



# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## Symposium on Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education

### Transcription of Panel I: “Historical Perspectives”

Friday, November 9, 2012, 9:00am  
The Heights Room of Corcoran Commons, Boston College

featuring:

**Andrew Delbanco**

Mendelson Family Professor of American Studies and Julie Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities, Columbia University

**Julie Ruben**

Professor of Education, Harvard University

**Mark Noll**

Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History, University of Notre Dame

Moderated by **Cullen Murphy**

Editor-at-Large, *Vanity Fair*

Introduced by **Henry Braun**

Boisi Professor of Education and Public Policy, Boston College



BRAUN: Good morning. I’m Henry Braun, professor of education and public policy here at BC, and it’s my great pleasure to welcome you to Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education. Actually, the subtitle for the symposium is “Varied Complexions, Comparative Perspectives.” And our three panels, as well as our lunchtime keynote speaker, will certainly bring a range of perspectives, informed as they are by decades of reflection, writing, debate, and, for some, many years of shouldering administrative and leadership responsibilities directly linked to the future of liberal education in their institutions.

I want to thank our speakers, our panelists, moderators, and of course, you, the audience, for taking the time to join us in the celebration of BC’s sesquicentennial, and for the symposium, one that addresses an issue that is at the heart of BC’s mission.

Before proceeding, on behalf of Erik and myself, I want to express our gratitude to Father Leahy, Mary Lou DeLong, Joe Quinn, and members of the Sesquicentennial Committee

for selecting this symposium as one of the signature events in the celebration of BC's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We're very honored, and have had great encouragement from Boston College throughout the process of bringing this symposium to fruition. And I especially want to mention Frank Murtagh, Courtney Hough, and their colleagues at OMC for their support in planning and logistics, as well as Conor Kelly for his steadfast support over the last year.

Last night, President Hatch's keynote address was titled Hope and Challenge in the Middle Ground. In it, he elaborated on the essential role that private colleges play in American higher education, with particular attention to those affiliated with the Catholic Church, and especially Jesuit institutions like Boston College. And while recognizing the great success of Boston College building on a centuries-old Jesuit Catholic tradition, he also spoke of the challenges faced today by Boston College, and, indeed, all institutions, with a focus on offering a liberal education that is powerfully transformative, all the while managing the tensions between the pull of rigid, homogeneous orthodoxy and the allure of academic excellence.

As we all know, many colleges and universities, sectarian and non-sectarian alike, have been grappling with the challenge of rethinking and delineating the aims of liberal education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in part to help guide their own strategic planning, and in part to make the case for the continuing relevance of liberal education in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They then face what is perhaps an even greater challenge, and that is to translate those aims into the lived experiences of students, faculty, and administrators.

The focus of this symposium is how those aims are framed and experienced on campuses with a strong and explicit affiliation to a religious tradition. Are such institutions just living fossils from another age, or are they hardy survivors, destined to flourish in the decades to come? Many of us believe that the future of liberal education is one of great moment for our nation. We have only to recall that tonight marks the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, a horrific event that took place across Germany and Austria, and proved to be a harbinger of the greater horrors that were to follow. Nazi philosophy and policies were, and are, the antithesis of liberal thought, and their ascendance in the 1930s arguably was a function of both historical contingency and a failure of German society, including its educational institutions.

In her sesquicentennial address a few weeks ago, Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust drew attention to the rise of the modern research university in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the innovations in curriculum initiated, among others, by the then-President of Harvard, Charles William Eliot. These changes signaled a turn in American higher education, and, with increasing secularization, character education, and more generally, moral formation went the way of Latin and Greek—that is, relegation to the margins.

This swerve, along with the steady increase in vocationalism, has placed proponents of liberal education on the defensive. In fact, Arthur Levine, in a recent interview, describes the current generation in comparison to previous ones as, and I quote, “much more pragmatic. They say their primary reason for going to college is to get training and skills that will lead to a job and let them make money. Despite the best efforts of the AAC&U and others, this view is ascendant in our nation's campuses, even those with a liberal education mission.” But this is a battle worth fighting. For, as President Faust put it, we cannot let our need to make a living overwhelm our aspiration to lead a life worth living.

At many religiously-affiliated institutions, that battle is being waged successfully. Here at BC, student formation has been a guiding principle since our founding 150 years ago, though certainly how it is framed and realized has evolved over the years.

After its most recent reexamination of the issue in 2006, Boston College issued a pamphlet titled *The Journey to Adulthood*, which noted that, ideally, college students, and I quote, “move towards new forms of identity and more critically aware forms of knowing, choosing, and living authentically.” And it goes on to point out that, while many institutions have moved to focus primarily on students’ intellectual development, BC proposes an explicit and intentional approach to a broader vision of student formation drawn from the understanding of what it means to be human that is at the heart of the Jesuit educational tradition. And I would expect that many other institutions with strong religious ties and traditions have similar statements, or wish they did.

In the spirit of critical but open-minded inquiry, our three panels today will examine a range of questions, including, how did we arrive at the present juncture, and what are the prospects for the future of liberal education? Are religiously-affiliated institutions relatively successful in graduating students who have matured along several dimensions that delineate this more expansive view of the purposes of higher education? And if so, what are the strengths such institutions bring, and what are the special challenges they face? And, by contrast, is a commitment to a religious creed fundamentally incompatible with the aims of liberal education and unfettered scholarship?

Sandwiched between the buffets that we have scheduled for you today, so to speak, each panel will offer much food for thought. Our intention is that you will actively partake of what is being offered with our panelists and moderators as well as fellow audience members. Indeed, our hope is that what happens in Chestnut Hill does not stay in Chestnut Hill, rather, that it ripples outward to energize or initiate further conversations, and even, dare I say, action. Actions that move liberal education forward here at BC and at many other institutions around the country.

Thank you for your attention, and let me now turn to Cullen Murphy, who will be the moderator for our first panel. Cullen is a well-known author and editor-at-large for *Vanity Fair*. For more than two decades he was the managing editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. He’s a graduate of Amherst College, and currently chairs its Board of Trustees. So please join me in welcoming Cullen and the members of the panel. Thank you.

