ESSAY

The Global Liberal Arts Challenge

Jonathan Becker

The democratic backsliding that has accelerated across the globe over the past decade has included a trend in education that has gone less noticed: a rollback of liberal arts and sciences (LAS) as a system of university education. An international educational reform movement that began with tremendous promise and success is now under siege, with institutional closures in Myanmar and Afghanistan, criminal threats and redefinition away from liberal arts principles in Russia, and the sundering of a major global partnership in Singapore. Even two of the bastions of LAS education, the United States and the Netherlands, face growing threats.

This essay seeks to analyze some basic questions regarding the LAS system: What is the nature of the global liberal arts education reform movement that has emerged over the past thirty years? Why is it under attack? What are its future prospects? I argue that the movement is under assault primarily due to the very values it represents. Additionally, I suggest that the movement still has prospects, because LAS education is not simply an American phenomenon but an indigenous response to universal challenges that can be successfully adapted to different environments. In so doing, I analyze the role of U.S. institutions globally and suggest ways in which they can play more constructive roles.

I do this from a front-row seat: I have been engaged in the adaptation of LAS education globally for thirty years, having taught and served as an administrator, advisor, and/or partner for liberal arts programs in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, primarily through my roles as vice president for international affairs and then vice president for academic affairs at Bard College, and as vice chancellor of the Open Society

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University Network. I can vividly remember seminars on liberal arts education in the early 1990s, when anything seemed possible, and recently have experienced firsthand how authoritarians have targeted educational reformers and the institutions they built.[1]

What is the Liberal Arts and Sciences Educational Reform Movement?

The liberal arts and sciences educational reform movement became a force in global higher education around the conclusion of the Cold War due to the growing strength of people power, embodied by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the increased optimism about prospects for democracy across the world. Its early advocates believed that this new sociopolitical environment demanded new educational approaches that would reject ideological constraints and empower students, focus on the development of the individual, and cultivate engaged citizens. The movement began as a response to the stultifying traditional systems of higher education that to this day view students as recipients of knowledge rather than active learners; force students to choose solitary academic majors when applying to a university; and feature hyperspecialized, rigidly sequenced, and strictly disciplinary curriculums, often determined by all-powerful ministries of education.

LAS advocates, by contrast, consistently emphasize change in three core spheres of university life: teaching, curriculums, and co-curricular life. They promote student-centered teaching; allow students to select their courses and majors after they have familiarized themselves with a wide array of subjects; develop curriculums emphasizing breadth (in the form of general education requirements) and depth (in the form of majors); create new innovative interdisciplinary majors that challenge knowledge silos and address global challenges; and promote vibrant intellectual life outside of the classroom, featuring activities like debate and civic engagement. Faculty members have been especially keen to engage in multidisciplinary research and teaching, from which they expect exciting new areas of focus that will expand their teaching and research profiles and might also support creative responses to the significant economic and social changes their countries are experiencing.[2]

Note that the modern liberal arts and sciences movement should not be confused with the promotion of traditional liberal arts subjects, often reduced to

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the humanities. The LAS movement focuses on systemic change in areas including the arts, social sciences, natural sciences, and, of course, the humanities, and demands new curricular structures and an educational approach that emphasizes the development of students as learners and citizens rather than as recipients of knowledge. The reform movement has led to the creation of new academic institutions and transformative units within more traditional ones, and in certain cases has painstakingly lobbied ministries of education to introduce new and flexible state standards. It has also fostered a variety of partial or adjacent liberal arts programs that incorporate elements of the liberal arts system, such as special student-centered courses and interdisciplinary curriculums, without adapting the full LAS package.

Why the Liberal Arts?

Leaders and advocates of the liberal arts reform movement have cited and continue to invoke three overlapping goals in support and defense of the LAS system: democratization, reformation, and modernization.

Democratizers emphasize the role of liberal arts education in deepening and reviving the spirit of democratic citizenship (and in rejecting Marxist-Leninist orthodoxies); a belief in independent thinking, personal autonomy, and individual agency; and the role of informed citizens in civic life. They represent the view of thinkers like Martha Nussbaum, who states succinctly, "The idea of 'liberal education' [is as] a higher education that [cultivates] the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally."[3] Democratizers see LAS as a system of education that cultivates these qualities through the promotion of engaged, as opposed to rote, learning; an emphasis on critical thinking and ethics; the implementation of elements of student choice in curricula; and the promotion of energetic intellectual life outside of the classroom that reflects students' hopes of a vibrant civil society.

Reformers like Hans Adriaansens—who almost single-handedly made the Netherlands a hotbed of liberal arts education—not only emphasize the acquisition of moral and ethical reasoning rooted in a liberal arts curriculum but also view the liberal arts system as a means of transforming undergraduate education. Building from the principles of the Bologna Process,[4] which created a distinct undergraduate (baccalaureate) program in Europe and adjacent educational spaces (the previous norm was a five-year master's or specialist degree), they view LAS's

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student-centered approaches and intimate learning environments within large institutions, akin to Oxford University colleges, as a means of remedying poor student engagement and dreadfully low graduation rates.[5] Other reformers emphasize interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity, seeing the liberal arts system as a means to undermine the strict disciplinary structures that have dominated the curriculums and organizational frameworks of universities, forced students and faculty into narrowly prescribed boxes, and inhibited approaches that could better address the complex problems facing the world today.

