

# Wisdom Is Paramount: Russell Kirk on Higher Education

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*The university is not a prison or a fortress, but a community of scholars—and not a community of one generation only.*

—Russell Kirk<sup>1</sup>

The invitation to write about Russell Kirk's views on higher education came during the height of the coronavirus pandemic as university leaders across the United States—and, indeed, the entire world—began asking salient questions about the mission and future of their institutions. Why did universities exist? What ends did they serve? Were they achieving what they were designed to achieve? What, exactly, *were* they designed to achieve? Were they equipped to alleviate the problems of affordability, accessibility, tuition, enrollment, funding, curriculum, and governance that confound college presidents and administrators? Were their students learning anything of value, and who decides what is valuable—trustees, faculty, employers, the government, or journalists and the media? What are students *supposed* to learn in college? How can universities measure academic outcomes with graduates entering different careers and vocations about which

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there are several and contradictory opinions? Were universities merely businesses supplying goods and services to consumers, or were they receptacles of knowledge and information to which students submitted and deferred, opening their untrained minds to instruction rather than proudly asserting their will and opinion?

Kirk had unequivocal convictions about these subjects, yet they are strewn across numerous publications and characterized by Kirk's delightfully ambling prose. This essay attempts to get to the heart of the matter, as it were, by presenting overarching points and themes that emerge from Kirk's writings about education, particularly about the university both as a concept and as a living institution. At the top of his hierarchy of concerns is the principal goal of higher education, divulged by the title of this essay: wisdom. If nothing else, a university so constituted and conceived should impart wisdom. All other ambitions and activities must be, in his mind, subsidiary to that purpose.

If imparting wisdom were easy and straightforward, however, we would possess wisdom in abundance. We do not. *How* to impart wisdom, therefore, and *how* to convey understanding—to cultivate curiosity and good moral habits—necessarily involves quotidian policies and protocols about which Kirk was not silent. He waded into debates regarding the financing, control, and delivery of higher education, and his erudite judgment in these areas is notable and intriguing in no small part because it remains relevant decades after its articulation. Kirk, it seems, was prescient, his unheeded warnings a stark reminder of what might have been, but also a hopeful sign of what could be if more leaders diverted their energies to better things, exercising moral imagination for the sake of generations yet to come. This essay does not seek to summarize Kirk's understanding of those areas of higher education that he considered to be subordinate or supplementary, but aims to name and describe those features of higher education that he deemed to be lasting and indispensable. To convey what he was after and to frame each section of this essay, I borrow a metaphor that Kirk himself employed in *Roots of the American Order*, to wit: that of a

flourishing, healthy tree.<sup>2</sup> The anchoring roots of higher education are conceived in wisdom, which nourishes the trunk and branches. The trunk symbolizes virtue, and the branches are those pillars of society that support and strengthen the vast network of life that inhabits the tree. Education, then, can animate whole societies for the better.

### **The Roots: Wisdom**

Wisdom. In a word, that is the final, ultimate object of higher education, according to Kirk, whose disenchantment with the trends and tendencies at Michigan State University, his alma mater, strengthened his commitment to what a proper university education is and does.<sup>3</sup> Nothing, perhaps, is more central to the Western philosophical tradition than the concept of *Sophia*, wisdom, which is fundamental to Greek, Hebrew, and Christian texts and teachings. As simple as it sounds, the imperative to “[g]et wisdom, get understanding”<sup>4</sup> encapsulates the chief reason for sustained study and self-examination, and universities emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages to answer this singular call.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, is the purpose of universities in light of the primacy of wisdom? Kirk has a simple answer: “To discipline the mind; to give men and women long views, and to instill in them the virtue of prudence; to present a coherent body of knowledge for its own sake; to help the rising generation to make its way toward wisdom and virtue.”<sup>6</sup> The net economic impact of universities is secondary to their ability to cultivate “a philosophical habit of mind.”<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Kirk states that “[t]he primary end of the higher learning, in all lands and all times, has been what John Henry Newman called the training of the intellect to form a philosophical habit of mind.”<sup>8</sup> “College and university,” Kirk explained, “were founded to develop right reason and imagination.”<sup>9</sup> If rationality and self-reflection set humans apart from other sentient creatures, then the university is to serve as the intellectual home for these distinctive, profoundly human activities, expanding the frontiers of knowledge and understanding.

