The Declension Narrative, the Liberal Arts College,

and the Research University

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Among the Jeremiads echoing through higher education in recent decades, one of the most often heard is the declension narrative of the liberal arts college. According to the declension narrative in its strongest form, the university and the liberal arts college represent two distinct and competing educational and institutional ideologies. Furthermore, the university--especially the public university--has grown stronger, while the liberal arts college, particularly the private liberal arts college, has weakened over the past 125 years. In fact, the university has overwhelmed the beleaguered liberal arts college, which has inexorably declined toward extinction, except for a small and diminishing number of well-endowed outliers.

Some of the most prominent documents in the declension literature include the following. In 1884 a leading professors at Columbia University, John W. Burgess, published a treatise in which he wrote, “I am unable to divine what is to be ultimately the position of Colleges, which cannot become Universities and which will not be Gymnasia. I cannot see what reason they will have to exist. It will be largely a waste of capital to maintain them, and largely a waste of time to attend them. It is so now.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In 1900 William Rainey Harper, the founding and reforming president of the University of Chicago, announced that nearly all liberal arts colleges would fail, unless they evolved into universities or devolved into two-year junior colleges.[[2]](#footnote-2) Echoing Harper in 1902, Nicholas Murray Butler, the new president of Columbia University, argued that the four-year B.A. college course was no longer viable at Columbia or elsewhere.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the following year, President David Starr Jordan of Stanford University published an essay famously stating: “The college is a small university, antiquated, belated, arrested, starved, as the case may be....As time goes on, the college will disappear in fact, if not in name.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In 1924 those university prophets were invoked by Leon Richardson in *A Study of the Liberal College*, and a process of documentary sedimentation thus commenced.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1962 Richardson’s study was referenced by another major document in the declension literature, the landmark history of the American college and university authored by Frederick Rudolph. In a closing chapter, Rudolph cited all the foregoing sources, while quoting the provocative words of Jordan.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rudolph’s book rapidly became the standard history of American higher education, and his references to the university advocates were subsequently adduced to evidence the 125-year declension. For example, in a collection of essays marking the 75th anniversary of the Association of American Colleges in 1988, the president, historian Mark Curtis, invoked Rudolph’s account.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1993 Curtis’s references appeared in a collection of essays on the future of American higher education edited by Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the following year, economist David Breneman, former president of Kalamazoo College, published his acclaimed *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?*, and cited to Rudolph on “The Harper-Butler-Jordan Forecasts of Demise.” Breneman calculated that there remained only about 206 liberal arts colleges that awarded at least 40 percent of their degrees in the liberal arts, as opposed to professional fields.[[9]](#footnote-9) His book served to place the liberal arts college on the list of endangered species, and the authority and prominence of Rudolph and Breneman, referencing the earlier works, subsequently contributed to the proliferation of the declension narrative.

In 1999 economists Michael McPherson, now president of the Spencer Foundation, and Morton Schapiro, now president of Northwestern University, relied on Breneman in a noted essay published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in a collection on the liberal arts college. McPherson and Shapiro concluded that only about 100,000 students attend colleges where most students major in the liberal arts.[[10]](#footnote-10) In 2005, at a conference on the liberal arts college sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, the distinguished historian and president emeritus of Williams College, Francis Oakley, noted that a century-long “narrative of decline” had emerged in the literature, relying on Breneman, Rudolph, Burgess, Harper, and Jordan. While cautioning that “the declension narrative may...serve to mislead,” Oakley observed, “So far as numbers go, the downward trajectory [of liberal arts colleges] would indeed appear to be unquestionable.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In 2011Victor Ferrall, president emeritus of Beloit College, published a major study with Harvard University Press that drew on Breneman extensively. Ferrall concluded that private liberal arts colleges are “at the brink” of closing or capitulating to professional studies, save for the fifty or so that are richly endowed.[[12]](#footnote-12) Finally, in 2012, a study published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities replicated Breneman’s study, and concluded that out of Breneman’s 206, merely 130 “true liberal arts colleges” remain today.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Culminating in this dismal conclusion, the declension narrative now constitutes a premise in virtually any discussion of the relations between the liberal arts college and the research university. Given this influence, the documents, the data, and the reasoning of the declension narrative deserve careful scrutiny, which yields some surprising conclusions.

I

The 1884 view of Burgess that colleges are “largely a waste of capital” and “a waste of time” certainly reflected his own academic background. After graduating from Amherst College in 1867, he studied for several years at German universities and embraced their rigorous methods of research and scholarship. Upon his return to the United States, Burgess tried unsuccessfully to persuade Amherst to adopt those methods, and then moved in 1876 to Columbia College in New York City, where he subsequently championed the German methods and founded the first academic journal and the first PhD program in Political Science.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, Burgess pioneered the research university, which was still new territory in the United States.

