

Overgrowth and Undergrowth in the Groves of Academe¹

HANNA HOLBORN GRAY

President Emerita

Harry Pratt Judson Distinguished Service Professor of History Emerita
The University of Chicago

The image on the screen, which I owe to the kindness of our colleague Stephen Stigler, pretty well charts the terrain I'm crossing this afternoon (Figure 1). It illustrates very clearly that the problems of overgrowth and undergrowth in the groves of academe go well back in time. Here the time is 1508; the picture graces the cover of a new edition of a textbook published originally in 1503 by a Carthusian monk named Gregor Reisch, who called it the *Margarita Philosophica*. The book was meant to be an encyclopedia of all learning, of all the knowledge fit to print.

I shall return later to the picture's iconography, but in the meantime, my theme has to do with the overgrowth that marks the activities and aspirations of our research universities and with the undergrowth that has been winding around their roots. In this connection, two foundational texts come to mind. The first comes from Ogden Nash. "Progress," he wrote, "might have been all right once/But it's gone on too long." And the second is from Edna St. Vincent Millay. "It is not true," she said, "that life is one damned thing after another./It is one damned thing over and over again."

Milton's description of the "olive groves of academe, Plato's retirement, Where the Attic bird/Trills her thick-warbled notes the summer long" sounds incredibly quaint. The groves of academe as we know them belong to the public airways of endless and, indeed, thick-warbled controversies. One has only to think of the often mindless or simplistic critiques of higher education (but there are also some thoughtful and thought-provoking ones) that appear in large quantities

¹ Read 20 April 2012, as part of a symposium on higher education.