Attaining wisdom requires “the elevation of the mind and conscience of the individual human person.”<sup>10</sup> Ideology inhibits the

acquisition of wisdom by foreclosing competing points of view and shutting off divergent lines of inquiry. "In the academy," Kirk bemoaned, "the scholar turned ideologue does mischief to his colleagues, his students, and the search for wisdom."<sup>11</sup> Rejecting the trappings of ideology himself, Kirk commended scholars on the left, such as David Riesman,<sup>12</sup> who demonstrated that they were not ideological. The dangers of ideology were, in Kirk's view, greater and more far-reaching than the dulling of one person's mind by narrowing the parameters of thought; in fact, ideology threatened order and normality—which are essential to the preservation of humane society—because an ideologue is susceptible to fanaticism, extremism, and zealotry.<sup>13</sup> The ideologue is willing to realize his or her vision for the future at any cost and is not open to compromise or negotiation. A peaceful social order cannot exist where ideologues level institutions and destroy civil compacts between cooperative individuals adhering to long-standing social norms and conventions. Violent disruptions and protests on college campuses evidence the tendency of ideologies to lead to assault and brutality rather than civil argumentation and rational debate.

Influenced by Irving Babbitt,<sup>14</sup> who "joined the broken links between politics and morals,"<sup>15</sup> Kirk considered his own views about the purpose of higher education to be, in themselves, *conservative*, and he believed that conservatism was itself the rejection of ideology.<sup>16</sup> "For the reflecting conservative," he wrote, "the purpose of education is clear. That purpose is to develop the mental and moral faculties of the individual person, for the person's own sake."<sup>17</sup> He added that "the conservative does not forget that the *essential* aim, and the chief benefit, of formal education is to make people intelligent and good."<sup>18</sup> Because the university system in the United States has fallen away from this essential and moral goal, abandoning "the pursuit of real objects, aims, or ends," it has become *decadent*, the term Kirk employs to describe the divorce of an institution from its essential purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Kirk regarded the private liberal arts college as quintessentially American: "The American College," he called it. He distinguished colleges from universities. "A college," he explained,

“at least in the American understanding of that word, generally is intended for the transmitting of an existing body of knowledge to young people; it is distinguished thus from a university, which possesses advanced schools, less strongly emphasizes the function of teaching, and may have facilities and opportunities for more creative work and research.”<sup>20</sup> “The American College” proposes to reform these private liberal arts colleges, which have, Kirk claimed, withered by departing from their fundamental purpose and form. Kirk referenced the myriad difficulties that these colleges faced and still face, including a rise in the number of large public institutions and an abandonment of traditional liberal arts in favor of practical and vocational studies.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the demand for college education—represented by historic highs in enrollment and spending per capita—these private liberal arts colleges have struggled to maintain funding and enrollment.<sup>22</sup> The persistent increase in inflation, coupled with a reduction in charitable giving from income and inheritance taxes, complicated these liberal arts colleges’ already precarious financial situation.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, these colleges overextended themselves while competing—and by continuing to compete—with state-sponsored universities, which as a result of government appropriations dwarfed, and continue to dwarf, private colleges in terms of spending on student amenities, buildings, and programs.<sup>24</sup> Over the latter half of the twentieth century and into the current century, numerous institutions of higher learning in the United States have changed their name from “college” to “university” as a sign of mimicry and expansion.