Modernizers like former Russian finance minister Aleksei Kudrin, who served as the founding dean of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University in Russia, which partnered with Bard College to form Smolny College,[6] emphasize the benefits of the LAS approach to the long-term success of students and the future of their countries' national economies. They recognize that more narrowly specialized graduates will struggle in a fast-changing world where people hold multiple jobs over the course of their careers and need the capacity to be flexible, to continue to learn, and to reinvent themselves. They see the liberal arts approach, particularly in its interdisciplinarity, as creating a space for innovation and creativity. They also recognize that democratic principles such as transparency, openness, and the rule of law create stability and predictability, thus boosting the economy, although they place far more emphasis on creative problem-solving and innovation.[7]

It is important to emphasize that the three arguments in support of the liberal arts movement overlap. All three recognize the inherent democratic and open nature of LAS as a system of education, particularly compared with the models they seek to supplant. As with any disruptive movement, advocates emphasize different elements depending on the audience: students and faculty might be more interested in the democratizing elements, while skeptical parents or influential ministries might be more persuaded by the reformist and modernizing arguments. And yet, the democratizing element in particular suffuses the reforming and modernizing approaches: you cannot create contributors to the new economy, for example, without instilling some degree of autonomy and independent thinking. In the end, all three rely to some extent on what I call "the liberal arts wager" suggesting that that which is cultivated in LAS education—the love of learning, capacity for critical thinking, and ability to communicate effectively—is, over the course of students' lives, more valuable to them than having a depth of knowledge in only one subject area.

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The Reform Movement

The democratic opening that emerged with the transformation and collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s heralded an inchoate but wide-ranging movement to promote LAS education. Although a select group of international institutions were already based on a liberal arts model—first and foremost the American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut[8]—there is no doubt that, as with the spread of democracy worldwide, the movement really became a force toward the end of the 1980s through the early 2000s.

As an international phenomenon, the promotion of LAS education emerged within countries usually as a combination of indigenous educational reform movements and inchoate transnational advocacy networks. LAS education was championed by faculty and administrators who often had formative educational experiences, whether as students or teachers, in the United States, where the modern liberal arts system is the most established. Their efforts were often supported by foundations such as the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, both of which had a strong footprint in the post-Communist space of Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. The movement has continued to be supported by global networks, like the Association of American International Colleges and Universities (AAICU), the Global Liberal Arts Alliance, and the Open Society University Network's Liberal Arts Collaborative. Regional networks, like the European Consortium of Liberal Arts and Sciences, have also played important roles. All across Europe, including in Eastern Europe, and in Central and East Asia, Latin America, and Africa, the liberal arts movement has gained traction and, in some cases, flourished.

The institutional structures created in countries around the world in response to the movement vary. Some emulate classical liberal arts colleges like Amherst and Swarthmore in the United States, albeit often without a robust residential component. These include institutions such as the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy in Ukraine (refounded in 1992), Ashesi University in Ghana (founded in 2002), and Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts in Slovakia (founded in 2006). Some of these fit within the AAICU tradition, which features private institutions abroad that are accredited in the United States, often with "American University" in their name, including the American University in Bulgaria (founded in 1991) and the American University of Central Asia (founded in 1993). Others are more akin to honors colleges, small

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units within large research universities that emphasize intimate teaching environments, like the one at University of Michigan. In the Netherlands, the movement has meant the extraordinary creation in one generation of nearly a dozen "university colleges" with intimate learning environments.

In addition to the transnational advocacy networks, LAS was further promoted by many U.S. institutions that set up branch campuses or established partnerships abroad. Examples include Bard College Berlin, established in 2011 in a merger between Bard College in New York and the European College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; Yale-NUS, an autonomous liberal arts college established in 2011 as a partnership between Yale University and National University of Singapore; and Duke Kunshan University, founded in 2013 as a partnership between Duke University and China's Wuhan University. Bard College, where I work, built dual-degree liberal arts programs with St. Petersburg State University in Russia (Smolny) and Al-Quds University in Palestine (Al-Quds-Bard College for Arts and Sciences), which are more akin to honors colleges or university colleges, like those in the Netherlands. Several American institutions also opened branch campuses, like NYU in the United Arab Emirates and Northwestern University in Qatar.

It is true that the global movement for LAS education has always been circumscribed, because the educational systems in which liberal arts institutions have emerged are always dominated by more traditional and restrictive educational approaches. Although there are variations, whether based on the European Humboldtian, the British, or the Soviet system, most educational systems traditionally promoted early specialization; restrictive and traditional disciplinary curriculums; lecture-focused classes; and, particularly in the Global South and former Soviet countries, rote learning.

