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To Live an Intellectual Life, I Had to Leave the Ivory Tower

To Live an Intellectual Life, I Had to Leave the Ivory Tower



By Allen Mendenhall

[\(https://www.mindingthecampus.org/author/allenmendenhall/\)](https://www.mindingthecampus.org/author/allenmendenhall/)

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In the lengthening shadows of late summer 2024, as yet another academic year loomed on the horizon, an inescapable realization struck me: The moment had arrived to bid farewell to the groves of academe.

The decision to leave behind my university career after nearly a decade in administration and considerably longer in teaching emerged not merely from the magnetic pull of a compelling opportunity at the Heritage Foundation, though that institution's offer proved irresistible. Rather, this transition involved disquiet about the trajectory of American higher education, a concern informed by my unusually panoramic view of the contemporary university landscape.

My trek through academia's varied terrain—from English to humanities departments, from business to law schools, and equipped with terminal degrees in literary studies and law—has afforded me a distinctive vantage point on higher education's current state. Having served as both professor and dean at secular and religious institutions, public and private,

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“U.S. Education Department says it is cutting nearly half of all staff” — *NPR*, 3/12/25

<https://www.npr.org/2025/03/11/s1-5324746/trump-education-department-layoffs-closure-reorganization>

“How Humanities Professors Got Marginalized” — *James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal*, 3/12/25

<https://jamesgmartin.center/2025/03/how-humanities-professors-got-marginalized/>

“Education and Social Control” — *Law & Liberty*, 3/12/25

<https://lawliberty.org/book-review/education-and-social-control/>



I've witnessed the particular struggles of individual departments and the more fundamental institutional decline that pervades the entire enterprise of higher education.

The pathologies afflicting our universities cannot be isolated as the peculiar malady of any single field. Evidence of institutional decay is everywhere, suggesting not a series of discrete problems but rather a fundamental misalignment between the purpose and practice of education. Here, I'll enumerate some troubling developments, though their order reflects no particular hierarchy of concern.

Politicization

The politicization of universities began principally in humanities departments before spreading outward, often undetected, to seemingly unrelated disciplines. I've witnessed firsthand how radical ideologies take root and flourish there. What's particularly striking is how these ideas then filter through the broader academic ecosystem.

Despite their reputation for no-nonsense pragmatism, business and law schools—I've been a dean in both—often unconsciously adopt these ideological frameworks. Rather than leading cultural conversations, they tend to absorb and reflect them. My colleagues in these fields frequently embrace what they believe to be cutting-edge intellectual trends, unaware they're adopting decades-old ideological positions that have long been standard fare in humanities departments.

This pattern reveals a curious irony: Departments that pride themselves on analytical rigor and real-world applications often uncritically adopt theoretical positions without examining their origins or implications. What they perceive as innovation is often merely the delayed absorption of established humanities dogma.

The catastrophe in American humanities education, particularly in English departments, stems from our abandonment of aesthetic and intellectual difficulty in favor of resentment, activism, grievance, and identity politics. We have replaced the sublime challenge of wrestling with Geoffrey of Monmouth, Langland, Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, and Shakespeare with a parade of ideological simplicities. The true purpose of reading—to strengthen the self, commune with the dead, and achieve cognitive and imaginative enrichment—has been sacrificed on the altar of social engineering.

Our students are no longer taught to read as solitary seekers engaged in the exercise, if not the art, of historical memory and literary or philosophical influence. Instead, they are conscripted into various political causes and told that the humanities exist merely to reinforce ideologies or to offer a creative platform for promoting activism. This is a profound spiritual and intellectual loss. When we reduce King Lear to a lesson about patriarchy or read Emily Dickinson through the narrow lens of gender politics, we commit an act of educational vandalism.