Financial constraints notwithstanding, Kirk contended that the most pernicious cause of the decline of liberal arts colleges in the United States involved their betrayal of the principles upon which they were founded. He accused these colleges of shunting principle in favor of the quantitative standards of large public universities. “Weigh an institution with no standards and no stadium against an institution with no standards and a great massive stadium: well, it is no wonder that the balance swings to the state-supported institutions,” he complained.<sup>25</sup> Disregarding or abandoning their

principles caused these private liberal arts colleges to lose the only ground on which they could compete with large state institutions—namely their mission, which should, in fact, set them apart, making them more attractive to the most principled and intellectually curious students.<sup>26</sup>

The negative and utilitarian features of mega-universities that irked Kirk have grown worse since he passed away in 1994. A recent report by Neetu Arnold of the National Association of Scholars indicates that the “average price of college has more than doubled since 1980,”<sup>27</sup> that universities seek power and prestige at the expense of student education, that administrative bloat at universities undermines institutional mission and raises costs to unsustainable levels, that university leaders spend money at alarming rates and institute political projects and programs to transform students into activists rather than learners, and that student loan debt has ballooned to the point that the country now faces a financial crisis. Aggregate student loan debt in the United States, as of the date of her report, was over \$1.5 trillion,<sup>28</sup> but that figure continues to rise. Given birthrate declines and trends in international enrollment, the steady growth that American universities enjoyed in the 1980s and 1990s cannot and will not continue. In fact, numerous colleges and universities are closing or merging or otherwise struggling to survive.<sup>29</sup> Reform was needed during Kirk’s lifetime, but it is even more needed today.

Kirk’s proposed “reform” was actually a “reversion” to the old ways. Historically, he believed, the intended purpose of liberal arts colleges was to develop moral and humane leadership through intellectual means, primarily the study of literature.<sup>30</sup> But literature, properly taught, did not involve ideology.<sup>31</sup> It involved an initiation into the “norms of human nature,” concerning itself, ultimately, with ethics.<sup>32</sup> Kirk’s emphasis on literature and literary study as central to the university recalls Babbitt’s essays “Literature and the College” and “Literature and the Doctor’s Degree” that appear in *Literature and the American College*,<sup>33</sup> for which Kirk wrote a lengthy introduction, boldly proclaiming that the “primary function of the college—as distinguished from secondary

education and from the graduate school—is the teaching of a body of important literature.”<sup>34</sup> For Kirk, traditional literary pursuit is the highest form of wisdom seeking.<sup>35</sup>

That pursuit requires a canon of texts to orient and guide serious students. Kirk was fond of historical surveys that portrayed the secure foundations upon which cultures and ideas were built. *The Conservative Mind*, of course, is such a work. Although initially reluctant to write an elementary primer on the central ideas that underpinned the United States of America, he relented at the urging of publisher Henry Regnery and authored *The American Cause* (1957), copies of which the federal government purchased and distributed to the American military to educate troops.<sup>36</sup> *Roots of American Order*, published in 1974, is a more nuanced and sophisticated account of the interlocking principles that are fundamental to American history, government, and experience and are derived from those elements of civilization represented by Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London. Kirk’s mapping of intellectual influence is comparable to Babbitt’s tracing of the humanistic tradition to classical texts and civilizations, that of Greece in particular. Kirk deserves much credit for promoting scholarship on Babbitt in the pages of *Modern Age*.<sup>37</sup> For Kirk and Babbitt, taking the long view and examining the classical origins of seminal lines of thought contributed to a fuller appreciation of the relation of the human self to general political and cultural conditions. Babbitt, who studied Sanskrit, arguably extended his interests more broadly than Kirk, comparing the Eastern and Western traditions and celebrating the wisdom inspired by Buddhism and Confucianism. Yet both men recognized literary pursuit and humanistic study as more than merely the inculcation of practical skills or professional training.

### **The Trunk: Virtue**

The purpose of study—not just of literature, but all study—was not to memorize and recall facts and figures but to ponder the world, the meaning of life, and leadership. “The intention of the college was not to confer a vague smattering of every branch of knowledge

upon its students,” Kirk maintained, “but rather to teach them the fundamental disciplines of logical thought, provide them with a taste and critical faculty for independent reading, and then send them into the world with a cast of character and mind fitted for ethical and intellectual leadership.”<sup>38</sup> The great historical impact of these American liberal arts colleges on culture and leadership was, Kirk alleged, attributable to their emphasis on ethics above all else.<sup>39</sup>