Nonetheless, LAS has made inroads. Ministries of education in countries such as Russia, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Palestine approved new state standards that accommodated liberal arts and sciences approaches in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the cases of Smolny College, Al-Quds Bard, and the many university colleges in the Netherlands, the goal was to use a subunit within a larger university—whether referred to as a department, faculty, or college—as a model to promote more systemic change throughout the larger university and beyond. And these reforms delivered. Survey data of enrolled students and alumni demonstrate robust and positive outcomes in such areas as student retention, student satisfaction with teaching and the educational process (particularly compared with their

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peers at more traditional departments and institutions), gains in such important capacities as critical thinking and intercultural understanding, and success in terms of graduate school admission and employment.[9] Such results are not only manifested in the Netherlands, where the largest indigenous LAS movement has grown, but also in the aforementioned programs in Kyrgyzstan, Palestine, Russia, and Singapore, where LAS constitutes but a small part of the educational landscape. In addition to the Netherlands, LAS programs proliferated in Russia, from Moscow to Tyumen, in Siberia, with several other institutions borrowing elements of the liberal arts system. Such was the attention that in 2015 I guest edited a special issue of the leading Russian academic journal *Voprosy obrazovaniya* (Educational studies) devoted to LAS education, drawing on a major international conference sponsored by Smolny that was held at the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library.[10]

Criticism: Has the Global Movement Sold Liberal Education's Soul?

Even while experiencing significant growth, the LAS movement has not been without its critics. Democratizers are viewed with the same suspicion as democracy in authoritarian and semiauthoritarian countries, which is magnified by the term "liberal" in liberal arts and sciences, leading to incorrect assumptions that LAS is associated with particular political parties or political perspectives. Reformers and modernizers have been confronted by traditionalists who criticize LAS for its alien roots and perceived lack of rigor, particularly in terms of an insufficient engagement with fields of specialization. Criticism of the university honors college model has been particularly acute, focusing on the potential that LAS curriculums might clash with those of other departments. Often underacknowledged in these debates is the degree to which universities are inherently conservative institutions, with long-time faculty and leaders hesitant to change an entrenched system, particularly where it might involve sharing disciplines with other departments or ceding authority, especially to students. The hesitancies often dovetail with the concerns of neoliberals from university administrations and the political sphere, who challenge the cost of liberal arts models and question the utility of an education that does not translate into an obvious profession or produce "specialists." Political leaders, especially in the Global South, are often enamored of the role STEM education has played in the economic success of

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the East Asian "four tigers"—Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan—disregarding both the tremendous success LAS graduates have in STEM fields, as illustrated in the work of Nobel laureate Thomas Cech, and the growth of LAS institutions in Asia.[11] I was once asked by the Open Society Foundations to meet a leader of a Central Asian country to discuss the transformative benefits of liberal arts education during the side meetings of the UN General Assembly. After waiting for four hours for the leader to appear, this leader declared in the first thirty seconds of our conversation that what was needed was to copy Singapore, not this "liberal arts mumbo jumbo."

A different and more pronounced set of criticisms has emerged from the United States. Many U.S.-based faculty at institutions with branch campuses and global partnerships have questioned whether liberal arts can work in authoritarian societies, criticizing what they take to be a deal with the devil. Jim Sleeper developed perhaps the most robust critique of the liberal arts movement, focusing on American institutions' branch campuses and partnerships in authoritarian countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and China. He argued, including in the pages of this journal, that institutions that seek to export LAS education into such countries "compromise liberal education's ethos and mission," legitimating regimes rather than liberalizing them, and in so doing undermine their own commitments to academic freedom at home. In sum, by "mistaking the 'international' or 'global' for the liberal and universal," he claimed that "they have committed themselves to regimes that exploit liberal education's fruits but crimp its ways of discovering, preserving, and disseminating knowledge."[12]

There are certain merits to Sleeper's argument, but he focuses too narrowly on a particular type of transactional university arrangement that results in a clash between educational values and financial benefits, such as those at Yale-NUS and MIT-Russia in Skolkovo.[13] And this is only a small part of the story, ignoring the global LAS reform movement. Most LAS programs have been initiated indigenously and others were and remain true partnerships that emphasize the values of a liberal arts education.

Bard College's joint programs in Russia, Palestine, and Kyrgyzstan, for example, were never based on financial gains (only a limit on losses) but were instead implemented with the view that colleges and universities should be engaged civic actors in their own right. In keeping with its mission to extend "liberal arts and sciences education to communities in which it has been underdeveloped, inaccessible, or absent,"[14] Bard has sought to develop partnerships based on

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mutuality and reciprocity that could help local actors promote educational reform. The goal is to adapt liberal arts principles to the local environment through dialogue and exchange of ideas, not to export a cookie cutter model. The approach indirectly benefits Bard faculty and students through exchanges of people and ideas, but the benefits are educational, not financial. Indeed, unlike the for-profit model of American institutions, it can, for example, be argued that by developing student exchange programs that bring tuition dollars (along with students from the most famous U.S. colleges and universities) to partner universities and supporting them with private grants, that joint ventures have actually contributed more financially to the welfare of our partners than to Bard College.[15]

The Global Liberal Arts Alliance, which emerged from the Great Lakes College Association and unites more than thirty institutions across the globe, takes a similar approach. Its focus is not one of revenue generation but of "advancing liberal arts education," and strengthening "the ability of our liberal arts institutions to operate effectively and globally." It also facilitates "curricular, co-curricular connections and scholarly activities among our institutions, and the mobility of students, faculty, staff, and leadership within the Alliance network."[16]