[applause]

MURPHY: Great, thank you, and thanks for having us here. It’s always wonderful to be at Boston College, a place where I’ve found myself spending increasingly large amounts of time. And it’s a pleasure to welcome our three distinguished guests, Julie Reuben, Andrew Delbanco, and Mark Noll.

Their full biographies are in your program, so I’m not going to give an extended reprise of that, but just very briefly—Julie Reuben is a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the author of *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*. Andrew Delbanco is a professor of American studies at Columbia, and the author, most recently, of *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, and when he’s in between books you can frequently find

him in the *New York Review of Books*. And Mark Noll is a professor of history at Notre Dame, and the author of so many books it's hard to know which ones to cite, but *America's God* and *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* are two that at least come to my mind. And I'm here in the role of ignorant layman, for which I've been well trained.

Our topic this morning is the historical perspectives aspect of the overall theme, Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education. And there's a large sweep of time to cover, but each of these three guests have written widely about it in various ways and from various perspectives. Just by way of framing, Nathan Hatch spoke last night about the possibility of colleges and universities staking out and holding some form of middle ground when it comes to moral formation, engagement with values, even spiritual reflection, a middle ground that's somewhere—it's a stance that's somewhere between avowedly sectarian and implacably secular. So if we can keep that concept in mind, I think it will just be something to hold onto through this discussion.

With that on the table, one natural thing to wonder is where we've been historically and where historical trends are taking us. And I wonder if we could just begin the conversation first by looking at the term liberal education, and just making sure we have a common understanding of what that is, what we think it means now, what it meant perhaps 150 years ago. Mark, do you want to go first?

NOLL: Well, I was privileged some time ago to spend about 10 years studying the circle of people around the College of New Jersey, which is now Princeton University. They had not articulated actively what liberal education meant, but practically, it meant that when you applied for admission and wanted to enter Princeton as a freshman, you could translate the Greek of the New Testament into English, as a start. You could translate simple English sentences into Latin sentences.

And the assumption was that the way the curriculum was set up, with a final year-long course taught by the president in moral philosophy, would combine a harvesting of the past, a building of character, a reaching out to include material and human learning, and then looking forward to character formation and leadership in society. This is, I think, a modified American variant of the *quadrivium* and the *trivium* from the Middle Ages. And I think it wasn't secure until we get to the period that Julie Reuben studies, with the professionalization toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

MURPHY: Andrew?

DELBANCO: I'm tempted to evade the question by paraphrasing—I think it was Justice Hugo Black, whose response when they brought some pornography cases to the court, said, I'm not going to define it. I know it when I see it. Which I don't mean entirely flippantly. I think liberal education, in terms of the precise curricular content that it implies, means something different to almost everyone.

I would like to think that a commonality among those differences is that it still has something to do with the Latin root *liber*, free. That is, a liberally educated person, in my conception, is somebody who is free from cant, free from a sort of unconsidered, unreflective reverence for received opinion, capable of thinking for him- or herself. And that capability is encouraged, I think, by some awareness of the past—that is, that the world has not always been put together the way it is right now, that there are alternative ideas about how societies should be organized and what values should be primary.

So it seems to me that those are the qualities one hopes to find in someone who has a liberal education. I'm inclined to think that there are different passageways to get there. Some institutions look fairly similar to what the pre-late 19<sup>th</sup> century Princeton looked like, but fewer and fewer. So it seems to me our challenge is to figure out the means to get to that end.

MURPHY: Julie, as you think about that question, maybe another part to fold into it, because it does pertain to some of your own work, another way of looking at what liberal education is is to look at what it's not, what its competitors have been. With that in mind?

REUBEN: I would agree very much that, while there's a kind of traditional notion of what liberal education was, that over time it's been transformed and separated from a particular content. And I don't think that we're going to go back to a moment where it's defined by a very specifically required content. And instead, to move forward, I think we need to think about what we count as the goals of liberal education. And when I think about the goals of liberal education, I think about both in terms of the content as trying to help us understand ourselves and the world that we're part of, and understanding the world interpreted very broadly. And also, in terms of its goals about preparing people who can ask questions and know about how to go about answering them, and I guess, in a way, that are motivated to ask questions.

But I think that these kinds of goals could be met in a number of different kinds of curriculum, and it's sometimes easier, as you suggest, Cullen, to say what it isn't, rather than what it is. I think historically one of the main things that we've said it isn't is, it isn't technical. It isn't supposed to be professional. It's not preparing people for simply the work aspect of their life, and so it isn't vocational in that sense. It can coexist with both technical and vocational and specialized. But what we consider to be the liberal part are not those aspects. They're not the technical, specialized, vocational elements of training. It's the broad things, the capability of thinking broadly about our human condition and what that really means to us in terms of how we should live our lives.

DELBANCO: If I could just briefly steal a formulation from my colleague Mark Lilla, who gave a wonderful talk to the first-year students in connection with our core curriculum at Columbia, and I think the way he put it is pretty close to this, and it goes to the heart of what I think we're talking about. He said, rather than thinking that college is about getting what you want, it should be—and for many of you, he said, I think it really is—a place where you have the opportunity to figure out what's worth wanting. And I like that contrast very much. I think we're saying that liberal education is the kind of education that compels us to ask that second sort of question, with the help of texts and traditions that have tried to address that question in the past.

MURPHY: And in some ways, Mark Lilla's formulation actually gets us at the very point of this conversation—does liberal education compel us to ask what's worth wanting any longer? Does it ask that question effectively? Maybe we can put that aside for a moment. Bearing in mind your Hugo Black definition—probably very many of us would have that same sort of visceral approach to liberal education.

But let's take something that's much more concrete, which is religion per se. Most of the institutions that we now would look at and just say, well, these are expressions of the liberal arts ideal—most of those were, at one point, religious institutions. Most, at some

point, shed that affiliation, even if they don't actively hide it. Some probably maintain it, as yours does, and as this one does. So just thinking about the role of religion, and the role that it played at the outset, how do you locate religion in the idea of liberal education? What motivating power did it have, what legacy has it left?

REUBEN: Well, if we take what I was saying about what I think of liberal education as trying to understand ourselves and our place in the world that we inhabit, religion certainly has been one of the main cultural forces that have addressed that question, and has tried to answer that question, and has engaged people in asking that question.