"NIH gives Planned Parenthood exec \$495K to study 'oppression' and abortion" — *College Fix*,

3/12/25

(<https://www.thecollegefix.com/nih-gives-planned-parenthood-exec-495k-to-study-oppression-and-abortion/>)

"Education Department announces massive layoffs, slashing nearly half its workforce" — *Higher Ed Dive*,

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"UNC Institutions Should End Discriminatory Faculty Hiring" — *James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal*,

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"How the SAT Became a Darling of the Anti-DEI Crowd" — *Inside Higher Ed*, 3/11/25



The core problem is our failure to understand that genuine education is fundamentally meritocratic—not in terms of social class, but in its demand for intellectual rigor and the recognition that some books are indeed greater than others. We have embraced a lousy form of democracy whereby all texts are considered equal and interchangeable, rap lyrics are studied alongside Keats, and the distinction between Taylor Swift and *The Divine Comedy* has been effectively erased.

We must recognize that certain works contain more aesthetic value, cognitive complexity, and wisdom about the human condition than others. Until we recover the courage to make such judgments and demand that our students climb rugged peaks rather than remain in the comfortable valleys of contemporary culture, American education will continue its decline.

Humanities faculty too often put the cart before the horse, encouraging students to take political stances before developing foundational knowledge. They prioritize activism over understanding social movements' complex histories and philosophical underpinnings. Consequently, moral certainty has overtaken intellectual curiosity among young people, who prefer quick, hot takes over thoughtful, well-researched arguments.

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(<https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2016/02/02/how-a-generation-lost-its-common-culture/>)

Presentism

The humanities classroom has become a curious theater of historical illiteracy. Students arrive armed with contemporary moral certitudes but bereft of the contextual understanding necessary to truly comprehend historical works. They approach great texts not as complex narratives requiring nuanced interpretation but as platforms for performative moral judgment.

This intellectual impoverishment arises partly from a pedagogy that increasingly sanitizes or sidesteps challenging texts. Professors, ostensibly to make the material more “accessible,” instead deprive students of the intellectual rigor required to engage with works that emerge from cultural frameworks different from our own.

The result is a generation of readers who reduce rich, multilayered historical narratives to shallow, presentist caricatures—intellectual drive-by shootings that reveal far more about the students’ limited perspectives than about the works under critique.

What’s lost is not merely an appreciation for historical complexity but the fundamental scholarly virtue of attempting to understand before passing judgment. In their rush to measure past achievements against present standards, students forfeit the opportunity for genuine intellectual growth.

(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2025/03/11/how-standardized-tests-became-part-dei-debate>)

“West Point disbands 12 student groups following Trump’s DEI executive order”
— *College Fix*, 3/11/25

(<https://www.thecollegefix.com/west-point-disbands-12-student-groups-following-trumps-dei-executive-order/>)

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“Education Department warns 60 colleges it could take action over antisemitism concerns” — *Higher Ed Dive*, 3/10/25
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(<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/university/>)

Technocraticism

Liberal arts colleges like my alma mater, Furman University, have rebranded as career preparation centers. Philosophy, English, and history departments are pressured to justify their existence through “practical applications.” Writing courses are increasingly focused on businesslike communications rather than logic or reasoning. Critical thinking is reduced to a bullet-pointed “skill” rather than a way of knowing and being. Large lecture halls replace intimate seminars where bold, genuine dialogue once flourished.

As a result, many departments have become credentialing factories, and on a larger scale their universities—public or private—have become degree mills rather than true centers of learning. Their doctoral programs produce specialists who know everything about nearly nothing. The proliferation of certificates and micro-credentials that signal competence without ensuring it is widespread in business schools especially. Across the academy, driven by the demands of accreditors and government regulations, success is measured by quantifiable metrics rather than intellectual growth.

Universities have embraced the customer service model partly due to constant assessment—externally and internally imposed—and frantic reactions to declining enrollment. Students are treated as consumers whose preferences must be catered to, while academic rigor is sacrificed for high satisfaction scores and appraisals. In student evaluations, faculty are judged more on their entertainment value and leniency than their educational effectiveness. Their reputation suffers if they grade strictly and firmly or assign complex texts; students perceive rigor as poor customer service. Have you heard the quip about inmates running the asylum? There should be another about students grading teachers.

