000 academics in the fields of anthropology, history, modern language, philosophy, political science, religion, and sociology travel to their annual conferences. If we assume that an average cost of \$800/person (travel, accommodations, food), that's \$32,000,000 annually, the majority of it coming from the colleges and universities where the conference attendants are employed (i.e., tuition dollars and public monies). It's also a lot of jet fuel, food calories, waste disposal, and additional atmospheric carbon. What do we get for this financial investment and one-time drawdown of the earth's capital stocks? Not much.²

² Frivolous Disney cruise vacations are no longer harmless in terms of their impacts either, but neither do they parade as gatherings of the America's finest men and women of letters for the purpose of exercising and showing off their education.

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The annual academic conference is a mono-cultural hothouse of the over-educated, concentrated around a very narrow slice of knowledge called a discipline, usually divided further into sub disciplines, and finally into panels of “topics,” usually including a moderator, two or three presenters who “give” what Gary Snyder describes as the “Byzantine artifact known as the professional paper”.³ The papers are usually hastily read or summarized, and a commentator provides brief critical remarks. The session takes about 90 minutes and includes some audience participation. There are dozens of these sessions going on simultaneously morning, noon, and night, punctuated by meals and larger events that feature the better known academics of the given discipline whose works are featured in symposia, and finally, keynote speakers, who are the best known and are usually members of the official organizations within which academics identify themselves. The smaller sessions may have as few as 4-5 audience members and as many as two dozen, many of whom wander in and out. The Symposia have larger numbers (50-100), and the keynotes fill the largest hotel ballrooms, a sea of herring bone tweed. Topics and papers are centered on the narrowest slices of a concept or argument and written in technical language.

Among the academic participants there are book sellers, editors in search of authors, authors in search of publishers, job interviews for newly minted PhD’s in hotel suites with small committees of middle-aged, tenured professors. It is a harrowing culling process for the interviewees and a grinding drudgery for the professors.

Were we to catalog what is gained by these conferences it would include a campus interview for the job candidate, a book contract, a new contact that may further one’s career, a publication in a journal. The professional association also does its business of

³ “The Etiquette of Freedom,” In *The Practice of the Wild*, p. 17.

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electing officers, revisiting by-laws, and occasionally giving prizes for the best paper. At the lower end of the spectrum there is another line on the curriculum vita, a sense of belonging to a community of like-minded who takes your work seriously enough to at least invite you to share it, a chance to see old friends and teachers, and chance to get out of your one horse town or bask in the sun.

The academic conference is emblematic of an ancient tradition (the Greek “academy” and the Latin “scholaris”) wherein an individual considered worthy (usually after performing various tasks and tests that demonstrate one’s intellect and the willingness to take orders) is admitted into a community of thinkers and becomes a disciple to a higher truth/school to which is dedicated one’s intellectual—not to mention one’s emotional and social—life.

The modern American (Western) educational system is particularly good at narrowing students’ intellectual interests until, if they can stay in the game long enough, end up pursuing a small slice of research known and shared by a similarly small cadre of scholars. Education for the PhD student is a slow process of matching interests with aptitude in ever-smaller fields of scholarship. When the match is found there is great excitement in pursuing a scholarly interest, relevance be damned. Training for the PhD has been narrowing minds for centuries. And it’s rare that student, mentor or academic discipline is called upon to justify the use of resources to pursue these interests.

Once you are a member of a discipline or academic tradition you have tacit permission to pursue any line of enquiry approved by the tradition in which one is working. No further justification is necessary. (As an example from my own career, I spent many years working on the question of what gives a promise its moral force. This included a

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careful reading of a ten page account of promising in 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume's book *The Treatise of Human Nature*. I published a short article on the matter. Years later the editor of a fairly prestigious philosophy journal asked me to review a manuscript because someone had told him that I was "the best person working on David Hume's account of promising." There was a time earlier in my career when that sort of comment would have made me proud, but no longer. To be considered an expert on a ten-page account of promising by a long-dead Scottish philosopher is the sort of thing that rightfully gives philosophers—and academics generally—a bad name.)

I have attended my share of academic conferences, but I am increasingly reluctant to do so, and I've become outright hostile to their mission. Even without the doomsday clock and climate change data these gatherings make me uncomfortable because they encourage self-importance and an overly intellectualized, anti-social inwardness. They give voice and legitimation to our specialties and subspecialties, which in itself would not be so bad if we considered these narrow academic foci as interesting, but tangential or secondary to our real work in the classroom or our home places, or government (like hobbyists and crafts people who meet at conferences and fairs to share ideas and work, but who otherwise have real jobs). Unfortunately much of the job security in the academic line of work—not to mention the self-definitions as scholar-teachers (in that order)—requires professors to see their specialties as the main events. Deeper and deeper they go until their only audience consists of a few editors, referees, tenure committees (and only because they are required to read the work), and the folks on a panel or in the small audience at one these conferences, folks who are themselves conference participants.