At his inauguration in 1869, Harvard president Charles W. Eliot declared that no true university yet existed in the United States. Soon after its opening in 1876 as an all-graduate institution, Johns Hopkins gained recognition as the first American university, and by 1884 only Cornell, Harvard, Michigan, and, perhaps, Wisconsin had really adopted university aspirations. Columbia was making strides, but was still dominated by a collegiate ethos, as were Yale and Princeton. Thus, only a handful of true universities existed in the country, and the liberal arts college remained the institutional norm in American higher education, notwithstanding the founding of state and land-grant universities.[[15]](#footnote-15) Recognizing this, Burgess titled his treatise prospectively *The American University: When Shall It Be? Where Shall It Be? What Shall It Be?* and stated that Boston was the only city in the nation with the means and disposition to support a university.[[16]](#footnote-16) Consequently, Burgess’s assessment is not so much a self-assured proclamation, as a zealous prophecy tinged, perhaps, with some disappointment that his alma mater had not responded to his entreaties.

The situation had changed dramatically by 1900, when fifteen research universities formed the Association of American Universities. Among them was the University of Chicago, which Harper had built into a research university with the financial support of John D. Rockefeller. In July of 1900, Harper gave an address to the National Education Association entitled “The Situation of the Small College.” Harper identified several threats to the small liberal arts colleges: the development of public high schools, which elevated academic standards from below; the emergence of many fields of specialized study, which small colleges could not sustain; the lack of financial resources to compete with universities in paying salaries for faculty or providing libraries or laboratories; and the low tuition and other subsidies of the state university. Due to these factors, Harper predicted that only about a quarter of small colleges would survive; the rest would become academies or two-year junior colleges.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In 1903 President Jordan of Stanford held out even less hope in a published essay. The most often quoted lines bear repeating: “the college is a temporary feature of American educational history. The college is a small university, antiquated, belated, arrested, starved, as the case may be, but with university aspirations to be realized in such degree as it can...As time goes on, the college will disappear in fact, if not in name. The best and richest colleges will become universities, following the example of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. The others will return to their places as academies.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Jordan’s words certainly suggest that the research university was driving the liberal arts college to extinction, and both Harper and Jordan did subscribe to a kind of institutional Darwinism. As Harper wrote, “The laws of institutional life are very similar to those of individual life, and in the development of institutions we may confidently believe in “the survival of the fittest.....The institution which has survived the trials and tribulations of early years, and...justified its existence,...deserves to live; ...In this struggle for existence,...some of the colleges...will be compelled to limit their activity to the... preparatory, field.”[[19]](#footnote-19) According to Harper and Jordan, changes in the academic climate during the previous twenty five years had made the liberal arts college unfit, while, for the university “great things are to be expected...in the next twenty-five years.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Nevertheless, some defensiveness appeared between the lines of these bold statements. Jordan titled his address “An Apology for the University,” and began with the words: “Now and then in these days some successful businessman raises his eyes from his counter to question the American university’s right to exist.” [[21]](#footnote-21) Moreover, Jordan first delivered his “Apology” at the Stanford commencement of 1898, and his words recall his difficult relations with Jane Stanford, who became the university’s patron after her husband, the railroad baron, died in 1893. Jane Stanford tightly controlled the Jordan’s spending and often treated the university as a low-grade technical institute.[[22]](#footnote-22) Jordan’s “Apology” therefore presents a justification for university patronage, and deflects criticism that higher education is irrelevant, arcane, or elitist toward the convenient target of the traditional college. Thus, Jordan says that critics of the university actually have in mind “the starveling colleges” of the past, when “college education was not related to life” and “had nothing to with action,” since “the old-time...college education was...valued for the feeling of superiority which it engendered.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Meanwhile, at the University of Chicago, Harper also had difficulties with his patron, who had a more technical and utilitarian vision of the university than did Harper. More significantly, Rockefeller grew disgusted at Harper’s imprudent deficit spending to develop the university, and in 1898 decided that he would no longer meet with Harper, who was crushed by losing the cherished privilege of direct access to Rockefeller. [[24]](#footnote-24) By 1900 both Jordan and Harper needed to assure their skeptical or estranged patrons that the future lay with the university. To bolster this assurance, these two presidents invoked Darwinian “laws of institutional life” and the invidious comparison with the liberal arts college.