Kirk also claimed that however difficult, the reversion of colleges to some form of liberal education would yield great societal benefits. Most colleges “try to be all things for all men,”<sup>40</sup> mimicking the function and offerings of large public universities and technical schools. Liberal arts colleges are in a unique position, however, because they are equipped to provide students with a rich and meaningful understanding of principles and culture, which cannot be taught as merely social, computational, or technical skills.<sup>41</sup> Colleges focused on concrete practice, jobs training, or industry skill may earn pragmatic successes for certain students, but they miss the true value of college: “[A] college is wasting its students’ time, and its own resources, when it pretends to teach what can really be taught only in workaday life, in the graduate school, or in the trade school.”<sup>42</sup>

Kirk, channeling Babbitt, declared that “the best of the small colleges will render a service to American education if they decide to make a sturdy defense of the humane tradition instead of trying to rival the great universities in displaying a full line of educational novelties.”<sup>43</sup> American colleges must, Kirk believed, return to form. Businesses and corporations, “even in the age of automation,” recognize the value of “the young person” who is “really prepared for life and work” because he or she “has been schooled in humane disciplines.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, truly liberal education benefits business and enterprise by populating the workplace and the workforce with knowledgeable, virtuous workers, but only if the standards for such education remain high. Retaining and refocusing on academic and humane matters is, according to Kirk, the only way private liberal arts colleges will survive: “The college can survive not by imitating the mass-education methods of the large

universities, but by offering a discipline of intellect, ethical in purpose, which mass-education neglects.”<sup>45</sup> In short, private American liberal arts colleges must avoid decadence by doubling down on their pure and original mission.

To guard against decadence and rebuild these universities upon their original foundations or missions requires, however, practical politics and policies. Quotidian tasks and routines, as well as basic rules and procedures, necessarily order and facilitate the continuity of pure, missional institutions. Mindful of the bigger picture, therefore, Kirk held forth on applicable stratagems for right-thinking universities.

### **The Branches: Offshoots of Wisdom and Virtue**

Kirk is not known as a policy wonk. The Great Books, not the mathematical or statistical models of economic technicians, were his organon of choice. He devoted essays to broad, perennial themes like “the moral imagination,” “liberal learning,” and “the permanent things.” Asked to recommend a book for President Nixon, he chose T. S. Eliot’s *Notes toward the Definition of Culture*,<sup>46</sup> a treatise that elevated artistic and aesthetic sensibilities over the quotidian, partisan politics in which the president was immersed.

Kirk’s pronouncement that the “academy simply is not the place to acquire an apprehension of the complexity of public affairs, or acquaintance with the skill and limits of diplomacy,”<sup>47</sup> illustrates his prioritization of wisdom over mundane policy. Read his numerous newspaper and magazine columns about higher education, however, and you might come away with a different impression, one of Kirk as a political strategist with a strong grasp of educational policy. “Of the many hundreds of essays, articles, reviews, and books Kirk wrote during his long career,” says James E. Person Jr., “he wrote most often about the state of American education,”<sup>48</sup> reflecting a strikingly contemporary concern for a man so consumed with past eras and the generational inheritance of custom and experience. Kirk’s writings on policy reflect practical concerns that represent, in the figurative scheme of this essay, the branches that form and feed the canopy of society. A crown of

flourishing foliage in a tree is also a sign that healthy minerals and water are channeling properly from rich soil through strong roots and a supportive trunk upward and outward, sustaining life. Likewise, good policy is merely a small piece of the integrated whole that makes social organization and civil order possible.

Kirk wrote on a wide variety of issues involving higher education: accreditation, academic freedom, tenure, curriculum, vocational training, community colleges, adult education, college presidents, textbooks, fraternities and Greek life, enrollment, seminars, tuition, teachers' unions, collective bargaining, student activism, British universities, urban versus rural schools, boards of trustees, university governance, the hard sciences, grade inflation, lowering academic standards, libraries, private versus public schooling, civics education, sex education, school vouchers, university presses, and more. He denounced the educational theories of John Dewey, with whom he associated the philosophy of pragmatism. "Kirk attacked those, such as John Dewey," says Gerald Russello, "who sought to reform society in accordance with an overarching master plan based on abstract conclusions about human conduct."<sup>49</sup>

