"Required reading for any citizen seriously concerned about the role of higher education in a democratic society." —Stanley N. Katz

W. B. CARNOCHAN

The Battleground of the Curriculum

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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For Kate and Patrick
(and their generation)

Preface

If it had not been for six years I spent at the Stanford Humanities Center as its director, I would not have attempted this book. Only the challenge and stimulus of many a conversation with many an acquaintance, old and new, gave me the sense that it might be done—even though my professional life has been largely spent in the environs of the eighteenth century. To the fellows of the Center in those six years, I owe a great deal. But not more than I also owe the Center's staff. Not only was (and is) it the best I have known, it is the best I could imagine. Working with Sue Dambrau and Susan Sebbard, whom I single out because both were at the Center during all my years there, was a rare pleasure. Their skill, energy, patience, and tolerance for foible have been of untold help to many students, to many scholars, and to me. Others to whom I am grateful are Dee Marquez, Margaret Seligson, and Ellen Schwerin. The Center was crucial to the enterprise of this book; to be there was to see new avenues of possibility.

Another debt of long standing is to the staff of the Stanford University Libraries. Too many people have been too helpful for too long for me to name them all here. But Margaret Kimball deserves special thanks for sleuthing that located archival material relating to the history of Stanford's curriculum. Elisabeth Green was particularly helpful in the search for the

elusive father of "Civics," Henry Randall Waite. I also take the chance to thank Michael Ryan, whose learning and inventiveness have added much to the university's intellectual life. Stanford is losing Michael Ryan to the University of Pennsylvania. It is Pennsylvania's gain, Stanford's loss. My thanks also to archivists at Harvard and to Rhea Pliakis, of Columbia, for responding so efficiently to requests for help and information.

While working on this book, I may sometimes have resembled the ancient mariner, stopping one in three. All I can say in defense is that I have benefited greatly from the knowledge and insight of others, among whom I can name Carl Degler, Kenneth Fields, Lilian Furst, Elisabeth Hansot, N. Katherine Hayles, Alan Heimert, Barry Katz, David Kennedy, Sheldon Rothblatt, and Bernard Siegel—with apologies to any who should be on the list but aren't, thanks to the incapacities of memory. The associate directors of the Humanities Center during my time there, Charles Junkerman and Morton Sosna, discovered that one of their responsibilities not in the job description was to listen to me trying out ideas; they always had knowledge of their own to add to my store. To David Tyack, George Dekker, and James Sheehan, I am grateful for readings of the manuscript that have improved it immeasurably. Jeffrey Erickson's work as a research assistant was thorough and helpful.

For the Stanford University Press, I have nothing but praise, especially for Helen Tartar. There could be no more creative, thoughtful, and generous an editor. I thank her both for help with this book and for what she has contributed to the growth of the Press. At a point in Stanford's recent budget crises, the Press came under threat. Catastrophe was averted in part because of Helen Tartar's success in building the Press's strength and standing in the area of the humanities. Nancy Atkinson was a thoughtful and meticulous copy editor, whose work was in keeping with the Press's high standards. John Feneron saw the book through production with his customary good humor and finesse.

I also should acknowledge two intellectual debts. The first is to the late Michel Foucault. But those who do not count themselves disciples of Foucault need not, I think, take alarm. The recognition that the power of (for example) academic departments exercises itself in subtle ways, though owing something in my case to Foucault's insights, demands no systematic acceptance of Foucault's thought. The second debt is to Hugh Hawkins's study, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot*, on which I have often relied in trying to understand the intellectual milieu of Harvard's most influential president.

Finally, there are debts of life larger than (though often inseparable from) those of work. Thanks to my children, Lisa, Sarah, Peter, and Sibyll, and to Erika Fields, for goodness of spirit (and for keeping me younger than otherwise I might be); to my grandchildren, Kate and Patrick, for a glimpse of the future; and to Brigitte, for more than I can name.

W.B.C.

In a general way, the place of the university in the culture of Christendom is still substantially the same as it has been from the beginning. Ideally, and in the popular apprehension, it is, as it has always been, a corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals. But these ideals and aspirations have changed somewhat with the changing scheme of the Western civilization; and so the university has also concomitantly so changed in character, aims and ideals as to leave it still the corporate organ of the community's dominant intellectual interest. At the same time, it is true, these changes in the purpose and spirit of the university have always been, and are always being, made only tardily, reluctantly, concessively, against the protests of those who are zealous for the commonplaces of the day before yesterday. Such is the character of institutional growth and change; and in its adaptation to the altered requirements of an altered scheme of culture the university has in this matter been subject to the conditions of institutional growth at large. An institution is, after all, a prevalent habit of thought, and as such is subject to the conditions and limitations that surround any change in the habitual frame of mind prevalent in the community.