Likewise, Nicholas Murray Butler at Columbia, in his first annual report in 1902, projected that, in the future, the liberal arts college could serve best by providing two years of general education. Then with some bravado, Butler declared that a plan should be drawn up for the citizens of New York to give the “urgently needed” sum of ten million dollars to Columbia University.[[25]](#footnote-25) This amount was larger than all but two of the university endowments of the day, and neither the money or the plan materialized. Thus, the pronouncements of these early university advocates are not measured assessments, and their confident trumpeting almost drowns out the prophetic and defensive undertones.

The equivocal message of the early declension literature came fully to light in Richardson’s 1924 study, which reported the results of a national survey undertaken at the request of the president of Dartmouth. Richardson cited Butler and Jordan and then made a surprising assessment:

Nearly a generation has gone by since these confident predictions were made, and there is little indication that that their verification is approaching. In fact, there has never been a time when the college, either as a branch of the university or as an independent institution, has seemed more alive, more virile, more confident of its position, than today. There has never been a time when its recognition as the heart of the American system of higher education has been more general.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Consequently, this central text of the declension literature actually negates the narrative in the mid-1920s.

Richardson’s view is corroborated by the presidency of Abbott Lawrence Lowell, who succeeded Eliot at Harvard in 1909. Lowell actively sought during the 1910s and 1920s to strengthen collegiate culture at Harvard, which had deteriorated under the university-builder Eliot.[[27]](#footnote-27) Lowell’s concern exemplifies the broad reaction against the research university movement that began in about 1910 and continued in subsequent decades. This reaction strengthened both the “liberal culture” and the liberal arts colleges that leaders of the research universities had subordinated in previous decades.

The next landmark text in the declension literature confirms this interpretation. In 1962 Rudolph invoked Burgess, Butler, Harper, and Jordan in a chapter entitled “Counterrevolution,” in which he wrote: “Collegiate ideals were, therefore, never entirely eclipsed by the university movement, and by the 1920s the temper of American higher education was really counterrevolutionary.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Rudolph therefore cited the university prophets by way of rebutting them. “The tug of the collegiate way was too strong” on higher education, he concluded.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Certain texts in the declension literature subsequently recognized these qualifications on the university advocates. Breneman astutely held “the Harper-Butler-Jordan forecasts of demise to be extreme,” for example. But he then concluded that “private colleges have been...increasingly marginalized during this century as public universities and community colleges have grown dramatically in size and number.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Hence, Breneman discounted the inception of declension and then affirmed the century-long decline. Such equivocation typifies the declension literature, which often qualifies the waning of colleges even while affirming that their decline has been unchecked and inexorable or “downhill all the way.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

This equivocation stems partly from a misleading reliance on proportional arguments. For example, several distinguished authorities have cited the following data to show the decline of colleges: between 1955 and 1970 the percentage of liberal arts colleges among institutions of higher education dropped from 40 percent to 24 percent, and the enrollment of liberal arts colleges dropped from 26 percent to 8 percent of students in higher education. Hence, liberal arts colleges became “a much diminished part of the educational landscape” in the words of Breneman and others.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Now, these percentages indicate that the *share* or *fraction* of liberal arts colleges and their enrollment decreased within higher education. But during the period from 1950 to 1970 federal financial aid for students grew enormously due to the G.I. Bill following World War II, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965. Meanwhile, the research universities received vast new financial resources through federal funding for research, led by the National Science Foundation, which was established soon after World War II. As a result, between 1950 and 1970 the undergraduate enrollment in the nation increased nearly four times from 2.3 million to 8.6 million, while the number of colleges and universities rose from about 1,800 to about 2,800.[[33]](#footnote-33)