And so if we also assume that you help people learn how to ask and answer questions by engaging them with other people's efforts to ask and answer questions, you couldn't really have a liberal education in our culture that didn't bring students into contact with religion. Because in order to understand how people have asked the question about who we are, what's our world, and what's our place in it, you would have to engage with various attempts of religious traditions to answer those questions. And so in that way, I think—hard for me to imagine a liberal education that students didn't come into contact with religious traditions.

NOLL: I think that the way you posed the question is a really interesting indicator of the modern world. Because until maybe 125 years ago in the United States, little bit longer in Europe, it was just taken for granted that liberal arts exist within a religious framework. From the origin of the universities in the Middle Ages in Bologna and Paris and Oxford and Cambridge, these are monastic-related enterprises.

At the Reformation, Protestants break away from Catholic teaching, but within the second generation of the Reformation, major reformers are going back to Aristotle and organizing Protestant curricula for higher learning in a fashion that's very similar to the way in which Catholic learning had been developed.

And then, in the United States, it's really only after the Civil War that there begins to be even the possibility that learning of a liberal sort would be—that you'd have to ask the question that you posed, because the liberal learning, the preparation of character, the preparation of leaders in society, is intrinsically built upon a religious foundation.

My colleague at Notre Dame, Brad Gregory, has recently published a really interesting book called *The Unintended Reformation*, in which he says that changes in the religious life of Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century led us eventually to the secular world. But he also shows that for centuries after the Reformation, there still was a common taken-for-grantedness about liberal learning and religion being in harmony together. And it was divisions, he argues, within the religious world that led us to a situation to where now we can ask this question—what place does religion have in the modern promotion of the liberal arts?

So my historical conclusion is that those of us who do think that a religious foundation is important for liberal learning today need to assess the strengths of what was an 800-year period of simply accepting the harmony of liberal learning and religious faith, and then also the reasons why that harmony was broken, and we're able to ask the good question that you posed today, where does religion fit within the modern concept of liberal learning?

MURPHY: Andrew?

DELBANCO: Well, I could take sort of a journalistic approach to this question, a casual account of what the landscape looks like from where I'm situated. I think we ought to be frank about this. In my institution, which has its roots in the Church of England, or Anglicanism, broadly, at the venerable institution across the river which has its roots in Congregationalism, at Princeton, which has its roots in Presbyterianism, it seems to me, generally speaking, you'd need an electron microscope to find any vestigial or residual surviving elements from those traditions. That's just a fact, I think. I mean, there may be different points of view.

Now, those are not the only important institutions, but they're a sort of representative sampling of the modern research university, the evolution of which Julie has written about so well, and the modern research university has had a tremendous impact on the whole landscape of American higher education, including on institutions like this one, because so many of the faculty earn their advanced degrees in the environment of a research university.

So it's kind of close to extinct, I think, in some very important institutions. I happen to believe—and that's one of the themes of my little book—that there are some elements that, if we raised them to a higher level of awareness, we would recognize that some of the traditions that we pursue actually have their roots in these religious traditions.

For instance, Nathan was speaking last night about diversity, the value of diversity. I have this peculiar view that the gathered churches of early New England actually had a concept of diversity, that the criterion for church membership was the capacity of the individual to edify other persons—that is, the question of church membership was, what do you bring to this community? And in theory, at least, that's the question which every admissions officer in every secular selective institution is still asking, but they're not, perhaps, aware of the origins.

If I can just say one other thing I say in a somewhat mischievous spirit when I go around talking about this kind of topic, and it always half amuses and half horrifies me—it is the standard-issue convocation speech that we now get at every highly selective institution, which is, you are the best and the brightest students ever to walk through these gates. Your accomplishments are already legion, and in the future, they will be more than the stars in the heavens. You're smarter than we were, etc.

And it amuses me to think that the equivalent of that speech X hundreds of years ago would have been, you are the most miserable, miscreant lot, (laughter) and the only thing you deserve is to burn in hell, right? We moved some distance from that, and I'm with Nathan on this, I think a middle ground would be a good place to try to get back to.

MURPHY: Yeah, the only place you got the speech that you're referring to now is in the graduating undergraduate humor speech.

DELBANCO: Exactly.

MURPHY: So, Mark, mindful of what you were saying about the—in a way, how odd my question was looked at from a historical perspective, I see the point. I think this might be the moment to actually look back and to just give a quick overview of the broad sweep of what has happened. Andrew, in one of your articles, you talk about building a Columbia

where there's an inscription over the façade that says, something, this is erected in the name of religion, where—

DELBANCO: Actually, what it says is, erected for the students. And a great teacher I had drilled into me the notion that, when you see a principle enunciated in this kind of public, big way, you can be sure that no one believes it anymore. In this case, this is a building that—the other buildings surrounding it have names like mathematics, philosophy, law—in other words, this is the new Columbia campus that was constructed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was constructed on behalf of the disciplines, of the subjects. So we have this one building there that says, we're different, we're erected for the students. And that struck me as kind of an interesting contrast.

MURPHY: And then, beyond that, it says something about religion, and also something about, so that they may grow in character.

DELBANCO: That knowledge and character should grow together.

MURPHY: Grow together, right. So in this article, you cite that. You walk by it, and you make the point that, well, even then, 100 years ago, this was a endangered idea for the reasons you just cited, but it made you reflect about where we had been 50, 75 years earlier, and what had happened in this intervening period up to the present, which is really part of the story that we're trying to get our minds around this morning. So I wonder if the three of you could just give your version of, what is the potted history of what took place, so that the world that Mark was evoking, which now seems in a time capsule in many institutions, not all—how did this come about? Julie, you've written about this.

REUBEN: I would stress two or three important factors. One is clearly an intellectual factor, and that is changing understandings about what constitutes knowledge, and how we get firm, accurate knowledge. And two particular changes that were associated with science in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were the idea that the best knowledge comes from free and open inquiry, and that everything has to be questioned, and that the best knowledge is also tested with empirical evidence. And the combination of those two created a lot of trouble for the dominance of theology and philosophy as the intellectual linchpins of the university.