One of Kirk's go-to subjects implicates several policy issues: federal subsidies. He believed that federal money threatened the mission and integrity of universities in numerous areas. For starters, he believed that federal subsidies—and, it must be added, foundation grants—created perverse incentives for researchers, who might conform to the benefactor's "preferences" and "value judgments."<sup>50</sup> Recalling the proverb that "[t]he man who pays the piper calls the tune,"<sup>51</sup> he cautioned against financial dependency on outside influences, which, he worried, could impose ideological conditions on grants to advance, or purge, particular viewpoints. Moreover, the grantors, whether they were foundations or the government, would, he believed, quantify the value of their funded work according to measurable outcome assessments that were "easily tabulated and defensible."<sup>52</sup> The intrinsic value of reading Homer, Aristotle, Plato, Herodotus, or Euripides, however, is not easily assessed in instrumental terms.

More fundamentally, Kirk viewed federal involvement in higher education as a step toward centralization and consolidation of power at the expense of local variety. He foresaw the creation of the US Department of Education long before it occurred.<sup>53</sup> Fearing the growth of an “educationist hierarchy” or an “empire of educationism” corrupted by “sinecures” and “patronage,”<sup>54</sup> he favored the aforementioned private liberal arts colleges, which, he insisted, flourished when they embraced mission and tradition.<sup>55</sup> “The American college—the small liberal arts college—is worth preserving,” Kirk wrote, “but it can be preserved, in our time of flux, only if it is reformed”<sup>56</sup> by harkening back to original mission rather than away from original mission or toward new missions.

Kirk’s reform was reactionary, not progressive.<sup>57</sup> It rejected the popular focus on vocation and specialization and sought to train “men and women who know what it is to be truly human, who have some taste for contemplation, who take long views, and who have a sense of moral responsibility and intellectual order.”<sup>58</sup> Even if they cannot be calculated precisely, these vague-yet-discernable qualities of literate people are beneficial to society writ large, in Kirk’s view. In other words, there is an appreciable difference between literate and illiterate societies.

A progressive might also argue for taking the long view based on a canon or curriculum featuring, say, Rousseau, Marx, Hegel, Derrida, and so forth, and excluding voices oppositional to that of these men. Kirk’s position on higher education could not be realized through a sustained study of such thinkers, however, or through faddish movements such as anti-racism or critical race theory that do not concern themselves with the concept of virtue. Here Newman’s ideas about the university are instructive, given the deep impression that his writings made on Kirk. Newman treated higher education, so conceived in his era, as an institutional vehicle for enlarging minds and exercising reason so that individuals might cultivate virtue. Hence, like Babbitt, Newman advocated learning the classical texts of the Greeks and Romans, in addition to history and Christian scripture, and he denominated the historic disciplines to that end into grammar, logic, rhetoric, and math (a category that,

itself, divides into geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music). Newman believed these disciplines were superior to the “new” vocational ones that emerged during the Middle Ages—law and medicine, for instance—because the former are fundamental or, put differently, antecedent to workforce education that emphasizes training and skill rather than private rumination for the greater good. Babbitt likewise urged that we achieve a breadth of knowledge about literary and religious texts and traditions, and he did so while cautioning against utopian promises of the kind of Romanticism that posited that human nature is perfectible.

So, when Kirk decried the alarming escalation of tuition prices in 1979, writing that “[a]ttendance at colleges and universities is becoming hopelessly expensive,”<sup>59</sup> he had much more in mind than contemporary policy. He had in mind irritating impediments to a proper education that could discipline the mind to contemplate the permanent things, or those enduring truths that represent wisdom and are essential to the life of virtue. Kirk devoted his own life to the permanent things, moving to his ancestral home of Piety Hill to live among thousands of books. He read and wrote compulsively, lectured widely, and held numerous visiting or honorary positions at universities. His mother inspired his love of literature when he was a young boy.<sup>60</sup> He inherited a library table on which he authored his own books.<sup>61</sup> Rejecting Dewey,<sup>62</sup> he was something of an autodidact who understood from personal experience the enormous importance and benefit of private cogitation.