A decreasing proportion during a period of massive expansion in absolute numbers does not demonstrate, of course, that the absolute number of liberal arts colleges or their students declined between 1945 and 1970. In fact, it has been suggested that many liberal arts colleges actually increased their enrollment of liberal arts majors between 1956 and 1970.[[34]](#footnote-34) Whether or not that is true, there appears to be no authority in the declension literature maintaining that the absolute number of liberal arts colleges or their enrollment declined between 1945 and 1970. Nevertheless, the lamentation that liberal arts colleges were “much diminished” persisted subsequently in the declension literature.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Apart from equivocation, the critical point here is that the serious decline in the number of liberal arts colleges begins only after 1970. Indeed, David Breneman focused his research on the years from 1972 to 1988. According to his analysis of the degrees awarded by the 540 Liberal Arts Colleges so designated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, liberal arts colleges were shifting rapidly toward offering vocational education in order to recruit students and survive financially. Breneman concluded that the number of liberal arts colleges awarding at least 40 percent of their degrees in the liberal arts dropped precipitously from 540 to 206 between 1972 and 1988. The other 334 closed, expanded into comprehensive institutions, or converted into “professional colleges” and lost their standing as “liberal arts colleges” in Breneman’s terms.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This finding attracted much attention and stoked the declension narrative, as scholars subsequently maintained that “the liberal arts colleges continue to struggle on several fronts” during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s.[[37]](#footnote-37) But no major study evidenced the trend with comprehensive data until 2011, when another major quantitative study in the declension narrative published. Ferrall, an enthusiastic defender of the private liberal arts college, examined the 225 small, private liberal arts colleges identified by U.S. News & World Report. In the previous two decades between 1987 and 2008, Ferrall found a marked trend toward granting degrees in vocational subjects,.[[38]](#footnote-38) He concluded:

all liberal arts colleges...are threatened with sliding over the brink....Impoverished colleges...are...being forced to close their doors, sell out to for-profits, or completely abandon liberal arts. Wealthy...colleges face becoming mere credential generators--isolated marginalized remnants of economic privilege....The gravest threat may be to the middle group,...which...suffer the most in the competition with tax-supported, low-tuition, public universities.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Nevertheless, the endpoint of Ferrall’s study was the academic year 2007-2008, and if his data are re-calculated in terms of Breneman’s standards twenty years earlier, a surprising result appears.

First, consider the threshold of granting at least 40 percent of degrees in the liberal arts. Breneman found 206 such colleges in 1988; Ferrall found 209 such colleges in 2008. Next, consider the higher standard of granting at least 75 percent degrees in the liberal arts. Breneman found 90 such colleges in 1988; Ferrall found 91 such colleges in 2008.[[40]](#footnote-40) Even granting the variability in these kinds of data, it is remarkable that these two independent studies arrive at nearly identical numbers for liberal arts colleges in 1988 and 2008.

The issue becomes even more intriguing in light of the 2012 study, published by the AACU. This study extended the declension narrative by updating Breneman’s study while replicating his “methodology for classifying liberal arts colleges.” The researchers concluded that only 130 liberal arts colleges remain of the 206 that Breneman identified, a finding that differs dramatically from the 209 liberal arts colleges identified one year earlier by Ferrall.[[41]](#footnote-41) This difference cannot be explained by the notorious problem of defining the liberal arts. Breneman in 1988, Ferrall in 2011, and the 2012 AACU study all employed closely similar and fairly conservative definitions of liberal arts majors, based on traditional disciplinary fields. Instead, much of the difference may be explained by the Great Recession, beginning with the stock market crash of 2008.

Ferrall’s study was based on data from the 2007-2008 academic year, just before the onset of the recession.[[42]](#footnote-42) The 2012 study was based on data from the 2008-2009 academic year, right after the stock market crash.[[43]](#footnote-43) The best explanation for the precipitous drop in liberal arts majors between 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 appears to be the recession, which, Ferrall predicted, “will accelerate” the movement of “liberal arts colleges...toward vocational courses and majors.”[[44]](#footnote-44) If this is so, it is also true that liberal arts colleges and majors held fairly steady in the two decades between 1988 and 2008, which means that the understanding of declension must be thoroughly revised.[[45]](#footnote-45)

II

The number of liberal arts colleges has dropped over time, but not as presented in the narrative of “downhill all the way” during “this past century”[[46]](#footnote-46) due to inability to compete with the research university or professional studies in the fight for institutional survival. Instead, it appears that the declension has occurred relatively recently and in discontinuous precipitous episodes during periods of economic stress or upheaval.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the early advocates of the research universities announced the demise of liberal arts colleges, but the validity of their assessment was undermined by their prophetic zeal and defensive concerns for patronage. In the 1910s and 1920s a strong reaction of “liberal culture” pushed back against the research universities. At that time, many liberal arts colleges still perceived themselves as “the heart of the American system of higher education,” in the words of Richardson. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Depression, World War II, and the return of the G.I.s likely drew liberal arts students and colleges toward vocational fields. Thus, one study in the declension literature found that by 1956, some 164 of the 540 liberal arts colleges that Breneman later examined had already lost that status, according to his definition.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In the 1970s and 1980s, liberal arts colleges again faced economic stress and upheaval. During the mid-1970s, there was double-digit inflation and high unemployment, and in the recovery between 1979 and 1986, college graduates earned a historically high wage premium over high school graduates. As a result, students went to college to acquire job skills throughout the period that Breneman studied from 1972 to 1988. In addition, during the 1970s and 1980s, the vast number of new students entering higher education were “non-traditional”--older, working, married, part-time, and working-class.[[48]](#footnote-48) These two factors explain why, between 1972 and 1988, the proportion of new college students seeking primarily to become “very well-off financially” rose from about 40 percent to 74 percent, and those seeking primarily “a meaningful philosophy of life” moved inversely from about 74 percent to 46 percent.[[49]](#footnote-49) Due to the economic stress and upheaval, as well as the massive influx of non-traditional students, both the absolute number and the proportion of liberal arts colleges in higher education decreased.