Another problem with Sleeper's approach is that he focuses more on the negative impacts of the global liberal arts movement on U.S. institutions, particularly in terms of principles of academic freedom, than on the beneficial impacts the new LAS institutions have had on students and faculty worldwide. Beyond the spirit of openness and the freedoms that help LAS thrive, the benefits are far more complex than people writing from the privilege of elite U.S. institutions might recognize. For students and faculty alike in illiberal societies, the new LAS institutions in their countries often represent spaces both within and outside of the classroom that are dynamic and profoundly more open than the surrounding environment. There, critical thinking and analytic skills are cultivated through a careful reading of texts. Well-crafted assignments help students find their voice. Exercises like debate and role-playing, often conducted in activities like Model UN, create even more space for discussion and contestation of perceived wisdom by inviting students to express views that are not their own. Co-curricular activities sponsored by student clubs also create such spaces. While it may be true that it is impossible to fully foster engaged citizenship in learning environments where citizens lack basic democratic rights, the students involved might end up being the ones to expand the spheres of legitimate controversy in public discourse, or might at some point constitute part of a critical mass to promote systemic change. And

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for faculty, the gathering of fellow travelers, who are committed to open intellectual inquiry and bristle at state-imposed constraints, creates a unique atmosphere that allows them to transcend the intellectual differences that are typical of any academic institution. In other words, even in authoritarian societies LAS institutions can be islands of freedom or nurseries in which seeds are planted that will produce fruit for years or decades to come.

Two cases from the United States can help illustrate this point. First, a few years ago, at a Scholars at Risk global conference on "Universities in a Dangerous World,"[17] I began a talk by speaking of a Bard program where the state vets all teachers and has the right to approve or reject curriculums, courses, and even readings. I could tell that members of the audience were wondering, based on my biography, what I was referring to: a Bard program in Russia? Kyrgyzstan? Perhaps Palestine? I went on to explain: "The name of the program is the Bard Prison Initiative. It is the largest degree granting prison education program in the U.S. and it also oversees a network uniting liberal arts in prison programs in more than a dozen states. It is transforming the discussion of the value of education for and the worth of incarcerated individuals. In terms of academic freedom, we don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

The prison education program offers an excellent example of a liberal arts and sciences education creating a thriving educational environment in spite of the indisputably authoritarian environment in which it is situated. Indeed, for the incarcerated students, the liberal arts classroom represents a venue of unimaginable freedom and profound self-reflection, and also responsibility: students hold each other accountable within and outside of the classroom in ways unimaginable at a residential liberal arts college.[18]

Another case study from within the United States illustrates this point even more clearly. Jelani Favors's enthralling recent book *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* tells the history of political activism at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States. HBCUs existed even in the extreme authoritarian environment of the Jim Crow era, and were in most cases funded by the state and thus dependent on segregationist state leaders for resources. And yet these institutions, even those that focused more on agricultural and technical subjects, created space for instruction and mentorship—whether it was part of the formal curriculum or the "second curriculum" offering a "pedagogy of hope"—that emphasized idealism and race consciousness.[19] It was those institutions, operating

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in a highly constrained environment, that produced students and faculty who became the leaders of the civil rights movement, from famous alumni such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall; to student protest leaders, like the Greensboro Four from North Carolina A&T State University; to administrators such as Tuskegee University's dean of students Charles Goode Gomillion, who was at the center of a major boycott and a 1960 Supreme Court case concerning gerrymandering. In other words, we should not be so quick to dismiss the viability and impact of LAS education even in incredibly restrictive environments, since U.S. history shows that the lessons often transcend their context.

The Current Challenge

LAS education is now under threat in many parts of the world, just as the global growth of democracy is being halted. While LAS had made great progress, including within education ministries worldwide, it was never institutionalized in the way traditional educational systems were and thus has remained fragile and susceptible to attack.

Authoritarian leaders and their minions increasingly view LAS education as a threat, and in some instances, LAS institutions have been swept up in broader political events. In Myanmar, for example, the 2020 military coup not only resulted in the imprisonment and killing of thousands of students but also meant the end of educational reform efforts, including those that would allow for LAS education. As Kyaw Moe Tun, the founder and president of Parami University—a Bard-affiliated baccalaureate LAS program that was in the process of becoming Myanmar's first private, not-for-profit liberal arts and sciences institution—put it: "Burmese faculty and students are rapidly losing hope. At best, they anticipate stagnation; at worst, they fear total annihilation of a budding modern higher education system."[20] A similar dynamic has occurred in Afghanistan, where the American University of Afghanistan has been uprooted since the Taliban takeover in the summer of 2021, although, like Parami, it is regrouping through distance education and, potentially, campuses in exile.

Other circumstances are more targeted. In Hungary, the "illiberal democracy" promoted by long-term prime minister Viktor Orbán saw fit to push the Central European University (CEU) out of the country through its 2017 Lex CEU. The Lex CEU is a short modification of the country's higher education law that specifically targets the U.S.-accredited institution as a part of Orbán's

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aggressive campaign to drastically curtail independent higher education and other autonomous institutions within civil society. While CEU was exclusively a graduate institution at the time (it has since opened an undergraduate program), it represents many of the values of liberal education and is a member of AAICU. Its closure was the first time an academic institution was kicked out of a European Union member state.