Compare Kirk’s lifelong devotion to personal study and reflection to the enthusiasms of the typical eighteen-year-old today who chooses to attend college not because of its curriculum (or to pursue wisdom or cultivate virtue) but because of the alumni network, amenities, football team, fraternity, and party scene. We continue to hear echoes of Kirk’s observation that the typical college student “oughtn’t to be in college at all: he has simply come along for the fun and a snob-degree, and his bored presence reduces standards at most American universities.”<sup>63</sup> He claimed that “[w]e have been trying to confer the higher learning upon far too many young people, and the cost per capita has become

inordinate.”<sup>64</sup> The question of why students attend college is closely related to that of the fundamental purpose of college. The university does not exist to entertain or amuse young people. “[I]t is not,” Kirk complained, “a center for diverting the rising generation,” because it concerns “serious learning, without which no culture can endure.”<sup>65</sup> By teaching wisdom, the pure and proper university, by Kirk’s high standards, would thereby proliferate virtue, improving the whole of society in the process.<sup>66</sup>

Uncertainty regarding the point of higher education—whether it is to develop the inquisitive mind, expand the frontiers of knowledge, equip students with jobs skills, or provide something else entirely—seems more pronounced today in light of technological, economic, and population changes. Moreover, it remains true that “most of the universities and colleges are forced to do the work that ordinary schools did only a generation ago.”<sup>67</sup> Should not *higher* education accomplish more than *remedial* education? Does it not have a greater end?

Kirk certainly thought so—at least if higher education were properly liberal. “By ‘liberal education,’” he explained, “we mean an ordering and integrating of knowledge for the benefit of the free person—as contrasted with technical or professional schooling, now somewhat vaingloriously called ‘career education.’”<sup>68</sup> Kirk’s surprising wonkishness, and his facility in policy debates, always submitted to this overarching goal: defending order against disorder, in both the soul and the larger polity.<sup>69</sup> “The primary purpose of a liberal education,” he said, “is the cultivation of the person’s own intellect and imagination, for the person’s own sake.”<sup>70</sup> Simply put, it is to teach students what it means to be human.<sup>71</sup> The benefits to the individual magnified in the aggregate, as more liberally educated people populated society and spread their knowledge and learning while setting good examples. The university that properly teaches the liberal arts thus contributes to the general order of society by, among other things, balancing the desire for human liberty with the order, stability, and discipline needed to avoid a descent into chaos.<sup>72</sup>

The aspiration of policy was not policymaking. “[G]enuine education,” Kirk averred, “is something higher than an instrument of

public policy.<sup>73</sup> Kirk's short-term strategies serviced a paramount objective: to seek wisdom, virtue, truth, clarity, and understanding. One cannot simply quantify the value of that. In today's era of accreditation and assessment, when each university department, college, curriculum, major, course, and philanthropic effort requires extensive, data-driven recording and reporting of outputs and outcomes, the essential role of the university—to “nurture the life and the mind”<sup>74</sup>—grinds in the machinery of technocracy and bureaucracy.

Kirk reminds us that there is more to life and learning than paper-pushing administration, high enrollment numbers, marketing, business, and the constant chasing of tuition revenue. The university could and should cultivate the individual intellect by pursuing wisdom and virtue, which, when they multiply among literate people, improve the lives and institutions of the greater society. Kirk's convictions about higher education, so stated, are neither cryptic nor complex. They are unlikely to become the subject of dense graduate dissertations. Yet their simplicity does not diminish their importance. Sometimes the obvious needs restating to avoid disorder and chaos and to repeat and remember what, after all, merits conserving.

Which returns us to the tree metaphor. Trees are perennial. They not only require nourishment but also furnish it. They supply refreshing shade on hot and sunny days, and fruits and nuts for humans and animals to eat. Woody plants are but shrubs or stemmy life-forms unless the right combination of water and sunshine fosters their growth into greatness. They shed their leaves in the fall and winter but return to full health each spring. They offer habitats to creatures big and small, and in groups they form large canopies and forests. Beneath their bark are cells that multiply and connect, adding fresh tissue that increases the girth and base of their trunks. Trees were long believed to live in perpetuity unless visited by harsh weather or disease.