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Such inwardness might be acceptable if it seemed even remotely relevant to the outside world. Engineers, scientists, surgeons, and accountants, for example, all have their professional conferences, and it must get pretty technical and boringly dreary to the outsider. But one can sense a larger interest in and purpose to this work. The results will potentially change how people work, live, and think. The press occasionally shows up. Not so at the conferences devoted to work in the Liberal Arts. It is creative, sincere, and occasionally useful, but largely marginal. Where are the reporters? Where are the audiences of people who are not making presentations themselves? Yes, these conferences are fun, and participants can learn some things and enjoy each other's company. But Liberal Arts academics should want something more: to be relevant, influential, and united in a common cultural goal.

In light of increasingly serious social and environmental challenges we face, I am embarrassed by the amount of intellectual capital that is squandered at professional conferences of academics—not to mention the squandering of our natural resources and the increasingly diminishing budgets of our colleges and universities. All of it might seem quaint or at least grudgingly tolerated as quirky in a world of relative peace, justice, plentiful resources, capacity for growth, and with most of the big systems working well. Needless to say, this is not our world. And it is especially troubling—and deserving of a much-deserved lashing—that our hyper-education and relative leisure can produce nothing more than yet another esoteric paper and another line on the curriculum vita. In the right circumstances, it would qualify as a textbook case of madness: Rome burns and we contemplate the nature of fire or discuss Heraclitus' views of fire in the cosmos in hopes of furthering our career. While it is certainly not anything equivalent to a crime

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against humanity, this sort of behavior does qualify as a willful neglect of humanity and the surrounding ecosystem, and it is certainly nothing about which we should display any pride or good feeling. Worse yet, as educators of the generation that will both confront and potentially challenge the end of oil and its many economic, social, and ecological impacts, they continue to teach the same courses and read the same books. They prepare students for the same careers as their teachers did them, while requiring students to incur ever more financial debt while facing fewer employment prospects at ever-reduced wages and benefits. This is not only madness. It is ethically culpable.

Any one of current environmental and social trends by itself would be cause for concern and a motivation to recalibrate our intellectual machinery. Taken together, they should ring every school bell, sounding an alarm that demands our attention, not just as independent contractors, but as members of disciplines and institutions. We need what Paul Hawken describes as a “shared mental model,” a general agreement about what is challenging our thinking (the problem to be solved), and specific products and programs that are designed to solve the problem. This is not just a dismal warning, although it is a warning. But it is also a challenge for those of us in the academy who—as a rule—are not asked to solve real and immediate problems (unlike our engineering and business colleagues who work to solve real and immediate problems.) The good news for all of us here is that the United States is at a junction that will require our collective and best work as theorists and educators. This work, if it is done right, will help manage the transition to a society that must “fess up” to the thermodynamic limitations of liberty and the American dream without thereby trashing the world’s ecosystems in search of a few more

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barrels of oil or further eroding our democratic and social institutions. It is literally the remaking of the American—and increasingly the world’s—operating systems.

We have a ten to thirty year window to effect the changes necessary to address successfully the end of our carbon-fuel addiction. (And ten to thirty years is not much time to redirect any system’s deep and underlying assumptions). Academics can, and should, argue about my specific recommendations.⁴ What matters is not the specific shape of the problem statement or the programs developed to address the problem statement. What matters is that academics across the disciplines agree to focus on a few of these problem statements, and then to get to work on some solutions. Despite the description of academics as independent and hard to corral, I do not believe it is unreasonable to think that they might usefully organize around issues or projects. I’m thinking, for example, of the Physicians for Social Responsibility,⁵ The Union of Concerned Scientists,⁶ or Engineers Without Borders.⁷

As a first goal academic intellectuals should strive to become relevant. This is not to say that all of their academic work should be put to use in solving problems. But some of it should, and conferences seem an obvious place in which to do it. To this end I would urge academic associations and conference organizers to create “get real” sessions that identify themes and problems that challenge academics to bring their specialties to bear on actual problems in need of solving. Set quantitative standards and expectations, demand language that is accessible, and reward participants who take their specialties outside to work with others.

