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COMMENTARY

On Lamentations for a Lost Canon

By *L.D. Burnett* | MAY 10, 2016

Dan Berrett's recent article "If Skills Are the New Canon, Are Colleges Teaching Them?" opens with a Just-So story that never was, an idealized and simplified "then" of settled canons and scholarly consensus against which to compare and contrast our presumably more contentious and complicated "now" of curricular multiplicity. But whatever skills may signify in today's college curriculum — and, as I argue below, they at least partly represent a new name for some old ways of thinking — they cannot be "the new canon" for one simple reason: There was no old canon for them to replace.

The myth of the canon as some set of texts that was once widely taught on American university campuses until it was finally abandoned in the 1980s is, in fact, a product of 1980s' and 1990s' debates about higher education. Academics, polemicists, and public intellectuals who resisted the multicultural turn in the humanistic disciplines framed these curricular changes as signs of decline, but the narrative of a purported fall from a golden age, when "the canon" formed the core of the American university curriculum and all students could be expected to read the same texts, bears little relation to the actual history of American higher education since at least the late 19th century.

Charles W. Eliot's *Harvard Classics*, first published in 1909, was neither a canon nor even a compendium of some agreed-upon core curriculum at American colleges. Instead, by the time Eliot's gimmicky "Five Foot Shelf of Books" hit the market, his signature curricular innovation — the elective system — had already been in place at Harvard for about a quarter-century and had spread like pedagogic wildfire to colleges across the country.

Instead of a standard sequence of courses or a prescribed set of texts all college students would be expected to master, the elective system represented an alternate understanding of liberal education as a kind of mental and moral training students undertook through the very process of weighing and choosing which courses to take and which fields to study. Eliot and his publisher may have been peddling a 15-minute-a-day reading program to the general, class-aspirational public as the next best thing to the college education that was still out of their reach, but American colleges championed the elective system for their own students as a means of cultivating the skills those students would need as future leaders in American society, government, business, and industry.

The rise of distribution requirements during the middle decades of the 20th century served as a corrective to the overspecialization of knowledge and the curricular free-for-all of the elective system. While distribution requirements represented a move toward prescribed content in the curriculum, educators conceived that essential content in the broadest way possible.

In an increasingly complex society, champions for general education argued, students would need some familiarity with each major field of intellectual inquiry. According to the 1945 Harvard report "General Education in a Free Society," disciplines in those major fields could be grouped under the broad categories of the humanities, the social sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics. But at least for the qualitative disciplines, students usually fulfilled these general-education requirements through large, sweeping survey courses that offered a cursory, flyover view of vast subject areas.

The aim of general education was not simply to fill students' minds with basic knowledge, but rather to help them develop the abilities — the skills, if you will — of thinking broadly and integrating knowledge from disparate disciplines, so that they would be better able to understand and address the complex challenges of contributing to and sustaining a free society.

In the 1960s, student activists, committed to realizing that ideal of a free society for everyone, grew increasingly frustrated with what they saw as a lack of relevant, practical content in their general-education courses. Student protesters challenged general-education requirements that, in their view, did not equip them with the knowledge they needed to address current, pressing social issues. Black student activists, for example, demanded space in the curriculum and on the campus for scholarship in African American studies that would provide students with relevant knowledge they could put to immediate practical use.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many American colleges responded to these student (and faculty) demands for the development of new fields of inquiry either by expanding the range of course offerings that could count toward the various distribution requirements, or by dropping distribution requirements altogether.

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Administrators and faculty at Stanford University, for example, adopted the latter approach, eliminating the Western-civilization course and practically all other distribution requirements in 1970. That brief experiment in a purely laissez-faire curriculum lasted less than a decade; by 1980, the university had restored a system of distribution requirements covering seven broad areas of scholarly inquiry, as well as a separate yearlong

humanities.

Western-culture course requirement.

In 1988, Stanford's decision to broaden the scope of that requirement from

"Western Culture" to "Cultures, Ideas, and Values" and reconfigure its reading list accordingly sparked a fierce outcry from opponents of multiculturalism in higher education. As a result of this controversy, the canon that never was became the canon that was no more.

Today, perpetuating the narrative that the 1980s was the decade that the canon died raises the stakes for higher education, particularly in the humanities. Decades of carefully cultivated hostility toward the purported canon-killers of the 1980s are now bearing fruit in legislative efforts to reduce support for scholarship in the humanities. Politicians and a public indignant on behalf of a canon that never was are increasingly unwilling to support education except in only the most narrowly conceived vocational terms.

Against this background of the delegitimizing and defunding of higher education for any purpose other than job training, it is no wonder that colleges and universities are talking up their ability to impart transferrable "skills" to their students. For now, it may seem like the only way they can keep their doors open long enough to teach students anything at all. That is not the fault of the purported canon-busters of the 1980s, but the fault of those who lost that curricular battle and still resent it.

L.D. Burnett is an adjunct professor of history at Collin College. Her book, Canon Wars: The 1980s Western Civ Debates at Stanford and the Triumph of Neoliberalism in Higher Education, is forthcoming from the University of North Carolina Press.

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