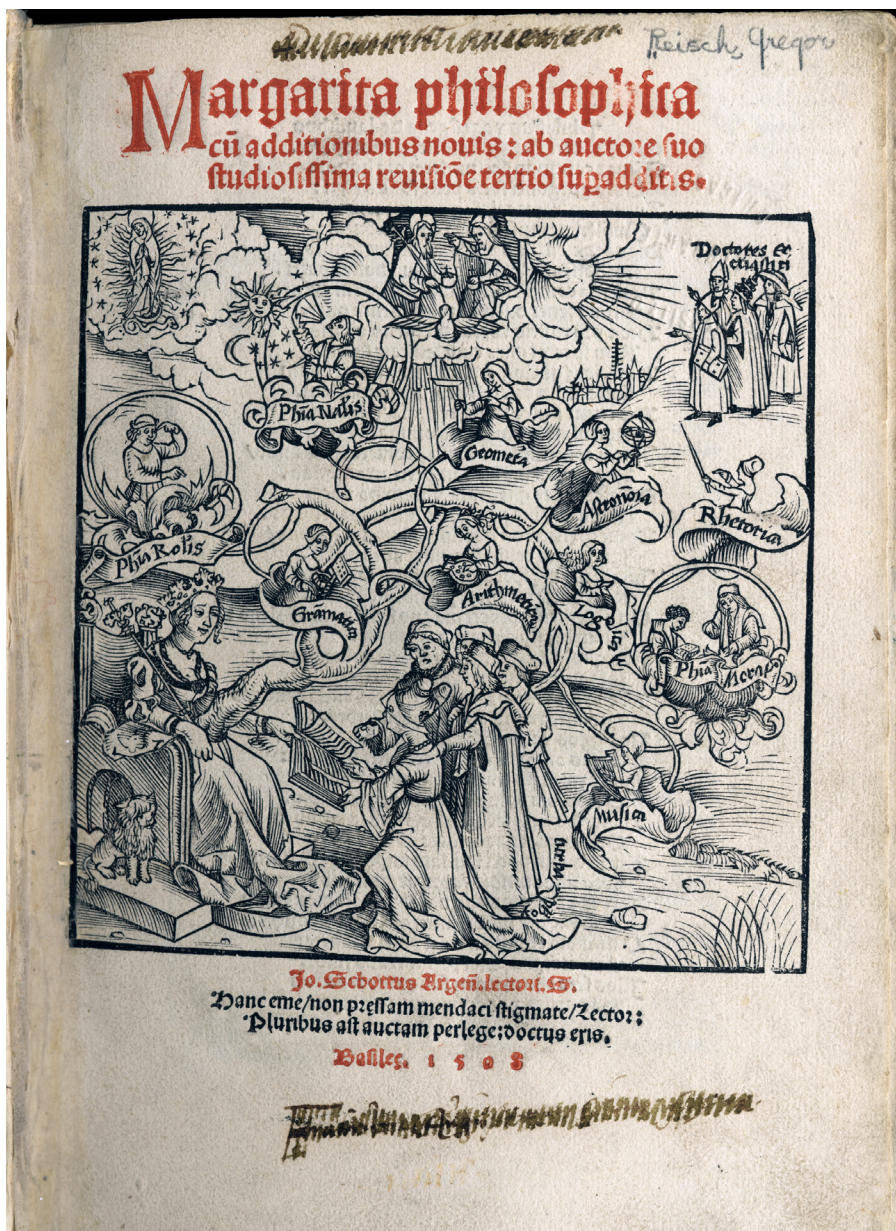


FIGURE 1. Gregor Reisch, *Margarita philosophica cū additionibus nouis; ab auctore suo studiosissima reuisione tertio supadditis* (Basilee, Jo. Schottus, 1508). Woodcut. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

every day. Discourse about higher education reaches everywhere, from the White House to the you-know-what house.

We learn from all this that higher education is in a state of unparalleled crisis. As an aged academic, I know that this condition of imminent catastrophe has been announced and lamented repeatedly over the course of the past half century, with the diagnosis of its terminal illness taking different forms at different moments. Today once again an urgent sense of crisis has merged with many profound uncertainties about the future to envelop almost all discussion of our colleges and universities. Yet despite the pervasive gloom, and despite the volume and prevalence of very hard challenges, it seems to me that the general state of higher education so far remains actually quite robust. It may be worth asking whether we are in fact seeing the same damned thing again and trying to understand what has brought higher education to be seen instead as something almost broken.

In doing so, let me return to what I think the best description of the modern research university that's been written and ask how closely it describes our own situation.

It is now almost 50 years since the publication of Clark Kerr's *The Uses of the University*, the book that conferred on the modern research university its indelible name of "multiversity." In 1963, Kerr saw the institution that had then come into being as the product of remarkable progress to a whole new level in higher education and the higher learning and in their contributions to the social order. But he was rueful, too, about the losses and potential dangers he thought this progress had incurred. He pointed to what he considered the disintegration of the university as a community and the loss of any common understanding of its mission, a continuing growth of specialization and the intellectual fragmentation of the university that resulted, an increasing weight of external commitments and professional enticements that drew faculty away from institutional loyalties, and a lessening attention to undergraduate education, to the value of the liberal arts, and to the important responsibilities of teaching. He was concerned about the state of the academic humanities and feared that their role and stature were being subordinated to those of the sciences and professional programs in the research university more generally. He deplored what he saw as a new vocationalism, and he was alarmed by what he thought a creeping politicization of the university and by the ways in which it was coming to be regarded as an appropriate, indeed potent, instrument of social reform and action. Needless to say, this catalogue of concerns still sounds alarmingly familiar in today's debates.

Over the later decades, Kerr came to believe that the fissures he had detected within the multiversity had widened and its autonomy had

been weakened. He had been initially hopeful that some balance between past and present strengths and the multiple missions of the new academic world might yet be accomplished going forward. Himself a graduate of Swarthmore College, he imagined the perfect university as a cross between Swarthmore and Berkeley, easing the tensions and restoring to a proper equilibrium the status of teaching and research, forging sturdier bonds among disparate and increasingly fief-like disciplines, rebuilding a foundation of intellectual community while continuing to achieve still greater levels in the discovery and cultivation of knowledge. That ideal of a liberal arts college within, and enriched by, the research and scholarship and professional education and public service of a pluralistic university was not, of course, unique; it is a vision dreamed by just about every institution. Yet the question remains: is this ideal consistent with the dynamic driving a decentralized academic patchwork of infinite variety and complexity that appears to defy a unifying ethos or direction? In today's intensely competitive universe of research universities, what can it really mean to respond, as do so many, with the common aim of wanting and striving to be simply "the best"?