Thorstein Veblen,
The Higher Learning in America (1918)

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Prologue

Once upon a time, so legend goes, all was harmony in the American curriculum, a time of accepted values, practices, texts; it was a golden age. This legend is simply wrong. More accurately—and to shift the metaphorical ground—the present condition of the curriculum in American higher education resembles that of a fault system still heaving and buckling with aftershocks of an earlier, larger rupture. That earlier rupture came in the context of a new creation, for the late nineteenth century saw the birth of the American university: a blend of European example and American practice, touched by the almost invisible hand of social Darwinism yet also by the habit of American egalitarianism, a volatile combination of meritocracy and democracy, an adaptive response to the heterogeneity of an immigrant society, and (nonetheless) an institution seeking to preserve the values—associated since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the universities of Oxford and Cambridge—of "liberal education." Out of such a mixture, conflict was inescapable. And out of it there came many years later, as one example among others, the struggle over "Western Culture" at Stanford University that caught the attention of the politically ambitious and of the nation as well.

Education exercises a fascination on the American mind that stood out once more when George Bush said he wanted to be

the "education president." Yet as a product of our particular history and culture, the practices of education, or at least of higher education, go insufficiently examined. How did we find ourselves where we are? What historical forces have been at work behind debates that have had an oddly airless character, as though what was being debated had never been debated before? And what might be gained by sharper answers to these questions? Much, I think.

To realize (for example) that certain conceptual origins of liberal education in its modern sense, that central building block of American higher education, lie within our historical reach, that it is not the unconditional or transhistorical value it is sometimes said to be, and that it has gathered to itself so many accretions of idea and value—so many distinguishable functions that have nonetheless become extremely difficult to distinguish—none of this need undermine its value. Such realizations can make it easier to think about liberal education more practically and more constructively, easier to find out what liberal education in the American context actually means and how it actually works, easier to separate out separate strands, and easier to analyze ways in which it might work better.

In matters of the American curriculum, the long, powerful tenure of Charles William Eliot as president of Harvard offers a starting point, even though Eliot has sometimes received more credit for introducing the free elective system than was his due (much to the exasperation, for example, of Cornell's first president, Andrew Dickson White). But his program was so far-reaching and his tenure so long that American higher education has never been the same after him, just as events in France in 1789—no matter what reversals followed eventually—unalterably changed the political and social landscape. At the same time, beginning with Eliot means beginning, in one sense, in the middle of things. Though his allegiance was more to the German than to the English system of university education, the values (and the romance) of Oxford and Cambridge were ines-

capably part of American longings for a usable past; beginning with Eliot will therefore require a subsequent look backward to Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century and then to John Henry Newman and to Matthew Arnold, in whom Eliot's opponents, whose strength gathered as his 40-year tenure came to its end, placed much of their trust.

Occupying Harvard's presidency from 1869, when he was 35, to 1909, when he was 75, Eliot fought a relentless, controversial, and successful battle to break down the prescribed curriculum and install the free elective system, in which students were able to set their own programs almost at will. Recognizing a national impulse to loosen the reins of dogmatic authority and admit a more entrepreneurial spirit, he translated this spirit of the times radically into educational action. Indeed he could be thought responsible, even at this distance of time, for the present "crisis" of the curriculum, insofar as "multiculturalism," with its plural values, depends on a curriculum in which subjects can be added incrementally to an existing body of knowledge. Yet Eliot remained loyal to the idea of liberal education even while taking measures that aimed, his enemies were to say, at its destruction. He believed he was proposing nothing more than "the enlargement of the circle of liberal arts" and the strengthening of the foundations of democratic society.[1]

The "crisis" of the curriculum and liberal education has been going on for a long time, and crisis-mongering has become a national pastime. In Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), the "crisis" of the university serves as a springboard to the larger crisis of everything: "the crisis of liberal education is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization." Crisis sells books, and seldom has a "crisis" so badly needed the protective embrace of quotation marks as that of the present curricular disputes. Commentators, typically but

not exclusively American, have sometimes remarked this crisis-mongering agenda. John Searle said in 1990, "I cannot recall a time when American education was not in a 'crisis.'" Another observer (not American) wrote in 1983, "In recent years much ink has been shed to the effect that a 'crisis' is besetting the study of English literature, . . . [but] this is nothing new." And while serving in the 1960s as a "committee of one" to study general education at Columbia, Daniel Bell wrote, "General education, we are told, is in a state of 'crisis'"; he added, "in the American temper, a problem is often seen as a crisis." So pervasive is the crisis mentality when it comes to education that debunking it can also become habitual. Still, it needs to be done. Crises engender panic and call for heroic responses. Problems call for solutions—or for accommodations.[2]

The history of the American college and university from the beginning has been told by Frederick Rudolph, as has the history of the curriculum; the emergence of the research university in the late nineteenth century has been described in patient detail by Laurence Veysey; and two volumes of documentation from the seventeenth century on have been collected by Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith. Yet a fuller sense of the history of the university and its curriculum as an ongoing intellectual episode, subject to the same sort of scrutiny and analysis as any other long-term struggle of contested ideas, is badly needed. It is unsurprising that political actors in these struggles are—or at least give no evidence that they are not—ignorant of the university's past; a knowledge of the actual past might compromise its representation. It is more surprising that university faculties also lack a firm historical sense of how the character of American universities is bound up with major currents of nineteenth-century thought, with the egalitarian heterogeneity and social imperatives of American life, or with educational change in nineteenth-century Britain; and even of how curricular wars that have come and gone have arisen from discordances in the body politic—an issue that, though patently on the sur-

face in one sense, is only faintly understood in its historical aspect.

