Chapter 6
Checkbook Math, Chocolate, and the Decline of Rigor in the Liberal Arts

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ABSTRACT

To save the liberal arts, we need to abandon efforts to "modernize" them or make them more appealing to students. Instead, the author argues that we consider restoring the sense of rigor that has until recently defined such fields as philosophy, English, and math. Hundreds of years ago, philosophers were the scientists of the world, making new discoveries and inventing mathematical disciplines such as geometry and calculus. The undemanding nature of contemporary philosophy has resulted in endless squabbles over hypothetical thought experiments that are largely irrelevant to everyone else. A similar fate has befallen their colleagues in English and mathematics, who would rather teach classes in video games and comic books or design courses in "checkbook" math than hold themselves and their students to the high standards that formerly prevailed in those fields. Making the liberal arts more rigorous is the only way to ensure their survival for another thousand years—at least in a form that can still be recognized as fit for free, and free-thinking, individuals.

It has become almost a *cliché* to assert that the U.S. higher education system is at a crossroads. Though more people than ever have the opportunity to pursue a college degree, fewer choose to study the liberal arts, "those branches of knowledge suitable for a free individual" (Wells, 2016, p. 87), which have served as the basis for higher education in the West since the Middle Ages. According to the American Academy

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of Arts & Sciences (2020), only 5 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded in 2015 were in fields associated with the humanities—the lowest level dating back to 1949. The numbers may alarm, but should not surprise, given that students everywhere are being pushed to study subjects that have a greater chance of leading them directly to a job, like those in the so-called STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and math. Meanwhile, support for the liberal arts continues to decline among politicians, educators, and, most worryingly, the general public. The former governor of Kentucky, Matt Bevin, surely spoke for many when he suggested that state universities deal with a possible funding crunch by "getting rid" of useless majors like interpretive dance or French studies (Blackford, 2017, para. 1).

What is needed now is not another defense of the liberal arts, like the kind that have been pouring forth in recent years from all corners of academia (Jaschik, 2018; "Verbum Ultimum," 2022). These are well-intentioned, but almost invariably fail to reach anyone who does not already agree that the liberal arts or humanities are indeed worthy of saving. The debate over whether there is any value in studying, e. g., philosophy, is as old as the field itself; what is the *Apology* of Plato, after all, but an *apologia* of humane learning? What can we possibly add to the argument put forth by John of Salisbury (ca. 1159 / 2009), concerning those who "despise not only our Trivium, but also the whole Quadrivium," and "have been sucked into the abyss of avaricious money-making" (p. 20)? There seems little point in attempting to engage politicians such as Bevin with arguments about the value of something they can never begin to understand or appreciate. Besides, even many supporters of the liberal arts will find it difficult to muster much outrage over a potential loss of interpretive dance majors. The idea of borrowing tens of thousands of dollars to study such a subject *does* seem rather silly.

If the liberal arts are to be saved from the clutches of short-sighted politicians and administrators, we shall have to rely on more than vague appeals to their ability to teach us "how to be human" (McClay, 2014, para. 18) or "provide a space for contemplation of truth and virtue" (Azam, 2022, para. 9). We shall first have to demonstrate that there is something there worth saving, that we take our subjects as seriously as those in business, law, or medicine. This means putting an end to courses in such frivolous subjects as chocolate and video game studies, and insisting that our students actually learn things that will challenge and frustrate them. It means calling a halt to the culture wars and post-structuralist nonsense that have destroyed the credibility of fields such as English and History, and dedicating ourselves anew to the serious, disciplined study of composition, literature, and past events. It means, finally, embracing our heritage as the descendants of Plato, Cicero, and Thomas Aquinas, rather than constantly criticizing it and blaming it for all we dislike about the modern world. As Paglia observes: "We have allowed the classroom to devolve from the pursuit of knowledge to the pursuit of 'cures' for social problems … We