⁴ If you are a student, parent or taxpayer you participate by demanding a public accounting of the high costs of conference attendance and what these dollars are buying.

⁵ <http://www.psr.org/home.cfm?id=about>

⁶ <http://www.ucsusa.org/ucs/about/index.cfm>

⁷ <http://www.ewb-usa.org/index.php>

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A second goal should be an expectation that academic intellectuals become public intellectuals as well. This is more difficult, to be sure, because it requires significant changes in the academic reward structures. The tenured faculty, administrators, and members/leaders of professional organizations should work to seek broader definitions of “research,” “publication,” and “service” that extend beyond “specialty,” “peer review,” and “campus committees.” Every college, university, and academic professional organization should create and encourage an expectation of pro bono work among its members. Service teaching should become as much a standard on our campuses as service learning is becoming. With time and practice, even the most inward of academic disciplines and practitioners will be able to contribute to the social conversation about, and solutions to, the central challenges of the day. Professors in the Liberal Arts seem ideally suited for this public work.

I do not want to suggest that all academic scholarship be devoted to planning for a nation low on its primary feedstock. But some of it darn well better be. Tenure is still worth the effort of jumping through the necessary hoops (publishing as a means to an end, though not necessarily an end in itself). Nor is it necessarily wrong to devote some scholarly energy and excitement to narrow and esoteric interests, especially when one’s job security demands it. But post-tenure should be a time when scholars think of their academic pursuits more as hobbies: interesting to us and other like-minded hobbyists, but not particularly deserving of wider praise or an all-consuming effort.

If we academic professionals honestly think the world and its varied systems—especially those close to home—are crumbling, then we should do something about it.

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Using the engineering method of first carefully defining a problem and then specifying product requirements to solve that problem, Liberal Arts academics and their associations should set themselves the tasks of creating/designing programs, systems, projects, and plans that anticipate and respond to the changes to come.⁸ They might imagine a second constitutional convention or rewrite founding documents for a new world or try putting Jefferson's Ward Republics to practical use in their home regions. They could identify and create the social infrastructures that will be necessary to help transition to a post-carbon economy or generate alternative economic models that downshift our growth economy without busting the gearbox.⁹ They could take their favorite intellectual icon/mentor and advance his/her work, rather than restating it or explaining or,¹⁰ or reinterpret tried and true concepts for a new age.¹¹

There is important work to be done, both theoretical and practical, and it will require a focus and dedication to solving the problems we face, not the problems that simply interest us, or those that we developed while in graduate school, or that begin as papers written for a conference panel and may find publication in the journals that no one reads and that university libraries are increasingly uninterested in purchasing.

⁸ In the business world this is called scenario planning. See <http://www.gbn.com/AboutScenariosDisplayServlet.srv> for an example.)

⁹ Richard Heinberg's *Power-Down: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*, chapter three, has a very good discussion of the sorts of changes necessary for a peaceful transition.

¹⁰ To put it another way, we ought not to be digging around in the intellectual past for artifacts to shine and display in a museum. (No more books and articles on so-and-so's account of such-and-such.) Our work in the past should be seen as more akin to visiting a junk yard and rummaging around for valuable but overlooked parts that will help us to get out of a big ditch. Let's advance our favorite writer's work for *this time and place*, and put it good use for the problems we face here and now.

¹¹ Academics can also stay home or closer to home (or demand more "virtual" conference attendance), demand more from their professional associations in terms of public work, encourage public accountability of their use of private and public funds in pursuit of estoterica, and work, when possible, to retool education, especially at the graduate level, to better prepare the next generation of intellectuals to be more in tune with the world in which they live and work.

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Academic professionals in the Liberal Arts need to see themselves as critically important for the work ahead; as civic engineers and entrepreneurs; as contributors to America's new civic, social and ecological infrastructures; and to see the next thirty years as one of most fruitful periods in American history for the sort of work they are called to do. Fear and guilt are motivation enough for their efforts, but I hope, too, that they can find joy and meaning in actually pitching in. Think of it as an intellectual barn-raising: vitally important, many hands, many skill-sets, a good deal of cooperation, camaraderie and coordination, hard work and fun co-mingled, and a sense of satisfaction at its completion. It is not a call to stop what one is doing or what one loves to do best, or even to stop attending academic conferences, but rather to put one's training and passion to work on a project that is critically important. If we're successful and lucky, our efforts just may forestall a future grandchild—whether real or imagined—from asking us what exactly we were doing when the oil was running out and the temperature rising.