



Russell Kirk on Higher Education

JAN 8, 2020



Allen Mendenhall



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R broad, perennial themes like “the moral imagination,” “liberal learning,” and “the permanent things.”

Read his numerous 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.

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, seminaries, 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.

One of his go-to subjects implicates several of those 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.”^[1] Recalling the proverb that “[t]he man who pays the piper calls the tune,”^[2] 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.”^[3] 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 the centralization and consolidation of power at the expense of local variety. He foresaw the creation of the U.S. Department of Education long before it occurred.^[4] Fearing the growth of an “educationist hierarchy” or an “empire of educationism” corrupted by “sinecures” and “patronage,”^[5] he favored small, private, liberal-arts colleges, which, he believed, flourished when they committed to mission and tradition.^[6]

“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.”^[7] Kirk’s reform was reactionary, not progressive.^[8] 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.”^[9] Even if they can’t 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’s an appreciable difference between literate and illiterate societies.

Kirk decried the alarming escalation of tuition prices. In 1979, he wrote, “Attendance at colleges and universities is becoming hopelessly expensive.”^[10] Forty years later, the costs of attending college have risen exponentially. Kirk opposed federal aid or scholarships to students,^[11] 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 couldn’t conceive of university leadership as so systematically exploitative.

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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."^[12] Elsewhere, 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."^[13] The question of why students attend college is closely related to that of the fundamental purpose of college.

Uncertainty regarding the point of higher education—whether it's to develop the inquisitive mind, expand the frontiers of knowledge, equip students with jobs skills, or 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."^[14] Shouldn't higher education accomplish more than remedial education? Doesn't it 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.'"^[15]

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.^[16] "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."^[17]

The aspiration of policy wasn't policymaking. Kirk's short-term strategies serviced a paramount objective: Namely, to seek wisdom, virtue, truth, clarity, and understanding. You can't simply quantify the value of that.

Allen Mendenhall is an associate dean at Faulkner University Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

^[1] Russell Kirk, "Massive Subsidies and Academic Freedom," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1963), 608.

^[2] *Ibid.* at 607.

^[3] *Ibid.* at 611.

^[4] Russell Kirk, "Federal Aid to Educational Bureaucracy," *National Review*, Vol. 10 (February 25, 1961), 116.

^[5] Russell Kirk, "The Federal Educational Boondoggle," *National Review*, Vol. 5 (March 15, 1958), 257.

^[6] See generally Russell Kirk, "The American College: A Proposal for Reform," *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 1957), 177-186.

^[7] *Ibid.* at 177.

^[8] *Ibid.* ("our age seems to require a reform that is reactionary, rather than innovating").

^[9] *Ibid.* at 182-83.

^[10] Russell Kirk, "More Freedom Per Dollar," *National Review*, Vol 31 (April 13, 1979), 488.

[11] Russell Kirk, "Federal Scholarships," *National Review*, Vol. 2 (November 24, 1956), 18.

[12] Ibid.


[13] Russell Kirk, "Who Should Pay for Higher Education?" Vol. 23 (May 18, 1971), 534.

[14] Russell Kirk, "Federal Education," *National Review*, Vol. 4 (December 28, 1957), 592.

[15] Russell Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education," in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, edited by George A. Panichas (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 398.

[16] Ibid. at 400.

[17] Ibid.



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 **michael burns** • an hour ago



One might see the decline in academic life simply watching popular college movies from the thirties on...

Many I have heard can't wait to go to University to gain access to the girls or boys or the parties; drinking and drugs or sadly now the activism.

The arrogance of not having an intellectual superior.

Socialism that relentless march, that has been continuous in last hundred years, it has never really gained a solid footing here in the west until the sixties and that hippie deluge of freedom without a value within university life.

The war on America intelligence struck that battle ground first, and here we are now with that fifth column of their inheritors that is so entrenched in academia now it is causing such a ripple effect in all aspects of intellectual pursuit in society. Never so much as in climate and psychology -- physics is a mess, and space well -- people watch far too many movies

It is sad to know that what we experience today in intelligentsia, was home grown over decades by sickly sweet sentiment, and the destruction of an all round education, the trivium lost to time.

You have introduced me to someone I have not read as yet. I will look for his essays where I can.
The "Moral imagination" piques my interest immensely, I will look for it immediately.

"is the cultivation of the person's own intellect and imagination, for the person's own sake."

As to you Allen thank you for this bright piece that opens the door to Russell Kirk.

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Mitchell Langbert • 2 hours ago • edited

Excellent piece, and thanks for the information about Kirk's insights into higher education. The influence of foundations begins pretty much at the beginning of higher education, and no university is free of either state control or the influence of Progressive benefactors. The entire system was encouraged for corporatist reasons and has never been committed to liberal knowledge--at least since the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations shaped the bulk of the higher-ed system in the early 1900s in ways consistent with the needs of Frank Vanderlip and JP Morgan. An interesting puzzle that has evolved since Kirk's important insights are the almost total left-wing dominance in the liberal arts and social sciences. How and why do investment bankers and corporations continue to support educational institutions that have become left-wing propagandists? The answer is suggested in the monotone academic support for the 2008 bailout. "The creatures outside looked from investment banker to academic socialist, and from academic socialist to investment banker, and from investment banker to academic socialist again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."

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