As is the tree, so is education—and the virtuous and ethical society built upon education. The process of learning never ends or terminates but continues through trial and error so long as it enjoys the necessary conditions: the educational equivalent to water and sunlight, moist soil, freedom from injury or illness. The university

system in the United States is like a diseased tree, its growth stunted and its leaves drying up and dying because its foundations have decayed. The branches that buttress and sustain a flourishing society cannot perform their function without a trunk, or virtue, to support them. Hence our society has fallen into decadence and disarray. “When to this internal decay of humane studies is joined the twentieth-century appetite for technological and utilitarian training,” Kirk bemoaned, “the normative content and function disappear almost wholly from the modern university.”<sup>75</sup> Such is the state of university matters today.

Where is hope? Perhaps in the movement and in the pedagogy of classical Christian education represented by such organizations as the Association of Classical Christian Schools, the Chesterton Academy, or the Trinity Schools that teach from the Trivium or Quadrivium with a distinct focus on Christian biblical themes and foundations. The rigorous curriculum of these schools, which prioritize the liberal arts over practical and professional training, would have pleased Newman, Babbitt, and Kirk. Their commitments to literary and religious influence, and their division of the educational maturation process into grammar, logic, and rhetoric, ensure that the soil and the roots remain suitable for the gradual success of the trunk and branches—and eventually of the whole of society that these represent.

Kirk was right: wisdom, indeed, is paramount. It is incumbent upon those with the requisite will, means, and positions to prepare the soil, to plant and water the seeds, praying that the tree, when it comes, will outlive us and our children, furnishing food, shelter, and beauty for future generations.

### Notes

1. Russell Kirk, *Decadence & Renewal in the Higher Learning* (Washington, DC: Gateway Editions, 1978), 136.
2. The tree metaphor seems apt in light of Joshua J. Bowman’s contribution to this volume regarding Kirk’s prospects for conservative environmentalism.
3. See Bradley J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 120–24.

4. Proverbs 4:5.
5. “The university is a European institution” that is “a creation of medieval Europe, which was the Europe of papal Christianity.” Walter Rüegg, foreword, *A History of the University in Europe*, vol. 1, *Universities in the Middle Ages*, ed. H. De Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xix. According to Kirk, “Universities were founded to sustain faith by reason—and to maintain order in the soul and in the commonwealth.” Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, ed. Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006), 29.
6. Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 117. Also printed in Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, ed. Mark C. Henrie (Bryn Mawr, PA: ISI Books, 1993), 243. The chapters in which this quotation appears in these two texts overlap but are not identical. Kirk associates “virtue” and “wisdom,” suggesting that the two are inextricably linked, the former the inevitable product of the latter.
7. Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 117.
8. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 241.
9. Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 241.
10. Russell Kirk, *Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, [1957] 2019), 79.
11. Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden, [1969] 1988), 202.
12. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 23.
13. See generally Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 15–27.
14. James E. Person Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 86. See also Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 30–38.
15. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, [1953] 1995), 431.
16. “Being neither a religion nor an ideology, the body of opinion termed *conservatism* possesses no Holy Writ and no *Das Kapital* to provide dogmata.” Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 15.
17. Kirk, *Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism*, 71.
18. Kirk, *Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism*, 71.
19. Kirk, *Decadence & Renewal in the Higher Learning*, ix.
20. Kirk, *Decadence & Renewal in the Higher Learning*, 294.
21. See generally Russell Kirk, “The American College: A Proposal for Reform,” *Georgia Review* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1957): 177–86.
22. Kirk, “The American College,” 178–79.
23. Kirk, “The American College,” 179.