In Russia, vicious attacks have taken place targeting not simply partnerships and institutions but also faculty and administrators. In the summer of 2021, the Russian government declared Bard College, St. Petersburg State University's partner in liberal arts education for twenty-five years, an "undesirable organization" and a "threat to the foundations of Russia's constitutional order,"[21] sundering the partnership by placing any Russian who cooperates with Bard at risk of fines and imprisonment. Bard was the first higher education institution to be placed on the list of undesirables, which had previously featured organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Open Society Institute (chaired by George Soros), putting an end to the most robust U.S.-Russian cooperation in the higher education field. The move was both a product of the decline in U.S.-Russian relations and a reflection of the internal politics of St. Petersburg State University, in which its rector, Nikolai Kropachev, who represents a toxic mix of authoritarianism and neoliberalism, sought revenge for plans to spin off the college as an independent institution.[22]

The declaration of Bard as undesirable was just a prelude to the broader attacks on liberal arts education in Russia. Faculty and administrators at Smolny have been placed under investigation for approving syllabi with inappropriate materials that may ostensibly violate educational norms, promote extremism, and potentially violate national security laws.[23] In late May 2022, a committee of fifty "leading experts" from St. Petersburg State appointed by Kropachev rejected the basic tenets of the LAS education, decrying the "tendentiousness" of the general education program and asserting that the curriculum was inconsistent, unsystematic, and did "not meet the standards of academic rigor and formality." Moreover, the committee declared that "the liberal arts program not only does not correspond to the classical Russian educational tradition," but offers "highly ideological disciplines . . . in accordance with the worst Western stereotypes."[24] While the final outcome has yet to be determined (in all likelihood the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences will be closed), Smolny's longtime patron and dean Aleksei

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Kudrin has stepped down, and it is clear that if any putative liberal arts program remains it will be a shell of its former self: faculty will be dismissed or dispersed to traditional university departments, and core educational elements, including the general education program and social sciences disciplines, will be stripped from the institution.[25]

Smolny is not the only LAS institution in Russia that is under attack. The Moscow School of Social and Economic Science, known as Shaninka, which launched a robust liberal arts program inspired by Smolny, has also faced a steady assault. Its rector was arrested on corruption charges in October, and since Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine started, it has been under investigation, like Smolny. The state investigators from the procurator's office cited the school for "undermining traditional values," and is exploring putative violations of national security laws. Other liberal arts programs are also under investigation, and the international faculty who helped bolster them have left the country. Shaninka sociologist Viktor Vakhshtein summed up the situation concisely: "In Russia, the phrase 'liberal arts' has become synonymous with 'distortion of history,' 'foreign influence,' 'threat to national security' and, apparently, the 'fifth column.'"[26]

The situations in Russia and Hungary do not bode well for liberal arts experiments across the globe. The ways in which new authoritarians learn from each other, be it in terms of legislation governing NGOs or migrant communities, suggests the anti-LAS virus may grow further. Even the much-ballyhooed Yale-NUS has come under attack. A decision in July 2021, evidently without Yale's input, put a 2025 end date on the experiment. An "NUS College" has emerged in its wake, but its commitment to the liberal arts is unclear and Yale will play only a nebulous advisory role.[27] Liberal arts–adjacent institutions in Turkey, like Bosphorus University, have also come under attack. One wonders, too, what will become of liberal arts experiments in places like China, where there have been a number of indigenous experiments in LAS education, including at Prospect College Hechuan in Chongqing, Prospect College in Taigu, and Prospect College in Shandong. The recent experiences of faculty being pushed out of universities in Hong Kong and the June 2020 National Security Law placing cameras inside classrooms do not bode well.[28]

LAS education is even being squeezed in the countries of its two largest proponents, the United States and the Netherlands. As the generation of idealists in the Netherlands who started the LAS experiment begins to retire, a combination of old-guard educational traditionalists and neoliberals concerned about costs

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(while ignoring retention data) is curtailing the growth of university colleges. While some university colleges are thriving, the future of others is now in doubt, as is Adriaansens's dream of systemic transformation.[29] In the United States, the birthplace of modern LAS education, the liberal arts are under assault on financial and ideological grounds. Florida senator and former governor Rick Scott reflected the neoliberal view being expressed today in state houses in the United States and around the globe when he said bluntly, "If I'm going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I'm going to take that money to create jobs."[30] The implication, of course, being that liberal arts educations do not produce workers who will contribute to the economy. As scholar Henry Giroux pointed out back in 2013, "The dystopian mission of public and higher education [has become about producing] robots, technocrats and compliant workers."[31] And even academic freedom, which is invoked by U.S.-based faculty to attack LAS partnerships internationally, is not doing so well at home. Anyone who regularly tracks the various foibles that take place on U.S. campuses and hears the calls for limits on speech coming from the Right and Left should be wary of claims of educational purity, let alone ones that are used as grounds to deprive others of educational opportunities. Particularly alarming has been a sluice of recent bills in state legislatures aimed at limiting the teaching of "divisive concepts" such as critical race theory. These bills have long targeted schools but are now beginning to take aim at universities as well. Any American academic who observes the current valorization of Orbán's "illiberal democracy" in Hungary that is growing within the Republican party should take note, because it may well portend the future at home.