Grade inflation has rendered academic distinction meaningless. Enrollment and attrition problems at universities make failing students too risky a business decision. Therefore, the administration pressures faculty to ensure high pass rates regardless of student performance.

The transactional nature of the professor-student relationship—or “learners,” the supposedly more palatable term—reduces teaching to a set of bureaucratic procedures. Liability concerns stifle intellectual exploration; professors hesitate to address specific topics (such as rape in criminal law courses) out of fear of controversy, litigation, or policy violations.

Office hours become rigid, documented interactions rather than spaces for meaningful intellectual exchange. Genuine mentorship and scholarly apprenticeship are impossible under these conditions of professional distance. Personal interactions have been reduced to institutional protocols, while innovative teaching methods have given way to standardized practices and a heavy reliance on dull textbooks.

[of-virginia-dissolves-dei-office-to-comply-with-trumps-executive-order/](https://www.virginiadissolvesdei.com/)

“As NC’s teacher pipeline dwindles, education colleges are getting creative” — WRAL News, 3/07/25
(<https://www.wral.com/story/nc-s-teacher-pipeline-dwindles-education-colleges-are-getting-creative/21897941/>)

“The Classroom Must Change” — James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, 3/07/25
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“Trump administration cancels \$400M of Columbia’s grants and contracts amid antisemitism probe” — Higher Ed Dive, 3/07/25
(<https://www.highereddive.com/news/trump-cancels-columbia-grants-contracts-400-million/741941/>)

“Are elephants ‘queer’? Feminist scholars say science is too ‘hetero’ and ‘fetocentric’” — College Fix, 3/07/25
(<https://www.thecollegefix.com/are-elephants-queer-feminist-scholars-say-science-is-too-hetero-and-fetocentric/>)

“Trump Is Right to Deport Hamas Supporters” — City Journal, 3/07/25
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“Trump Administration Says It’s Pulling \$400 Million of Federal Contracts From Columbia U.” — Chronicle of Higher Education, 3/07/25
(<https://www.chronicle.com/article/trump-administration-says-its-pulling-400-million-of-federal-contracts-from-columbia-u>)

As a conservative who has been unfairly profiled twice by the student newspaper—a story for another time—I feel especially vulnerable to targeting. Therefore, I refuse to meet with students one-on-one in my office. Instead, I insist on meeting in public, open spaces to protect myself from false accusations. I also record my lectures on my iPhone to defend myself from students who might misrepresent or distort my words. It's no longer fun to teach under such defensiveness.

[RELATED: The Passion Project Industry: How College Admissions Activities Lists Killed Intellectual Wonder]
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Attention Deficit

Having grown up in a digital environment dominated by instant messaging and social media, today's students struggle with traditional classroom dynamics. Their communication habits, shaped by texting rather than voice calls, reflect a broader challenge: the inability to maintain sustained focus during a standard lecture period. The constant urge to check phones, send messages, or engage with laptops reveals how their digital dependencies have compromised their capacity for extended, undistracted learning. Faculty now shorten reading assignments, reduce complex arguments to simple bullet points, and replace deep textual engagement with skimming and summary—all to accommodate students' diminished attention spans.

We are witnessing an alarming erosion of shared cultural knowledge. The rich tapestry of common references that once allowed meaningful discourse across generations has begun to unravel. Debates about the literary canon, if they still occur, have largely abandoned discussions of intellectual merit in favor of identity-based considerations, while historical knowledge—once considered fundamental to an educated mind—has become merely optional.

Perhaps most troubling is the growing dismissal of cultural context itself. Rather than being recognized as essential for understanding literature, art, and ideas, contextual framework is increasingly treated as superfluous, creating a kind of intellectual presentism whereby everything is evaluated solely through contemporary politics and perspectives.

