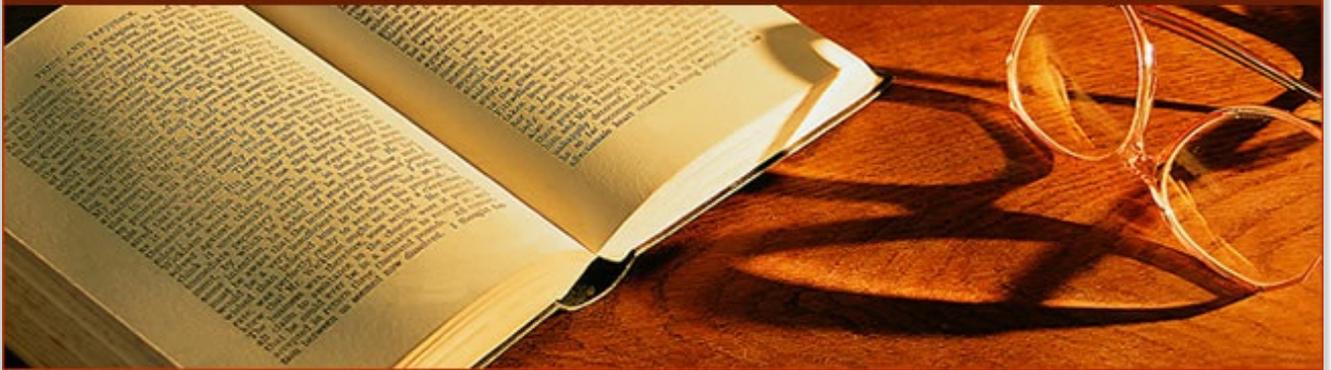




# New & Noteworthy in Higher, Liberal & Classical Education

January 2014



## QUOTABLE:

“History doesn’t repeat  
itself, but it rhymes.”  
*(Ascribed to Mark Twain,  
but no one has found where  
he said it.)*

“We have met the  
enemy and he is us.”  
*Walt Kelly*

Only, good master,  
while we do admire  
This virtue and this  
moral discipline,  
Let’s be no stoics nor  
no stocks, I pray;  
Or so devote to  
Aristotle’s cheques  
As Ovid be an outcast  
quite abjured:  
Balk logic with  
acquaintance that you  
have  
And practise rhetoric in

*I keep being surprised by a paradox that becomes clearer as higher education globalizes. In the United States, many in the media, business and politics seem to be swept away by the “middle class panic” about American higher education - especially education in the liberal arts and sciences. But overseas the distinctively American liberal education seems widely respected and worth replicating. Are they seeing something we’re missing?*

**U.S. Style Education Overseas:** Several U.S. universities have started teaching the liberal arts, American style, at overseas campuses. I find especially impressive what Yale is doing with the National University of Singapore. The curriculum report “[A New Community of Learning](#)” is full of ideas that could profitably be tried in this country as well as overseas. (I am grateful to **Bryan Garsten** and **Mira Seo** for keeping me informed about this new college.)

**A New Liberal Arts College:** Plans are underway for Ralston College. There is a [Wikipedia page](#) on the proposed college as well as a provisional [website](#). (Thanks to **David Liu** for this information.)

**Mourning The Loss Of Seamus Heaney:** On Seamus

your common talk . . .  
*Shakespeare, Taming of the Shrew*

### READING FOR PLEASURE & PROFIT:

**Derek Bok**, *American Higher Education* (Princeton University Press, 2013)



### CONGRATULATIONS:

To **Dan Mendelsohn** on the President's Award of the American Philological Association.

To **Hunter Rawlings** on being awarded the James Madison medal from the graduate school of Princeton University.

To **Vanessa Ryan** on being named Associate Dean to Advance Teacher Training in the graduate school at Brown University.

To **Jean Houston** on her retirement from the

Heaney's last words "noli timere" see **Helen Vendler's** revealing comments in [a posting](#) on my blog on September 19, 2013.

**No More 'Narratives Of Decline,' Please.** The fallacy of gauging the health of academic fields by tracking the percentage of majors in each of them is becoming increasingly evident. See "[The Culture Wars Again?](#)" in *The Huffington Post*. That doesn't mean that everything is just fine with American higher education, but it's important to look closely at disparities within it rather than generalize about whole sectors.