Reflections and Conclusions

The modern global LAS education reform movement is inextricably linked with the expansion of democracy and democratic values, the optimism generated by the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist system. Even modernizers, who emphasize the economic benefits of a creative and dynamic class of thinkers, recognize the democratic elements inherent in an educational process that empowers students, helps them direct their educational experiences, and cultivates their critical thinking and expression of ideas.

Whether promoted by democratizers, reformists, or modernizers, the system of LAS education can benefit students in almost any environment. LAS education is

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designed to be student centered and empowering, both within and outside of the classroom. Its origins may be in cultivating citizens in democracies, but it is also the case that in authoritarian or semiclosed societies it can provide a space where students can learn and find a voice, even if they cannot currently use that voice in a full-throated manner. It is for that very reason, among others, that LAS is being increasingly targeted by authoritarian leaders who want to quash any sources of vibrant civil society, and who do not desire to have empowered citizens who think critically. The nature of LAS institutions, as educational reforms that sit outside of the traditional educational system, and the failure to institutionalize such reforms have left them vulnerable.

But the LAS movement is not dead and it still has prospects: LAS education is not simply an American phenomenon but an indigenous response to universal challenges that can be successfully adapted to different environments. As Parami University president Kyaw Moe Tun said, "The global LAS movement, in its infancy replete with wide-ranging challenges, is far from over because the very essence of the LAS education is not just a representation of an American educational phenomenon, but is a necessary product of the inherent human nature of curiosity and desire to become well-rounded individuals."[32] Despite rollbacks, most of the institutions established since the fall of the Berlin Wall are still operational, and new ones, like Fulbright University in Vietnam, continue to open. India has several new liberal arts initiatives, including Ashoka University, founded in 2014. In Bangladesh, BRAC University was founded in 2001 and the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh was founded in 2004. They meet the criteria of democratizers, reformers, and modernizers, and their strong results in terms of retention, student satisfaction, and employment outcomes offer a strong retort to the neoliberal mantra that increasingly has higher education in its thrall globally.

As for Americans, using a broad brush to condemn the entirety of the global liberal arts movement as a missionary money grab is misplaced and myopic. Just like students in the United States who are currently incarcerated or those who attended HBCUs during Jim Crow, many students in Palestine, Kyrgyzstan, Singapore, and China have benefited greatly from their exposure to the LAS system, despite their illiberal surroundings. Even in a place like Russia, where the LAS approach, already facing huge challenges, appears to be another casualty of the war in Ukraine, it would be hard to argue that the LAS experience has not had great value to the students and faculty who experienced it. Thus, those at U.S. institutions who are quick to raise concerns about legitimating

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authoritarian regimes would benefit from analyzing their own country's history, seeing how LAS institutions here have been the sites of personal and political development that challenged the oppressive conditions under which they had to operate.

Rather than dismissing the capacity of LAS education in nondemocratic societies, perhaps it is better to think about what can be done to protect those liberal arts institutions that may be under assault. Former Yale president Bartlett Giamatti once said, "How we choose to believe and speak and treat others, how we choose a civic role for ourselves, is the deepest purpose of a liberal education."[33] In this spirit, I believe it would be far better for U.S. institutions to act more as engaged civic actors who help promote educational reform than as avaricious multinationals peddling reputations and services. Institutions should expect the same standards for themselves as they do for their students. They can support the liberal arts movement through partnerships that reflect mutuality and reciprocity, and a desire to enhance learning through exchange rather than profit. Certainly, that is the case for institutions with endowments in the hundreds of millions and billions (and sometimes tens of billions) of dollars. They can use their reputations not to cash in, but to try to press authoritarian regimes to support academic freedom and allow liberal arts institutions to pursue their educational missions. They can support efforts of institutions like Parami University and the American University of Afghanistan, and contemplate how to reach heretofore-inaccessible populations through innovative online and hybrid approaches. Kyaw Moe Tun summed it up well, saying: "Students suffering under authoritarian regimes thirst for a genuine education that promotes critical thinking and liberal habits of mind. New models of delivery that can circumvent such states' monopolization of degree-granting authority must emerge to quench this thirst. I make a humble call for a global conversation on what these models should look like—because our students deserve better."[34] Finally, U.S. institutions and academics should be cognizant of their country's own challenges, both historical and contemporary. Given current trends, they should recognize that they might have much to learn from exchanges with international partners about strategies of resisting both authoritarian and neoliberal assaults on liberal arts education, because it might protect them from the same authoritarian and neoliberal tendencies. They should also understand that, just as it did for the civil rights movement, the impact of education, particularly its links to engaged citizenship and democracy, might manifest itself for decades or even generations to come.