The other thing that I think is very important is social change and the increasing diversity of the United States, both in terms of religion—the United States has always been religiously diverse, but I think it was very significant when it was no longer just infighting among different Protestant groups that shared a lot of commonality, but also immigration bringing in large groups of Catholics and large groups of Jews, and industrialization breaking down old patterns of both where people lived and how money flowed.

The old denominational college was often in a small town, in a region that had been settled by people from a particular ethnic and religious group, and elite money went into the colleges, and students went into the colleges, in these local networks. But industrialization and urbanization broke those down and created new flows of money, and that created an opportunity—both made it hard for universities, and colleges in particular, to get their students and their financial support from a single group, and they had to appeal to a larger group, and it also created wealth that empowered different groups of people to set standards.



It created a new intellectual and industrial elite that worked together, and ultimately they worked together to enshrine the primacy of research-oriented universities. And they took over a lot of different organizations, like foundations, and set up accrediting organizations and other things like that, that eventually put a lot of pressure on other kinds of colleges to conform to the models of the research university.

And so I think it's a combination of intellectual changes that led to certain new institutional practices, but then those institutional practices being really supported by social and economic changes, and together, that really create a very tight and difficult set of institutional practices to break out of, and that we've lived with them for 100 and more years, and we've tried to tinker with them. But it's very hard to really transform them in a significant way, because they're linked both with intellectual standards and a kind of social setting and economic setting that support them.

MURPHY: Remind me, Julie, at some point, I would like to come back to ask you about a fascinating little diversion that you have in one of your papers about dormitories. But I don't want to get us off-track now, but I've made a note. Andrew?

DELBANCO: Well, just briefly, to add to the story that Julie tells so well, and we rightly locate—I gather Drew Faust did this in a talk here a couple of weeks ago—we've located the formative moment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the rise to the presidency of Harvard the first non-clergyman to be president of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot. And I think that's all true.

But I think we want to also remember that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, a very important decision was made in this country, and that is when the federal government, for the first time, got significantly engaged in funding higher education. The decision was made—and the Vannevar Bush commission was the driver of this—that the research project would be located in our existing universities. It didn't necessarily have to be that way. That's not generally the way it's been in Europe, for instance.

So that moment, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, redoubled and accelerated the process that Julie has described, I think, in a very powerful way. And we want to remember, as we look at the broader landscape the way that Julie suggests we should do, that the number of students in our country who attend institutions like yours, Amherst College, that is, the purest exemplar of the liberal arts college free of a research university, is an extremely small number. Last I checked, it was about 100,000 students out of 18 million undergraduates. Mike McPherson of the Spencer Foundation likes to say you could fit them all into one Big Ten football stadium. So I'm just underscoring the point that the research university has become the major driving force, and that that happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century even more than in the 19<sup>th</sup>.

MURPHY: Mark, as you think about this very same question, I wonder if you could add one more element to it. So over this course of time, the dynamics that Julie and Andrew have described took place, many institutions that did have a religious affiliation let go of that affiliation. But at the same time, many did not. As you think about this, also talk about the institutions that held onto it.

NOLL: Right. And I actually am very much indebted to the work of Julie Reuben and Andrew Delbanco for the periods they have talked about. My sense in broader intellectual, and even religious terms, is that the changes they describe so well for the second half of the

19<sup>th</sup> century have also come out of the way in which higher education in America was set up intellectually right from the beginning, or certainly from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that was with a very high reliance upon what we might call natural theology, or natural reasoning.

The year-long moral philosophy course taught by college presidents into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was not a theology course. It was not a biblically oriented course. It was a course in natural reasoning, in which the effort was made to show that the ways of God, revelation, fit with the best forms of human understanding. To the developments that Julie describe—and I would add the Civil War, which was religiously disconcerting, because there was such strong religious commitment to the rightness of both the Union and the Confederate side that was never resolved religiously.

Those developments shook what had been the easy camaraderie between natural reasoning and reliance upon revelation. The entrance of the new sciences, I think, a perfect example. Darwin's ideas are promoted in America first by Asa Gray of Harvard University, a lifelong Sunday school teacher at the Park Street Church who went to his grave affirming the Nicene Creed. For Asa Gray, there was no sense that the new science would disorient the traditional views of revelation, but he, and then just a few other people, were in the minority.

What happened, I think, in direct response to your question, is very much what Nathan said last night. There came a fork in the road where the major American Protestant denominations, and most of the major American colleges and universities, turned toward free inquiry, turned toward science as a dominant adjudicator of knowledge. A few institutions decided not to go that way, but in not going that way, they became quite sectarian, choosing not the middle ground, but the far right ground of preserving a distinctly religious tradition. The mainstream of education was not ever overtly anti-religious, overtly turning aside, but was like the slow boil of the frog in the pot of water. And over time, that water became very secular. The heat turned up.

This, I think, is described wonderfully in George Marsden's book, *The Soul of the Modern University*, and I think pertinent for Catholic universities is the great book by Philip Gleason that came out just about the same time as George's, describing Catholic colleges and universities, which I think—and following Phil Gleason—I think they began to face in the 1940s and '50s, but Protestant colleges and university had faced in the 1870s and '80s.

That is, they had to decide, would they keep the particularities of the religious tradition, when the particularities of the religious tradition no longer lined up neatly with the leading research in the leading academic institutions? And I think maybe Boston College today, along with the University of Notre Dame, is about where Princeton, Harvard, Yale, were in the 1890s and 1900, trying to stay in the middle ground, but being pulled on the one hand toward a sectarian preservation of the tradition, and pulled in the other hand toward a more secular, general approach to learning that looks down upon the possibility of a particular religious tradition grounding liberal arts.

DELBANCO: Just one quick addendum to these marvelous historical narratives that we've just gotten—just one comment about the present moment. We want to recognize that, for reasons having to do with large economic global forces, the era of the tremendous infusion of new resources into American higher education seems, at least for the moment, to be

stalled, if not stopped. And in that context, there is—as I hardly need tell people in this room—a growing preoccupation with measurable outcomes. If we make, as a society, an investment, either through public funds or private philanthropy, in an educational institution, how do we know what we’re getting for the investment? What is the outcome?