**Top Performers And The Slackers:** A big disparity in cognitive growth emerges between the "high performing" colleges and universities and the laggards. The gap is clear in data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) if I read [a report](#) by **Roger Benjamin** correctly: *The overall gain in performance on the CLA over four years is about 0.73 of a Standard Deviation (SD)*. That's not a dazzling gain, but unless you are an ideologue eager to bash higher education, that number doesn't mean much. You have to ask what the highest performing institutions achieve (and how badly the poor performers did). In the most recent year the top achievers among the CLA schools had a gain of 2.30 SD and the bottom a loss, -0.76 SD. That is a spread of over 3 SDs. And when you compare the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 75<sup>th</sup>, there is a spread of about 1.5 SDs. That seems to me a huge disparity, suggesting that no institution should be content with the median of 0.73 SD. [Things are worse if you look at "Value Added," that is, actual CLA results compared to predictions based on entering SATs etc -- at the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile a negative (-0.56 SD) compared to a +0.70 SD gain at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile.]

Or to translate – at high achieving institutions students make big gains. At the other end students actually lose ground in these critical cognitive capacities.

The scuttlebutt I hear alleges that the high performing institutions are not always the most prestigious ones or

library staff of the National Humanities Center.

### A 'Minimalist Christianity'?

Thinking about authority, literary and religious, led me to write about the Gospel of Mark, and in turn to ask whether that gospel had in view a "minimalist Christianity?" Take a look at the latest posting on the Gospel Renegades site, "[\*Taking Mark Seriously.\*](#)"

Many thanks once again to **Chris Graebner** for editing this newsletter.

the ones spending most per student. And among the bottom performers there may be some well-known names. Since the individual institutional reports are confidential, there is no way to be sure – except for faculty at individual institutions to ask to see their institutional report, and take a hard look at it with one crucial question in mind – How can this institution do a better job for its students?

**How Are The Classics Doing?** “ [A Snapshot of Undergraduate Education in the Classics](#)” gives some basic facts and figures. Corrections and additions are welcome.

**The “Q” Word Resurfaces:** “Quality” is not a word we have heard very often in the Washington discussions of higher education. But it has resurfaced, according to the Council of Higher Education Accreditation at the Senate meeting of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions where the renewal of the Higher Education Act is under discussion. “Committee Chair **Tom Harkin** (D-Iowa) noted in his opening remarks “We need to examine whether the current accreditation system sufficiently guarantees the quality of education students receive at postsecondary institutions.” **Lamar Alexander** (R-Tennessee), Ranking Member of the committee, asked “Are the accreditors doing some things they don’t need to be doing? And are they spending enough time really focused on quality?” But what do they mean by “quality?” Are we ready to talk about student learning and cognitive growth? If so there’s a big disparity to think about.

**“High-Impact Practices”:** That term is being used for a set of practices (for example, first year seminars, overseas study, capstone courses, etc.) that correlate with high levels of student engagement. If one is serious about improving the quality of an undergraduate education these practices need to be in place and *all* students need to take advantage of them. All this, and much, much more, in **George Kuh** and **Ken O’Donnell’s** [Ensuring Quality & Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale](#), available from the Association of American

Colleges and Universities.

### **Beating Them At Their Own Game:**

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has issued a "[Report Card](#)" on the Humanities. Here's one tidbit: "Between 2000 and 2009 humanities majors scored 9% higher on the Graduate Management Admissions test than business majors."



**Fallujah And Ramadi Again:** The bad news sent me back to Roxana Robinson's terrific book, *Sparta: a novel* and then to some thoughts about what a liberal education might mean for a soldier coming back from Iraq or similar situations. Read my [review](#) of the novel on my blog (*entry of January 10, 2014* ).

**Mea Culpa** (one among many): I omitted to mention **Jim Grossman's** co-authorship of an article recently. Jim is a sharp observer of higher education, especially history, and his writings are always worth following.

**MOOCS Morph:** 'Connectivity' is the new buzz word, and maybe an important step in their continued evolution. **Tamar Lewin** gets the story in "[After Setbacks, Online Courses Are Rethought](#)" in the *New York Times*. **Greg Nagy's** "Heroes" course made an early probe in this direction by involving former students in his Harvard Heroes course as guides in electronic discussion groups in his MOOC.

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