24. Kirk, "The American College," 179.
25. Kirk, "The American College," 181.
26. Kirk, "The American College," 179–80.
27. Neetu Arnold, *Priced Out: What College Costs America* (Princeton, NJ: National Association of Scholars, 2021), 15.
28. Arnold, *Priced Out*, 30.
29. For a rolling count or continuously updated count of such colleges and universities, see "A Look at Trends in College Consolidation since 2016," Higher Ed Dive, updated July 7, 2021, <https://www.highereddive.com/news/how-many-colleges-and-universities-have-closed-since-2016/539379/>.
30. Kirk, "The American College," 182.
31. Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*, 170.
32. Russell Kirk, "The Ethical Purpose of Literary Studies," *Educating for Virtue*, ed. Joseph Baldacchino (Bowie, Maryland: National Humanities Institute, 1988), 35.
33. See Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 118–33 ("Literature and the College") and 134–50 ("Literature and the Doctor's Degree").
34. Russell Kirk, "Introduction," in Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 26. One of the contributors to this symposium, Michael Federici, transcribed Kirk's typewritten (i.e., written by typewriter) introduction while Federici was still a graduate student interning for the National Humanities Institute.
35. For a better sense of how Kirk uses the term "literature," see the lecture titled "Literature" in John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 4th ed. (London: Basil, Mantagu, Pickering, 1875), 268–94.
36. Gleaves Whitney, "Introduction," *The American Cause* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), xi.
37. William S. Smith, *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 13.
38. Kirk, "The American College," 182.
39. Kirk, "The American College," 182–83.
40. Kirk, "The American College," 183.
41. Kirk, "The American College," 183.
42. Kirk, "The American College," 184.
43. Kirk, "The American College," 184.
44. Kirk, "The American College," 185.
45. Kirk, "The American College," 186.
46. Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 215.

47. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 202.
48. Person, *Russell Kirk*, 81.
49. Gerald Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 196.
50. Russell Kirk, "Massive Subsidies and Academic Freedom," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 28, no. 3 (1963): 608.
51. Kirk, "Massive Subsidies and Academic Freedom," 607.
52. Kirk, "Massive Subsidies and Academic Freedom," 611.
53. Russell Kirk, "Federal Aid to Educational Bureaucracy," *National Review*, vol. 10 (February 25, 1961), 116.
54. Russell Kirk, "The Federal Educational Boondoggle," *National Review*, vol. 5 (March 15, 1958), 257.
55. See generally Kirk, "The American College."
56. Kirk, "The American College," 177.
57. Kirk, "The American College," 177 ("our age seems to require a reform that is reactionary, rather than innovating").
58. Kirk, "The American College," 182–83.
59. Russell Kirk, "More Freedom Per Dollar," *National Review*, vol 31 (April 13, 1979), 488. Forty-two years after Kirk penned these lines, the cost of attending college has risen exponentially. Kirk opposed federal aid or scholarships to students, but not, from what I can tell, for the economic reason that the ready availability of federal funding would enable universities to hike tuition rates to artificially high levels. Perhaps, even in his skepticism, he could not conceive of university leadership as so systematically exploitative. Russell Kirk, "Federal Scholarships," *National Review*, vol. 2 (November 24, 1956), 18.
60. Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 24.
61. Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 26.
62. Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 27.
63. Kirk, "Federal Scholarships," 18.
64. Russell Kirk, "Who Should Pay for Higher Education?" *National Review*, vol. 23 (May 18, 1971), 534.
65. Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*, 137.
66. See generally his essay "Can Virtue Be Taught?" in *Redeeming the Time*, 53–67.
67. Russell Kirk, "Federal Education," *National Review*, vol. 4 (December 28, 1957), 592.
68. Russell Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education," in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 398. See also the section titled "The Liberal Arts versus Liberalism" in Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 149–62.

69. Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education," 400.
70. Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education," 400.
71. Kirk, "The Ethical Purpose of Literary Studies," 35.
72. Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 38–39: "Against license, anarchy, and chaos, the university was raised up, to restrain passion and prejudice through right reason. What the university offers to intellects is discipline and order. Through such intellectual order and discipline, rational liberty of the person and of the society is made possible. This is true of the humane and the social studies; it is quite as true of the physical sciences. The university is the one important response to the universal menace of chaos."
73. Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 43. He adds, "True education is meant to develop the individual human being, the person, rather than to serve the state." Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 43.
74. Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*, 138.
75. Kirk, "The Ethical Purpose of Literary Studies," 36.