And the problem, I think, that we face, all of us interested in humanistic education, whether we come from a particular religious tradition or not, is how do we step up to that challenge? As Nathan said last night, scientists know how to show results. If you believe, as I do, that the results of humanistic education don’t show up until they come back for their 25<sup>th</sup> reunion and you find out how they’ve lived their lives, it’s hard to answer that question. And I just think we should have that problem out there as part of the conversation.

MURPHY: Perhaps this would be a good moment, actually, just to go deeper on that issue of outcomes. If one of the goals in the past of a liberal education was character formation—and it does not seem to be at the center of the enterprise right now in many institutions—what do we know about what liberal education does to people? And I can ask this in two ways. Take a traditional undergraduate college in Columbia, say, or Williams, that doesn’t have any kind of sectarian influence, and then also take Wheaton, say. What do we know about what the experience of those two institutions does to people, and does to people differently? Do we know anything? But it’s kind of a fundamental question.

DELBANCO: If I could offer one other slightly mischievous but semi-serious response, I think one thing we know—we at Columbia have this core curriculum that we’ve somehow managed to preserve for 75 years, and the alumni are ferociously loyal to it. One thing we know is that they seem generally to be a little less interested in making money than alumni at our peer institutions, which is measurable by the relative size of our endowment. (laughter) In other words, there are complicated reasons for this, but they seem to be more inclined to, say, go into medicine than to go into high finance, at least until recently. So that’s just one way.

MURPHY: So what you’re saying is, you succeed when you fail.

NOLL: Exactly.

REUBEN: Yeah. [laughter]

DELBANCO: Exactly.

NOLL: I’ve been really struck at Notre Dame, by the weekends, Father John, that are held in early June or late May, when the alumni come back, often with their kids. I don’t know what they’re trying to recreate by living in the dorm, but they’re showing a lot of loyalty to the institution. And I think more than just loyalty to the institution. This would have been the same—in light of many years of experience—at Wheaton College, where alumni that return would say almost all of the positive things that administrators would have said this education will have. More attention to service in life, more ability for those who do go into the professions to use some of the means gained by the profession, or the expertise of the profession, to advance the common good, not just the nest egg.

But maybe even more significantly, I think that—and this I know better from the Wheaton College experience—the people that would not come back, who would have come in their own personal journeys to reject certain aspects of what they had been taught at Wheaton—and I suspect it’s true at Notre Dame as well—nonetheless express their disillusionment or rejection in highly character-driven, highly moral terms.

So that what was clearly successful in the institution is training people to think about major life issues on the basis of grounded moral inquiry. It wasn’t as though people were upset with something happening at Wheaton College because fewer people were getting into the financial world. It was because of something that they saw as morally damaging for themselves or the society. And I suspect that’s probably the same at Notre Dame, where people either on the left or the right think that Notre Dame has erred grievously, their complaint is very much the kind of complaint that people at Notre Dame want them to make if they’re going to reject the institution, because it’s an effort to complain on the basis of a moral foundation.

MURPHY: That’s a great insight. And so the question I’d like to ask the two of you, with a different perspective on different institutions—is the product of your schools, are they asking questions in the same fashion? Are they critiquing with that same kind of moral leverage? In a way, Andrew, it’s the Mark Lilla question again, asking the question about what’s worth wanting. Are people graduating with a secular liberal education with that question, what is worth wanting, foremost in their minds, or is it really not there at all?

DELBANCO: I can only give an impressionistic answer to this. I don’t have a dataset. But it’s a study that maybe every institution should do of its own alumni. My impression is, actually, that we do all right in this regard. Sometimes alumni—the nostalgia they feel for their college days may be mixed in with the sense that that was the period in their life when they had the opportunity for this kind of reflection, and they miss it. And they come back for occasions that allow them to experience it again—alumni seminars, celebrations of teachers upon retirement whom they revere.

So I think, actually, that we do OK. The worry is, what’s it going to be like going forward, because the sociological changes continue. Again, this is a presentist point, but the way in which students make decisions now about where they want to go to college seems to me to have less and less to do with the particular character or tone of a given college, and more and more to do with its standing in the prestige hierarchy.

One of the paradoxes that I feel is that, say, when my institution was much less selective than it is today, much more local than it is today, most of the students came from the New York metropolitan area. We took one out of every three or so who applied. Now we get them from all around the world, and we take fewer than 10%.

But those students in those days, they kind of were there because this is where they wanted to be, and they knew something about the character of the institution. And I would think that that may be true of Wheaton and Notre Dame and Boston College more so today than the big research universities that *US News* puts at the top of the list. So I worry about the sort of homogenization of institutions and the struggle to retain institutional character or personality in this new environment of ferocious prestige competition.

MURPHY: Julie, as you think about this question, another aspect I'd like to add, because you've written a little bit about it, when thinking about outcomes, what kinds of people does a certain kind of education produce, and you've asked the question, is freedom enough? If you just put students into an environment where they're free to study what they wish, behave as they wish, is that going to have some kind of—like stone-washed jeans, they're going to be exposed to so much different material and views and so on that, by the time they come out, they will have a certain kind of seasoning—is that enough? Or is it just actually manifestly not enough? And I don't know whether you have the answer to it. I think, in the paper that I read, you actually asked the question without answering it. (laughter)

REUBEN: To ask a question without answering it is a great thing about being a historian. (laughter) I think that part of what you're asking us to grapple with is, does the institution, and the character of the institution, have any sort of impact on students once they graduate? Do the students kind of reflect the values or virtues of their institution? And when I think about the institution I'm associated with, Harvard, I think, well, what kind of virtues or lack of virtues does my institution have, and are they reflected in their students? And you think, on a kind of obvious level, humility isn't one of our big virtues, (laughter) and it's not a big virtue of our graduates either. So maybe we do affect our students.

But it's very complicated, because, to some degree, we draw in, by our images, by what we say we value, people that already have those. So we're not working with a blank slate. And so that Wheaton graduates would be quite different from Amherst graduates wouldn't be surprising, because the students who go to Wheaton are going to already be quite different, so it's very hard to separate the selection from the impact. And in many ways, I think more of what colleges and universities do is that they reinforce certain kind of characteristics, and they help people build on them, and in some cases, lead them to reject them. But it's more of a working with what comes, rather than a total transformation.