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NOTES

[1] Having been asked so many times about the liberal arts, I wrote an article entitled, "What a Liberal Arts and Sciences Education Is . . . and Is Not," which has been translated into Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. See Jonathan A. Becker, "Chto takoe obrazovanie po model svobodnykh iskustv i nauk . . . i chem ono ne yavlaetsya," [What a liberal arts and sciences education is. . . and is not] [published in Russian], in Jonathan A. Becker and Philip Fedchin, eds., *Svobondyi iskusstva i nauki na sovremennon tape* [Contemporary liberal arts and sciences education: Experiences from the United States and Europe] (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg State University, 2014), pp. 12–39. For an English version, see: tools.bard.edu/wwwmedia/files/5438940/1/Liberal%20Arts%20and%20Sciences%202014%20Final%20September%202014.pdf.

[2] Jonathan Becker, Andrei Kortunov, and Philip Fedchin, "Russia: Against the Tide, Liberal Arts Establishes a Foothold in Post-Soviet Russia," in Patti McGill Peterson, ed., *Confronting Challenges to the Liberal Arts Curriculum: Perspectives of Developing and Transitional Countries* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 151–74. See also Samuel Abraham (ed.), "ECOLAS MANIFESTO: The Crisis of the Bachelor's Degree in Europe," *Kritika and kontext* 25, no. 60, pp. 2–4.

[3] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 7.

[4] Teun J. Dekker, "Liberal Arts and Sciences After Bologna—What's Next?" in Samuel Abraham, *Kritika and kontext*, pp. 19–25. Dekker wrote, "One of the most notable recent developments in European higher education is the emergence of the liberal arts and sciences movement. In the past 30 years, over 100 programs identifying with this educational philosophy have been created all over Europe, including significant numbers of programs in the Netherlands, the UK and Central Europe," p. 19.

[5] The ten university colleges established in the Netherlands increased graduation rates from around 20 percent to more than 80 percent. Hans Adriaansens, "The Future of University Colleges or the Emancipation of the Bachelor's," in Abraham, *Kritika and kontext*, pp. 27–33, at p. 29. See also survey results in Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA), Maestricht University, *Liberal Arts & Sciences Programmes Alumni Survey Factsheet 2017* (Maastricht, Netherlands: ROA, April 2018), pp. 1–7, universitycolleges.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Factsheet-LAS-Alumni-Survey.pdf.

[6] Smolny College refers to a dual degree partnership between Bard College and St. Petersburg State University. It was started in 1996, became a degree-granting program in 1998 as a part of St. Petersburg State University's philology faculty, and in 2011 was transformed into the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Russia's first department oriented in the principles of liberal arts education.

[7] Aleksei Kudrin, "Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Russian University Educational System," *Educational Studies* [Voprosy obrazovaniya] 4 (2015), pp. 62–71, vo.hse.ru/en/2015--4/169106216.html. See also "Alexei Kudrin Tells the Gaidar Forum about 'Free Knowledge' and the New Education of the 21st Century," Gaidar Forum, January 15, 2021, www.gaidarforum.ru/en/news2021/2049/.

[8] It should be noted that universities with the title "American University of…" are unregulated and many such institutions are neither accredited in the United States nor follow the LAS system. The Association of American International Colleges and Universities (AAICU), which unites many such institutions, stipulated in its 2008 *Cairo Declaration* that its members must be accredited in the United States and operate "within the framework of the American liberal arts tradition." See "Cairo Declaration (Identity-Principles)," Association of American International Colleges and Universities, www.aaicu.org/about/cairo-declaration-identity-principles/. Several of AAICU's twenty-two members have joined since the 1990s, including American Universities in Armenia, Bulgaria, and Central Asia.

[9] Jonathan Becker and Daria Pushkina, "Sila obrazovaniya vypusniki program svobodnykh iskustv i nauk v rynke truda v XXI veke," [The strength of graduates of liberal arts programs in the labor market] in Aleksei Kudrin, Danila Raskov and Denis Kadochnikov, eds., *Obrazovatel'naya model' svobodnykh iskustv i nauk: Mirovoi i Rossisskii opyt* [The liberal arts and sciences educational model: International and Russian experience] (Moscow: Gaidar Institute, 2021), pp. 362–94.

[10] Jonathan Becker, ed., special issue, *Obrazovanie po modeli svobodnykh iskustv i nauk* [Education according to the liberal arts and sciences model] *Educational Studies Moscow* [Voprosy obrazovaniya] 4 (2015), vo.ru/en/2015—4.html.

[11] Thomas R. Cech, "Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education?" *Daedalus*, vol. 128, no. 1, Winter 1999, pp. 195–216, at p. 213. Cech wrote, "Liberal arts colleges as a group produce about twice as many eventual science Ph.Ds per graduate as do baccalaureate institutions in general, and the top colleges vie with the nation's very best research universities in their efficiency of production of eventual science Ph.Ds."