If any version of the universities' history is widely known and shared, it is that in the late nineteenth century the German model was imported and "research" came to center stage. That is not untrue, only insufficient. Having spent time in Marburg and regarding the German system as only a partial model for what he wanted to achieve, namely, a combination of university and college, Eliot the Boston-bred Unitarian had a homegrown sense of social responsibility and American tradition. Indeed the radical thoroughness of his reforms, presented as a matter of plainest common sense, was deeply in the American grain, arising from a combination of forward-lookingness and a desire to preserve. When he urged enlarging "the circle of the liberal arts," Eliot was not just paying lip service to the ideal that his own reforms seemed to place in jeopardy. "Liberal education," he said, "is not safe and strong in a country in which the great majority of the men who belong to the intellectual professions are not liberally educated." And that, he said, "is just the case in this country." By free election, he hoped not so much to create a "research university" as to make liberal education safe and strong.[3]

However numerous the trials of American higher education, and however unstable it may seem in the aftershocks of the nineteenth-century rupture, these trials and instabilities—in addition to the incomparable prosperity, now perhaps at an end, of the society—have given it in this century tensility and strength. Some of the vitality of the American university has been fostered by the often unseemly squabbling and conspicuous wringing of hands that have been among its distinguishing marks. But we have reached a situation of diminishing returns in which the apparent sameness of the argument undermines some of its vitality (if not its volume), even its interest, while obscuring the possibility of an analysis that would distinguish what is merely repetitious from what is—however analogous

to earlier debate—qualitatively different and dependent on new circumstances in the society. Without clearer analysis, American higher education risks the danger of seeming to repeat itself, perhaps to the point of exhaustion.

Are there any ways out of this thicket? I believe there are. One is that of further historical work, both in the style of panorama and at the level of conceptual inquiry. The belief that "liberal education" is a transhistorical value has impeded the habit of doing what universities usually do best, namely, studying currents and crosscurrents of change over time. With better conceptual understanding, a second avenue to change presents itself: a clearer sense, potentially, of purpose. What exactly is liberal education *for*? It is lamented often enough, but seldom more than lamented, that we really seem not to know, at least not very well, what we are trying to do. Third, with better conceptual understanding, we can better respond to local circumstance rather than assuming—when it comes to liberal education—that there is only a single desirable formula and that what is good for one is equally good for all. If it serves its purpose, this book should make others want to go farther. Should a disclaimer be needed, I make no pretense of being a historian, and what follows, except in the final section, is a series of time exposures, excerpting events and ideas over the last 200 years. In the final section, I consider in more but not extensive detail directions that I think would be helpful.

If a *real* crisis now exists, or threatens to, it is that the squabbling and wringing of hands have become so much a routinized exercise as to obscure what is actually taking place on the intellectual landscape. Max Weber described as the "routinization" of charisma the decline of personal leadership into bureaucracy and officialdom. If the debate about the curriculum becomes just a strategic ground on which to argue out social divisions rather than a serious effort to deal with the theory and practice of education itself—if, that is, the political content of the de-

bate becomes its only driving force—so much will have been lost that one might then want to speak of a crisis without the embrace of quotation marks.

In an essay on these matters, Louis Menand has said that the university is not set up "to discover ways of correcting inequities and attitudes that persist in the society as a whole."[4] This is a wise reminder. At the same time, it discounts the sense of civic and moral obligation that has driven American higher education since Harvard was founded, in 1636, to ensure the survival of a learned clergy and that has merged, though not without awkwardness, with the ideal of liberal education.[5] It discounts, that is, the belief system within which American higher education operates, a system that has produced a host of tensions. This book aims to recapture certain contexts from which our present discontents, with all their political colorations, have sprung and to suggest not the way out but how we might look for a way.

Finally, I should declare not my interest but the boundaries of my own experience, which determine in part the limits of this book. The two universities I know best are Harvard and Stanford, the one where I spent eleven years as a student and a junior-level administrator, the other where I have taught and done some other things since 1960. And, while Harvard and Stanford have played a considerable role in the history of American higher education, they are obviously not the whole story. In a recent reexamination of "the idea of the university," Jaroslav Pelikan, of Yale, singles out three nineteenth-century university presidents as deserving special mention: Daniel Coit Gilman, of Johns Hopkins; Andrew Dickson White, of Cornell; and William Rainey Harper, of Chicago.[6] Eliot of Harvard is not on the list, a mark of how many different stories of the American university can be told. Moreover, the tendency to tell the story as that of the American *private* university, though not without some reasons behind it, is also limiting. Someone