The trajectory of higher education that Kerr described continued on its course over the later twentieth century and beyond, through shifting times of prosperity and of constraint. That included the fluctuating momentum of expansion and increasing complexity in its institutions, of accelerating growth and change in the disciplines of knowledge and research, of the sweeping impact of new technologies, of deepening tensions among the different missions and demands that universities shouldered, of the dependent and often conflicted relation between universities and government and between universities and their publics. Since the '60s, the authority of universities, both moral and intellectual, has come to be regarded somewhat more skeptically. Today's critiques give evidence of a waning faith in the worth, quality, and effectiveness of higher education and its prospects, and this is true of the different positions all along the broad political and intellectual spectrum of our world. Yet for all that, a supportive respect for and belief in the shaping role of higher education has remained remarkably strong. Here, as elsewhere, extreme criticism is often the reverse side of the high value set on its object.

We can see how the anxieties I have sketched have now intensified under the impact of financial crisis. Public discussion tends to view the university primarily in terms of collegiate education and to dismiss graduate education and research almost as though these were distractions from those functions or even a kind of faculty self-indulgence. The bulk of critical commentary deals with undergraduate

education as critics mount their most stinging attacks on a university culture that rewards research and scholarship above teaching and on a decline in educational standards according to their ideas of what those have been and should be. In addition, they express mounting impatience with what is seen as universities' resistance to change or inability to change, whatever the word *change* might mean. At the same time, many critics are asking that universities contribute more knowledge and more service to their communities, the nation, and the world. Economic stringency has further spurred the plea that education look toward job market-related skills and that certain fields be favored. As in the case of opposing teaching and research, such tendencies to vocational preferences and the repudiation or questioning of a liberal arts education have always been part of an outlook on collegiate education historically very common in American society (just read your Tocqueville), an attitude now reinforced by recession and the escalating cost of tuitions, not to mention the hard facts of unemployment. The humanities have forever thought themselves to be in crisis, especially when placed on the defensive as the sciences and social sciences found expanding space in the research universities. They have at most times felt downtrodden, under-supported, and misunderstood. While battles over the curriculum have come to involve such new issues as programs related to gender and race or the vogue of cultural studies, and while to argue that either the salvation or the dissolution of all academic values can be discerned in emergent new methodologies and epistemologies, still, those battles now seem almost dated. Such conflicts continue to embody a clash of underlying positions about the curriculum that are as old as the liberal arts themselves, never to be finally settled but always to be renewed and re-argued in the changing contexts of time and circumstance. So, too, with the perceptions of ever-advancing overspecialization and declining intellectual community; those complaints were causing loud dissonance already in the newly developing universities of the later nineteenth century.

About the issue of our universities' institutional autonomy and the imperatives of academic freedom, we can say the same—enduring questions, new contexts and challenges. Most obviously, their dependence on the states, in the case of public universities, and the federal government, in the case of all universities, inevitably created difficult instabilities of funding and the consequences of ever closer, more confining regulation. Freedom and flexibility of choice and action for all universities have been vulnerable to the power of the public purse ever since the marriage of research universities to federal funding. That partnership has on the whole navigated successfully through often stormy seas, while making possible an ongoing era of extraordinary

scientific discovery and of greatly improved access to higher education, however highly charged the political environment.

One could go on in this vein, but the point is self-evident. The sources of many major concerns now regarded as unprecedented extend back at least a half century and more. That of course makes them no less weighty. And to the extent that these are in fact woven into the structures of the research universities as such, they will continue to shape such recurrent problems. Maybe not as just one damn thing, but as several interconnected and identifiable things that require ever re-invigorated attention.

At the same time, it is clear that universities have moved in directions that were scarcely compelling or even visible to Kerr when he wrote (the issues associated with equal opportunity and affirmative action, for example). Most important, Kerr had not witnessed the technological revolution that has already transformed so much while creating still unimagined possibilities for scholarly and scientific investigation and academic collaboration, for education at every level, and for the forms, and new forms, of the preservation and communication of learning that universities pursue.

So I ask again: Is the current crisis essentially just the same damned thing? As you know, historians are people who begin by saying that nothing is ever really new and end by telling you that everything is really quite different. In this spirit, I will say yes and then add a qualified no.

I say yes in the sense that there are indeed inherent problems and centrifugal pressures built into the fabric of the research university and its work, and there are recurrent external forces and events that will regularly threaten or give rise to crises—economic cycles most obviously, but others, too, above all political and ideological challenges that have over the years come even closer to the heart of a university's *raison d'être*. We cannot talk away the universities' inherent tensions, but we can, I believe, moderate their accumulating effects by tending to the work of balancing and rebalancing equally valuable priorities, looking to each university's self-definition and its choices.