I think this is one of the issues about colleges becoming less distinct, having less distinct values, and their almost complete emphasis on diversity, is that they are attracting people that maybe do not come with a certain set of values, and therefore they don't have that advantage to work with. They're not just reinforcing. And so, ironically, in a way, our challenge is that we have a harder task in front of us.

This is certainly true when we think about religion, and what we might think of as religious literacy, or something like that, that our students at the average elite liberal arts college are coming from less religious backgrounds, with less religious literacy. And then to provide it, we have a task that institutions 50 years ago just didn't have. As we get students that come with less of the shared values, because we have less distinct values ourselves, we have a harder task in front of us in terms of shaping students and providing them with those things that we think they need.

That's a particularly difficult thing to face for institutions today, that we don't have the advantage that a Wheaton has of having a very distinct identity, and therefore coming with students that already share some of that, and then it's a matter of deepening it, and reinforcing it, and making it mature. Our students are coming with just a wide range, and sometimes a wide range of not much of depth, and that makes it much harder for us to figure out how to do it.

MURPHY: The religious literacy question is a fascinating one. Just as a footnote, from my own experience at Amherst, I find there to be much more religious awareness and personal religious practice at Amherst than there was 40 years ago. Partly it's a result of demographic diversity—Korean Pentecostals, Protestant and Catholic Latinos, Jesuit-educated Africans. So it's actually a very interesting experiment that no one knew they were conducting.

DELBANCO: I think that's very true, and I think faculty of my generation, at least in places like mine, don't really realize this. For instance, when they see a student walking across the campus who has the physiognomic features of a person from Asia, they think, there is an Asian-American person, whereas it's more and more likely that that person thinks of him- or herself as a Christian first. And I think very few faculty are really aware of this change that's happening right now.

MURPHY: Just thinking about religious literacy in general, I suppose there could be a tendency among some to think that, because religion seemed to be more in the public eye and more present in institutions decades ago than it is now, that religious literacy must have been greater in the past. But I wonder about that. I can certainly see that literacy with respect to one's own religion might have been greater, but literacy with respect to other religions may not have been any greater at all.

So stepping back from that, what role do you see for religious literacy? How important is it? How does that inform liberal education, or how should it? Is it a big-ticket item that we're missing, or not?

DELBANCO: Well, it seems pretty clear by now that there was something wrong with the secularization thesis of history. I can answer with an anecdote. I was put on—I think it was the last committee they put me on, for reasons that may be obvious to you—but I was put on the review committee for the religion department at Columbia, and the then-dean of the faculty clearly had the attitude that he couldn't understand why this department existed. And he had a not-so-hidden agenda to see to it that it would go out of business. I mean, we had Union Theological Seminary down the street, so why did we need this department?

And then 9/11 happened, so all of a sudden, religion became a topic of renewed interest, but religion as a kind of pathology. We needed to study religion, understand religion, because it clearly explained a lot of what was wrong in the world. We had a religious right in this country, and we had jihadists in other countries, and therefore we ought to have a place in the university where we studied this pathology.

I'd like to think we've moved through that, and we're now at a somewhat better place, and that because of the comment—what you were pointing to us a few moments ago, namely the renewed interest on the part of students in figuring out their first principles, that maybe we're coming to a moment where religious literacy might find better reasons to be deemed important as part of a liberal education.

MURPHY: Mark, anything?

NOLL: Well, I do think that the general situation has changed dramatically. If you think of the era of the American Civil War, you have the greatest speech, probably, in American public life, by Abraham Lincoln, who had been to school less than a year, much less

college or university, quoting five or six times the King James version of the Bible, and not stopping to say where these were quotations were coming from, and everyone knew, from this non-church member, what he was talking about.

What Americans in 1865 knew about Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhism, was negligible. It would have been probably just a few people within five miles of where we sit today that would have had any knowledge. On one hand, I think, in fact, contemporary students have a much better grasp of the religions of the world, but also probably a much weaker grasp of the particular traditions that have been important in the West.

And I would say, about religious literacy at places like Notre Dame and Wheaton, and many colleges and universities of that sort, so far as I can tell, there's an unambiguous, unapologetic requirement that all students take basic—I think at Notre Dame it's two theology and two philosophy courses. At Wheaton it's three and a half Bible courses and theology courses over the course of their tenure at the college.

I think maybe it used to be that these were courses designed to give an intellectual and a theological standing within the tradition. Now, I think they function to teach people who are there, for reasons of some interest ahead of time, actually to give some content, to give some intellectual and theological ballast to what it is that the institutions say they're doing. The students sort of know, and are interested in, but in many cases may not have a whole lot of particular information as to what that tradition actually means in intellectual and theological terms.

I'm certainly not sure how well the institution thinks those required courses work, but looking from the outside at the administration of those courses, they seem very proper, and done usually quite decently, and a major assist to keeping alive religious literacy amongst the parts of the population that are supposed to be religiously literate.

REUBEN: I think that one of the things that you point out about, in many ways, students are coming who are more personally religious, is a great reminder that universities and colleges are not operating in a vacuum, they're operating in a social context that brings students to them with different levels of commitment and things.

And it is true that we're living in a world where there's a high level of personal religious commitment, and our students come to the institutions with those commitments, but one of the issues is that those commitments remain largely private at many institutions, so that students with their religious commitments pursue them, support them, remain in their groups that they create in the extracurricular world, but it never gets integrated into the main part of the university, and students don't necessarily communicate across traditions, and don't necessarily deepen their own understanding of their own religion.

I think that part of the challenge for colleges and universities is how to move private religious commitments into the intellectual sphere of the college, and how to bring people together so that religious literacy they come with can educate their peers, and they have opportunities to also be educated about other religious traditions, and about their own religious tradition, and how to approach that religious tradition in a more serious way.

I was part of a project that the Ford Foundation did called Difficult Dialogues, and when they did it, they thought that it was mainly going to be about race and ethnicity conflicts, and how to get people to speak across them. But one of the things that they found was the

most interesting projects had to do with religion and getting people to be able to speak across religious groups.

