Although they are still objects of envy and emulation throughout the world, American colleges and universities are facing a crisis. In the liberal arts and sciences, institutional structures, philosophies, and the curriculum haven't kept pace with demographic and technological changes — or with the vocational aspirations of “stakeholders.” Trying to reform higher education, according to Louis Menand, “is like trying to get on the Internet with a typewriter, or like riding a horse to the mall.”

In “The Marketplace of Ideas,” Menand, an English professor at Harvard and staff writer at The New Yorker, provides a smart, succinct, splendidly written summary of the back story and current state-of-play in education in the liberal arts at the country’s elite institutions. But, alas, he feels no great compulsion to prescribe. And so, despite some tantalizing hints, he doesn’t say nearly enough about how to shake the system without breaking it.

Liberal education, Menand reminds us, is in danger of being marginalized by the proliferation of alternatives. Twenty-two percent of bachelor’s degrees are conferred in business. Twice as many sheepskins are awarded in social work each year as in all foreign languages and literatures combined. Four percent of undergraduates major in English; two percent in history.

Over the past 30 years, the revolution in humanities disciplines has spawned a crisis of legitimacy. An emphasis on context, contingency, and interpretations rather than facts, Menand indicates, led to an abandonment of “Great Books,” “Western Civ,” a core curriculum, and, often, prerequisites for courses in the major. Professors of women’s studies, cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, and postcolonial studies took the theoretical position that disciplinary boundaries are arbitrary and limiting.

Menand insists that this transformation helped make the rest of the academic world more aware of issues surrounding objectivity. His suggestions that it is probably impossible “to put the toothpaste back in the tube” at times seem perilously close to an endorsement of the status quo.

Menand does imply that the decision of liberal educators to “pull up the drawbridge” to keep vocationalism out may have been a mistake. After all, he claims, “knowledge just is instrumental.” Economics departments, which refuse to offer instruction in accounting because it’s a trade, he writes, should “remember the immortal dictum: Garbage is garbage, but the history of garbage is scholarship.” Left unaddressed is whether the economics curriculum should include courses in accounting as well as the history of accounting.

Whenever faculty consider changes in major or general education requirements, Menand maintains, the process does not resemble a Samuel Beckett play so much as Jarndyce v. Jarndyce in Dickens’s “Bleak House,” or being in psychoanalysis: “interminable, repetitive, and inconclusive.”

Faculty appear to believe that “nothing should be done,” he explains, because for decades the academic profession has been cloning itself. Students who go to graduate school self-select and are trained by mentors “invested in their paradigms.” The philosophical, methodological, and attitudinal gap that separates academics from nonacademics grows wider.

The key to reform, Menand concludes, lies not in changing how knowledge is produced, but in changing “the way that the producers of knowledge are produced.” If doctoral students were trained to teach their fields to nonspecialists and write for a general audience, there might well be a healthier dose of ferment, iconoclasm, and heterodoxy in higher education.

Menand may be right. But don't hold your breath. The next generation of scholars are likely to remain experts in fields of specialized study. Professors probably won't substitute a single peer-review article for a monograph-length dissertation to cut down the time it takes (nine years in the humanities) to get a PhD in order to attract a more diverse pool of graduate students. Administrators almost certainly won't give up a readily available source of cheap teaching assistant labor.
In higher education, as in politics, it seems, you can almost always make a buck by betting on the status quo.

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