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[12] Jim Sleeper, "Innocents Abroad? Liberal Educators in Illiberal Societies," *Ethics & International Affairs* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2015), pp. 127 to 144, at p. 129. Sleeper has also suggested that these institutions adapted curriculums in "too narrow and instrumental" ways, p. 129.
[13] It should be noted that in the wake of Russia's continued war in Ukraine, MIT terminated the Skolkovo partnership. See MIT President Rafael Reif's letter to the MIT community: news.mit.edu/2022/mit-responding-ukraine-0228, February 28, 2022.
[14] "Mission Statement," Bard, www.bard.edu/about/mission/.
[15] On Bard's approach, see Jonathan Becker and Susan H. Gillespie, "Adapting Liberal Arts and Sciences as a System of Education," in Ted Purinton and Jennifer Skaggs, eds., *American Universities Abroad: The Leadership of Independent Transnational Higher Education Institutions* (New York: American University of Cairo Press, 2018), pp. 267–85.
[16] "About Us," Global Liberal Arts Alliance, liberalartsalliance.org/about-us/.
[17] For information on the conference, see www.scholarsatrisk.org/event/2016-congress/.
[18] These issues are expertly explored in Lynn Novick's excellent TV documentary *College behind Bars* (2019).
[19] Jelani M. Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), p. 4.
[20] Kyaw Moe Tun, "We Need Authoritarian-Proof Higher Education Models," *Times Higher Education*, September 6, 2021, www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/we-need-authoritarian-proof-higher-education-models.
[21] Russian Prosecutor-General's Office, quoted in Matthew Luxmoore, "In Banning Bard College, Russia Shutters a Program That Bridged an International Divide," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, July 29, 2021, www.rferl.org/a/russia-bard-college-blacklisted/31384301.html.
[22] Ibid.
[23] For attacks on Smolny, including its faculty, see "Fakutetu svobodnykh iskustv SPbGU prodolzhaet dostavat'sya i Bard-Kolledzha.* I.o. dekana snyala dolzhnosti," [The faculty of liberal arts at St. Petersburg State University continues to be harmed by its relationship with Bard College.* And the dean was removed from office], *Fontanka,* 19 April 2022, www.fontanka.ru/2022/04/19/71268119/.
[24] St. Petersburg State University News, "Brief Repoft from the Rector's Meeting, May 23, 2022, spbu.ru/news-events/novosti/kratkiy-otchet-o-rektorskom-soveshchanii-23-maya.
[25] Oleg Dilimbetov, "Aleksei Kudrin svoboden ot iskusstv v nauk" [Aleksei Kudrin is freed from arts and sciences], Kommersant, May 21, 2022, www.kommersant.ru/doc/5381034.
[26] Quoted in "Nazad v kazarmy," [Back to the barracks] *Novaya gazeta*, March 23, 2022.
[27] Karen Fischer, "A 'Flabbergasting' Decision: Abrupt End of Yale-NUS Partnership Offers Lessons to Colleges Seeking Global Re-engagement," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* September 17, 2021, www.chronicle.com/article/a-flabbergasting-decision. See also Daevan Mangalmurti, "The End of Ideas: Liberation, Liberal Arts and the Closure of Yale-NUS," *Politic*, April 10, 2022, thepolitic.org/article/the-end-of-ideas-liberation-liberal-arts-and-the-closure-of-yale-nus.
[28] Peter Baehr, "Hong Kong Universities in the Shadow of the National Security Law," *Society* 59 (June 2022), pp. 225–39, link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12115-022-00709-9.
[29] Adriaansens, "The Future of University Colleges or the Emancipation of the Bachelor's," p. 29. See also survey results in Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market, *Liberal Arts & Sciences Programmes Alumni Survey Factsheet 2017*, pp. 1–7.
[30] Rick Scott, quoted in David N. Devries, "A Question for Every Answer: David N. DeVries Considers What It Means to Live a Life Grounded in the Liberal Arts," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 23, 2014, www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/06/23/essay-meaning-life-grounded-liberal-arts.
[31] Henry Giroux, quoted in Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, "Academic Prioritization or Killing the Liberal Arts?," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 1, 2019, www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/03/01/shrinking-liberal-arts-programs-raise-alarm-bells-among-faculty.
[32] Kyaw Moe Tun, interview with the author via email, May 29, 2022.
[33] A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The University and the Public Interest* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), pp. 136–37.
[34] Tun, "We Need Authoritarian-Proof Higher Education Models."

Abstract: The democratic backsliding that has accelerated across the globe over the past decade has included a rollback of liberal arts and sciences (LAS) as a system of university education. This essay explores the origins and goals of the global LAS education reform movement. I argue that while the movement is under threat largely due to its principled value of educating democratic citizens, it still has powerful potential and global impact; in part because LAS education is primarily an indigenous

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phenomenon adapting to local circumstances. I also argue that U.S. universities could contribute more constructively to the movement if they conceived of their role as global civic actors that conduct themselves in the spirit of mutuality and reciprocity, not as multinational corporations that channel neoliberal tendencies to maximize revenue. U.S. critics of the global LAS movement should also pay heed to the United States' own history. Specifically, they can learn from historically Black colleges and universities how, operating under the extreme authoritarianism of the Jim Crow era, they managed to produce leaders who shaped a more democratic country. Liberal arts education produces short term benefits for students and alumni, but in the democratic context it is a long-term wager.

Keywords: liberal arts, liberal education, democracy, democratization, authoritarianism, educational reform

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