Even more difficult than speaking across religious groups than—so, say, getting Catholics and Jews or Catholics and Muslims to speak together—was getting people who had religious commitments to be able to speak with people who didn't have religious commitments, or who had clearly commitments against theistic kinds of understandings of the world.

It seems that a remarkably wonderful opportunity for institutions that want students to learn from each other, and want people to be able to learn from the diversity that we're intentionally creating at these institutions, is to think about religion as an important dimension of difference and an important opportunity for people to be able to learn and to discuss.

So to be creating intentional opportunities for people to move their religion out of private practice and into the intellectual life of the institution seems like something that colleges and universities could do because they have the opportunity that their students bring to them. It's not something that they have to do from the top down with faculty and staff. They have it there, and it's a matter of creating spaces, and conversations, and forums for that kind of peer education to go on.

MURPHY: So this prompts one last question from me. In just a moment we're going to open the floor to questions for our panelists. Also, I had asked each of the panelists to think of a question that they wanted to ask one another. So I'm going to ask my last question. We'll let the panelists ask their questions, and then open it to all of you.

My last question is, given what you've just said, Julie, about the social context and what students are bringing to schools, and my own impressionistic sense that people in general—like parents, for instance—kind of love the idea of character formation and moral engagement. It's part of what they've spent the first 18 years of their children's lives doing, and they don't like to think that, for a mere \$50,000, it will now stop. Given what you know of history, and cycles and trends and such, what is the prospect for the idea of character formation and moral engagement, whether with a religious aspect or not, actually coming back in some important way in liberal education?

DELBANCO: I'm usually into prognosticating doom, so I'll try to resist that, because the reasons to do that are plentiful, and probably obvious. I think that, if we can find ways to take advantage of the trauma that our country has been going through in recent years—which is to say, recognize, as I think a lot of people do, but they don't quite have the vocabulary for expressing it—recognize that it's not been just a financial crisis, or an employment crisis. It's been a spiritual crisis. And people have a sense of that.

People on the left and people on the right sort of agree on that point, that there's something rotten at the center of some of our most important institutions, and a retreat from a sense of living for the public good. If one could take advantage of that sort of incipient feeling that's out there and find ways to bring it into the classroom, then we might make some progress on this matter.

MURPHY: Mark?



NOLL: I think the challenge for institutions that have a particular religious standing in character formation is to combine two things that are often difficult to combine, which is strong rootedness in the tradition, but secondly, highlighting those aspects in the tradition that are outward-looking to the world. All the major theistic traditions do combine those, in theory.

That is to say that they are Jewish, or Muslim, or Catholic, or evangelical Protestant, or Lutheran, and all of those theistic systems have strong views of the imago dei, they have strong views of God creating everything, but it's difficult to maintain the balance between the particular and the general, and somehow training in character should have as an ideal formation by the best in your tradition and as much openness to those who are not of your tradition as possible. This a way, I think, to have character that functions in public—which is not always the same as character functioning in private. That's a challenge, and I think I remain a little bit still residually gloomy about the prospects, unfortunately.

REUBEN: Well, I think that history would teach us a kind of mixed message about whether to be optimistic or gloomy here. Since the major transformation of higher education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that made moral formation a much more difficult project within colleges and universities, we have seen many cycles of attempts to kind of re-establish morality. Some of them have been successful for a period of time, but not successful in the long run.

In the post-World War II period, the crisis of fascism and totalitarianism, and the war itself, led to a proliferation of general education programs really aimed at teaching and preparing people to be able to be democratic citizens. And there was a remarkable amount of experimentation with courses that combined academic study with social, political, and personal reflection. They lasted for a decade or so, but they didn't transform the institutional structures themselves. In fact, the institutional structures themselves, in a way, became more entrenched, and mediated against the success of these kinds of programs.

I think that there's a possibility that external factors like the crisis the country faces now could put pressure on colleges to take morality seriously again. But I think that colleges have to respond by also looking at their institutional structures and thinking about how they can maybe make changes in those institutional structures, changes in things like how tenure is awarded, and how faculty careers are perceived and understood. It might be possible that we're at a moment that institutional structures could change. Or it might be that we're at a moment where we're going to entrench the same old institutional structures that make moral formation such a difficult issue to address in our colleges and universities.

Things like distance learning might, in fact, provide an opening for us to share specialized knowledge while returning to a notion of a teacher and teaching as a kind of human relationship. And colleges that create hybrids, where some of the specialized knowledge is in this shared world, but more emphasis is on teaching, and that relationship that teaching is in terms of forming youth into reflective adults, I think it would be possible for institutions to think about how to take advantage of these opportunities to really move forward.

But I also think that the likelihood that competition among institutions for prestige, the need for outside funding, those kinds of things are going to continue to push institutional leaders to try to do business as usual. So it's a little bit of a—I think there are opportunities there, but I think that there are also pressures that might make us overlook those opportunities.

MURPHY: Thank you. Just making myself aware of the time, I realize there may not be time to go to you for your questions at the expense of the questions that will likely be out in the hall. So we have 15 minutes, and if there are any questions—OK. Yes?

OPPENHEIMER: I'm Mark Oppenheimer. The first time that anyone said the word that I'd been thinking the whole time was just now, when Ms. Reuben said prestige. That's so central to the tension that you're talking about, which is that it's probably not that difficult to have a kind of coherent sense of your Christian mission or whatever, your ethnic mission, your character forming, if you're willing to sacrifice, if you're willing to get off the treadmill for prestige.

If you don't worry about—if what you want to be is an evangelical Christian college with a strong sense of mission, a strong identity, and a strong mission to build a certain kind of character in your students, that's fine, but you won't get any of the top Jewish students, or Roman Catholic students. You'll get very, very few, right?

And it seems to me that part of what happened historically—and you can tell me if this is wrong—is that a lot of schools that used to have a pretty coherent identity, a pretty coherent mission, that may have lent itself to a certain kind of character formation, or formation tending toward certain virtues. Think about a Luther College in Iowa, for example, which was not only Lutheran in its mission, but Norwegian Lutheran. But the problem is that, when Luther College decides, our peer institutions are Amherst and Williams, it begins making very different sorts of decisions about what the curriculum will look like, about the kind of students it has to appeal to, and its sense of identity and mission gets watered down.