We have also to recognize a deep underlying dynamic that will forever drive the world of research and education: namely, the relentless upward spiral of cost that inevitably results from the successful pursuit of knowledge and the needs then created for the next steps of investigation and learning. Each next stage in this evolving process requires yet larger numbers of highly trained people, still more sophisticated technologies, and more advanced state of the art facilities. Resources can hardly, if at all, keep pace with such rapid and demanding growth; resources will never be sufficient to satisfy the aspirations of

even the wealthiest institutions. The evolving growth of knowledge and of scholarship creates the dilemma of how best to perpetuate these activities themselves.

Universities over the past half century have lived by the assumptions of growth. The competition among them and the demands placed upon them have spurred a very rapid acceleration of growth and, I think, of over-extension. What is nowadays often taken as progress needs, at the very least, to slow down and set some speed limits. I am speaking here not of paring the genuinely central activities of education and research, but of what is in my judgment a need to step back, to recall what research universities, as special-purpose institutions, exist to do, things that others do not, and to become more selective in pursuing their aims.

I think that in the last 20 years or so we have seen an accelerating form of an unhealthy kind of competition and a more pronounced consumerism among universities and colleges. The spreading epidemic of peer pressure within higher education, with its encouragement toward self-promotion, fancy marketing, and public relations, has furthered a preoccupation with prestige and with numbers, as of high numbers of applicants and low percentages of admission, and an extraordinary attention to ratings such as those of the *U.S. News and World Report*. All kinds of new programs and services and amenities, in fact just about everything and anything you might think it nice to have, whether relevant to academic quality or not, and with them, numerous new administrative functions, now adorn, and perhaps litter, the academic landscape.

The desire that the college be an ideal community, a garden of Eden from which only the serpent has been banished, a model for bettering the social order beyond its borders as well: this has gained at the expense of a college's reason for being, namely, to plant the seeds for, to extend, to sustain, to give life to an intellectual culture through the generations. For universities, the demands that they provide more and more assistance and direct more of their research and time to economic development, and that they concentrate their intellectual resources on the urgent need to find solutions for mitigating the social and educational problems of the world, have intensified the pressures that universities have always experienced to take up tasks that they are not well equipped to perform and that spread their work and resources too thinly. Perhaps progress has indeed gone on too long.

The bottled water we consume in the groves of academe would appear to have been filtered from the lazy river Lethe. Crises have come, and then they are gone; and the engines rev back up to full speed without too much thought for the creaking supports beneath them and the hazards already in wait down the road.

Today's financial circumstances have exposed more fully the conditions that have gathered below the surface of the research university, the directions taken in their growth, and the limitations these impose for the future. It is as though recessionary times, conflict over educational content and goals, and political controversy as well have come together with already existing trends and newer forms of growth and demand to create the explosion of distress that we are witnessing today about and within higher education.

To urge that we be more modest and more realistic in what we profess beyond the academic core is not to diminish but, I would hope, to strengthen the university's unique value to the social order. Nor does it mean that universities should abandon public service. But the forms of service they undertake or sanction should proceed from their educational and scholarly purposes, from what they do best or from what they can do that other institutions cannot do or do as well. The insistent demands for universities to make a difference in every important good cause that merits attention will only divert them from the long-term contributions that are theirs specifically to make. So, too, does the idea that the university's goal is to exemplify social virtue.

And now, to iconography. The great art historian Erwin Panofsky, asked how he achieved his miracles of iconographical interpretation, smiled and said, "I bend the nail until I hit it on the head." Following this splendid model, let me tell you that the illustration on the screen before you displays a heavily laden tree of knowledge born full blown from a lady whom we can recognize quite literally as *alma mater* (Figure 1). The tree sprouts into an immensely crowded landscape, its branches representing the traditional liberal arts, together with a number of natural sciences. The ground below all this learning is rocky and wasted. The *alma mater* looks perfectly comfortable, even complacent. But I'd urge her to get up, scoop up her pooch, grab a pruning hook, take another long and careful look around, and get to work.

That brings to mind a closing text, taken from Casey Stengel at his wisest. "They say you can't do it," he observed. "But sometimes that doesn't always work."

I'm sure you will all agree that this is certainly very true, especially in the groves of academe with their overgrowth and undergrowth ruled by so amiable an *alma mater*.