The erosion of education I've described here continues unabated, mainly because each compromise seems small and reasonable in isolation. Only when viewed collectively does the scale of the transformation become apparent. The result is an educational system that excels at producing credentials but struggles to cultivate genuine intellectual development.

These compromises accumulate like sediment in a once-clear stream: shortened readings here, simplified arguments there, relaxed standards everywhere. Appeals to accessibility, diversity, or consumer (i.e., student) demands justify each concession. Yet, together, they have fundamentally altered

"Draft Order Offers Hints to How Trump Wants to Shut Down the Department" — *Inside Higher Ed*, 3/06/25
(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/politics-elections/2025/03/06/draft-order-outlines-plan-close-education-dept>)

"Trump to Sign Order Abolishing Education Department Today" — *Inside Higher Ed*, 3/06/25
(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/politics-elections/2025/03/06/trump-reportedly-set-order-dismantling-education-dept>)

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"Agriculture Dept. gave university \$600K to study 'menstrual cycles in trans men'" — *College Fix*, 3/06/25
(<https://www.thecollegefix.com/agriculture-dept-gave-university-600k-to-study-menstrual-cycles-in-trans-men/>)

"Can Ibram Kendi Find a New Home at Howard?" — *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/05/25
(<https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-ibram-kendi-find-a-new-home-at-howard>)

higher education, turning what should be an intellectual odyssey into a credentialing process whereby graduation signals endurance rather than achievement.

But I want to end on a hopeful note. Throughout my career, I have worked with a remarkable array of conservative educational organizations that offer profound, challenging intellectual experiences for eager students. From Liberty Fund colloquia—in which I've participated as both student and faculty—to seminars for the Philadelphia Society's fellowship programs, I have witnessed a vibrant intellectual culture.

In classrooms at Hillsdale, and through programs run by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Russell Kirk Center, Federalist Society, Acton Institute, Claremont Institute, Institute for Humane Studies, Heritage Foundation, Mises Institute, American Institute for Economic Research, and Mercatus Center, I've seen students engaged in substantive scholarly discourse.

These venues have fostered rigorous debates: young people wrestling with ancient texts, arguing constructively about theology, exploring Federalist and anti-Federalist positions, grappling with political economy's great minds from Adam Smith onward, and critically examining the Enlightenment's legacy.

While mainstream academia has drifted toward simplistic presentism and ideological narrowness, these educational institutions—diverse in their specific missions yet united in intellectual seriousness—consistently provide an educational experience far superior to contemporary universities' increasingly fragmented and politicized approach.

As universities fail and capitulate, these institutions stand resolute: guardians of intellectual tradition, cultivating minds rather than managing expectations.

Follow Allen Mendenhall
(<https://x.com/allenmendenhall>) on X.

Cover designed by Jared Gould using Text-to-Image AI; "Create an oil painting-style image of a rainy college campus. In the foreground, a man, appearing as a black silhouette and holding books at his side, walks towards the viewer, away from an ivory tower-style university building in the background. The figure should be facing the viewer, not the building. The scene should convey a somber, reflective atmosphere, with rain blurring the details, and the university building looming in the background. The style should evoke a sense of melancholy and departure, with muted lighting and overcast skies."

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Unions" — *Law & Liberty*,

3/05/25

(<https://lawliberty.org/forum/a-reckoning-for-teachers-unions/>)

"Medical Schools' Botched

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— *U.S. Department of*

Education, 3/03/25





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Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy.

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3 thoughts on “To Live an Intellectual Life, I Had to Leave the Ivory Tower”



March 12, 2025 at 10:14 am

Tanstaaf (<https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2025/03/11/to-live-an-intellectual-life-i-had-to-leave-the-ivory-tower/#comment-1231350>) says:

There's a much more basic problem at the colleges with lax admissions standards, places where millions of students attend. The median matriculant has middle school level academic skills and lacks a desire to learn. This student is given an ample opportunity NOT to learn, with easy classes and few restrictions on cheating. With a very small effort, this student can earn a degree despite graduating college with middle school level skills.