I guess it seems to me that it's really—what we're talking about here is a lot of institutions—and I'm sure Boston College, there's some of this going on as well, and at Catholic institutions as well—who decided, we want our peer institutions to be the most intellectually prestigious institutions, in an age where intellectual prestige is going to require that we reach out to faculty and students who aren't going to sign certain statements of faith, who aren't going to come here if our gestalt, if our vibe is highly ethnically or religiously particular. I guess the question, then, is, at what point did the prestige mission creep in? Was it industrialization, as you were saying, or was it when foundation money became widely available? Where did that enter the picture?

MURPHY: Would one of you like to take that?

DELBANCO: Well, I think it's an important point, and I wanted it to be implicit in something I was saying earlier, so I'll make it a little bit more explicit. In my little corner of the higher education landscape, it's totally insane that students apply to both Brown and Columbia. Because if they knew anything about either institution, they'd know that they're completely opposite convictions about how an undergraduate education should be organized. That's an example, I think, of what you're talking about.

And if I were here representing an institution like Georgetown, or Boston College, or Notre Dame, or Wheaton, I would be significantly worried about this external pressure to participate in the hierarchy of prestige. We talked earlier about measurable outcomes. The way we now tend, as a society, to measure the quality of an institution of higher education is by measuring how many applicants you turn away, right? You're the best in the world because you get the most disappointed applicants, which is a kind of a perverse way of thinking about it.

The measures that *US News and World Report* uses to rank institutions—faculty compensation, which is often in inverse proportion to the amount of time they spend with undergraduates, for example. Selectivity and yield, all of those numbers, to the extent that an institution buys into the project of improving those numbers for itself, push against the singularity of the mission of the institution, particularly if it's an institution that is trying to stay outside of this rat race. So that's a real tough one, and if I were at one of those institutions, I'd be quite worried about it.

NOLL: I've got to say—just 30 seconds—one-half cheer for prestige, because the good side of prestige is the awareness of institutions that they need some things that their tradition does not develop by itself, and that can be a positive along with the many negatives for simply seeking prestige.

MURPHY: There's a question down there.

QUINN: Yes, thank you. Joe Quinn from Boston College. I'd like to return to Cullen's question—is freedom, hanging around with smart faculty and fellow students, enough? Do the panelists think that providing a liberating, liberal education to today's students is more likely with or without a core curriculum, a concept that many great universities like Columbia and Notre Dame and Boston College still proudly embrace, but equally wonderful universities like Brown and Amherst have proudly abandoned?

DELBANCO: Well, I'm a big partisan of a core curriculum. I think it has many values that are not always obvious, including its power to build community. The students have read the same books, and they've got something to talk about other than last night's football game, and that turns out to be something that follows them through the rest of their lives.

The practical problem, in my view, is that to build a new compulsory core curriculum in the contemporary environment of higher education, in most instances, would appear to be virtually impossible. There are a few examples, like I mentioned earlier, a small liberal arts college, Ursinus College, where the faculty actually developed a new required common core based on a Great Books core. But that's a very unusual example.

So my own sense is that the way to go on this, if you're a believer in core curricula, is to take a build it and they will come approach. That is, create something somewhere within the institution that offers students the experience of a core curriculum, and see how attractive it is. Put your best teachers in those classrooms, to the extent that they want to be there, and then students will catch on. And it's happening at some places. This is a good thing to do. I want to do it. And then the program may grow. But the idea of getting the faculty together to say, we're going to create such a thing, it seems to me unlikely to work out in most places.

MURPHY: We have time for one more question, and I did see a few more hands. Yes? Yes, thank you.

Q: I want to pick up what seemed to be the most promising moment, in my ears, when Julie Reuben was talking about the possibility of developing a kind of shared discourse from people from different backgrounds—different religious backgrounds, but also, and most especially, a kind of shared discourse that includes people of no religious backgrounds, and little sympathy—not necessarily going as far as the dean who thinks of all religion as pathology, although they could be an interesting part of it too.

We started with the word liberal, but we've never really put into question, it seems to me, the word religion in this kind of way, that I think a recent book by Mark Noll's colleague at Notre Dame, James Turner, does. That is to say, he's written a book called *Religion Enters the Academy*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the classic period we're talking about, religion was not really a category, and people took whatever their religious views were for granted in the ways that we've acknowledged.

But we can't do this in the world after 9/11, as you said. And it makes the possibility of studying different religions, which eventually did enter the academy with work by Max Müller in England and in this country, with comparative religion and so on. It makes that possibility something that would be interesting. It's an opportunity to kind of make this feature of human experience, which has been to a very great extent marginalized—not just the morality, but the religion of people has been marginalized.

How can we create a common discourse, not in religion departments per se, but throughout the university in the different disciplines? What are the opportunities here, given the pressures that the panelists were just giving us about the prestige and so on? What are the pockets within the existing structures where this could be promoted and fostered?

MURPHY: Got a starter, Julie?

REUBEN: I'm very aware of the time, so I just want to say that your question, in some ways, is more important than my answer. I think that's a very important thing for us to put on the table. I think that some of this can start outside of the classroom, but I think it could be moved into the classroom.

So I think that it would be worth universities and colleges starting these conversations extracurricularly, which I think is a little easier to do, to get their feet wet and see how this goes, and then think about how to move them into curricular structures, which I think could be done. But I would think that the practical move would be to begin outside the classroom first.

DELBANCO: I think that institutions of higher education that are self-consciously based upon a religious principle have at least potentially a head start. Because all of them—despite, often, their histories—all of them affirm basic principles about the goodness of creation, and the standing of all people, even though it's not in my religion, the standing of all people as made in the image of God.

Now, the history works against that principle, because the particular groups have been, often, ferocious in protecting their understanding of God's way in the world. But I think

the principle is there, and in the modern world, gives institutions with a religious-particular basis some opportunity for showing how their particularities mandate the universal kind of respect and dialogue you articulated in your question.

MURPHY: Thank you very much. It's been a wonderful conversation, and, Julie, Andrew, Mark –

BRAUN: Thank you very much.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]