[Reply](#)



March 12, 2025 at 3:33 am

Matthew G. Andersson (<https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2025/03/11/to-live-an-intellectual-life-i-had-to-leave-the-ivory-tower/#comment-1231257>) says:

This essay makes a number of real observations. Ultimately is the question of solution. I suggest five for students. They are based on individual initiative.

1. Carefully choose the department and each professor, as to fit. As an undergrad, I interviewed professors before I registered for their class. Some passed; some failed. This also established a potential working relationship; explored areas of mutual interest and background; and changed the nature of a “class” into an effective tutorial. The opportunity of college is to find a few professors, and others, who you can work with, not sit in a classroom. Even at Berkeley, one can pursue science and engineering at fine levels of fidelity; at Texas, petroleum engineering; at Illinois Urbana-Champaign, history and computer science, or music and electrical engineering. If UM Montana, work outside in forestry. You'll be too

(<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/speech/secretary-mcmahon-our-departments-final-mission>)

“Researchers in ‘Limbo’ as Trump Battles Courts” — *Inside Higher Ed*, 3/03/25

(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/science-research-policy/2025/03/03/researchers-remain-limbo-trump-battles-courts>)

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(<https://www.chronicle.com/article/new-ed-dept-guidance-on-race-and-dei-tells-colleges-which-programs-might-be-illegal>)

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(<https://www.manhattancontrarian.com/blog/2025-3-1-the-greatest-scientific-fraud-of-all-time-part-xxxiii>)

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busy to worry about diversity. Join ROTC. Take flying lessons. Play tennis. Join fencing. Study Nicomachean Ethics and consider Aristotle's megalopsychia as a model of virtue.

2. Attend a university outside the US: Japan, Russia, Germany, South Africa, China, Mexico, Norway, Tunisia, Israel, Ireland, Turkey, Argentina, Iceland, Saudi Arabia, among 25 other effective geographic and cultural options. If it requires a second language, learn it. If they can do it, so can you.

3. Attend any UK university, including Scotland, and focus on the tutorial system which filters out some amount of taught-class vulnerability to institutional ideological transmission and distortion. Higher education operates on a mass-market model. Therefore it absorbs and transmits mass culture (what Saul Bellow called "backflow" on campus).

4. Be the solution in college. As Greenpeace founder Rob Hunter said, "Put your body where your mouth is." Universities will not change, adapt, modify or follow, without leadership and influence. One student can make a difference. See *Dixon v. Alabama*, 294 F. 2d 150 (5th Cir. 1961).

5. Get in and out of college as fast as possible. Don't take the summers off. Test out, seek waivers for experience, maximize credit hour load. Intellectual and physical loitering in college (students and faculty) contributes to both excessive conceptual abstraction, maladaptive ideation, and emotional dysregulation. It therefore weakens necessary goal-directed behavior. Speed and ruthless self-directed objectives tend to make university ideology trivial.

Reply



March 11, 2025 at 5:23 pm

Jonathan (<https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2025/03/11/to-live-an-intellectual-life-i-had-to-leave-the-ivory-tower/#comment-1231055>)

"The decision to leave behind my university career after nearly a decade in administration and considerably longer in teaching emerged not merely from the magnetic pull of a compelling opportunity at the Heritage Foundation, though that institution's offer proved irresistible."

This says a lot. So the Associate Dean and named Professor found the Heritage Foundation life irresistible. His article covers the gamut of Centers, Institutes, etc etc outside of academia. Also all the undeniable problems of academia, e.g. grade inflation, need to study in public spaces with students, etc etc etc. Nothing inspiring, I'm afraid.



Maybe it's this bad, but leaving for greener pastures doesn't help things. It raises some doubts about the reasons for lack of conservative professors. Is there no college or university somewhere out in the boonies to welcome such people?

The standard brand academia is probably not going to disappear any time soon. I hope for some new young eager blood coming in to fill Professor Mendenhall's shoes. I wish him good fortune at Heritage Foundation.

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