Nevertheless, Breneman’s findings about this extraordinary period were subsequently assimilated into the declension narrative of liberal arts colleges as evidence of the perpetual decline. Meanwhile, during the prosperous 1990s and early 2000s, no study apparently presented comprehensive data indicating a decrease in the number of liberal arts colleges. In fact, it has been shown that “a modest but continuing increase in the percentage of degrees in the liberal arts” began to occur in the late 1980s.[[50]](#footnote-50) Then, an economic shock occurred in 2008-2009 when the Great Recession began, and another decline ensued.

If all this is roughly accurate, then the so-called declension of the liberal arts college has not been a Darwinian process of extinction. It has not been a continuous inexorable decline whereby each year ten or twenty liberal arts colleges go “over the brink,” unable to conform to or compete with university mores or professional studies, which draw students from the liberal arts. Rather, the declension has occurred more recently than is commonly supposed, and in discrete precipitous episodes during periods of economic stress or upheaval. Between such episodes, the liberal arts colleges held their own. After such episodes--and this is a critical point--the lost colleges never recovered. So the overall number kept falling.

Another critical point is that the declension narrative has obscured the actual pattern and process of decrease. On the one hand, the narrative obscures by presuming a continuous inexorable decline over 125. On the other hand, the narrative obscures by implicitly equating liberal arts education and the liberal arts college. This latter point requires further explanation.

The declension literature generally assumes that liberal arts education occurs only or best in a liberal arts college, especially a private liberal arts college. As a corollary, the narrative also assumes that liberal arts students are enrolled only at liberal arts colleges, not elsewhere. These two assumptions are often denied or qualified, out of desire not to appear invidious.[[51]](#footnote-51) Nevertheless, most laments about the decline of liberal arts colleges implicitly shift into laments about the decline of liberal arts education in general.

For example, Ferrall studied the private liberal arts college, but he titled his book *Liberal Arts at the Brink*, and he meant it.[[52]](#footnote-52) Similarly, the economist presidents McPherson and Schapiro state that the “fundamental problem” of liberal arts colleges “is the lack of a customer base that is willing and able to cover the costs.” But, a few lines later, they conclude that the “underlying problem [is] that many [students] are less interested...than they used to be.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Through such language, the declension problem subtly shifts from students unwillingness to pay for a liberal arts colleges, to students losing interest in the liberal arts. If students choose not to attend a liberal arts college, they lack interest in the liberal arts. Furthermore, the decreasing enrollment in liberal arts colleges means that the number of liberal arts students is decreasing, and the decline of liberal arts colleges means the decline of liberal arts education.

This implicit equating of liberal arts education with the liberal arts college in the declension narrative obscures the actual pattern of decline in two paradoxical ways. On the one hand, the declension narrative inflates the potential enrollment of liberal arts colleges; on the other hand, it undercounts the actual population of liberal arts students. Taken together, these two points serve to magnify the crisis.

Inflating the potential enrollment of liberal arts colleges appears in the lament, discussed above, that these colleges have become “a much diminished part” of higher education.[[54]](#footnote-54) This lament about diminishing proportion assumes that liberal arts students--and therefore the enrollment in liberal arts colleges--should maintain their same proportion of the total enrollment in higher education. Yet, between 1939 and 2009 the fraction of the United States population attending higher education grew almost six times, from 1.1 percent to 6.4 percent.[[55]](#footnote-55) Consequently, the lament about proportional decline assumes that the fraction of the total population enrolling in liberal arts colleges should have increased by nearly six-fold between 1939 and 2009. Nowhere is this assumption justified or even identified. The lamenters take it for granted that everyone should be liberally educated, as did University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins in 1936, asking “why should he not be?”[[56]](#footnote-56)

But historical data suggest otherwise. [[57]](#footnote-57) During the first half of the 1800s students in higher education in the United States constituted between 0.1 and 0.2 percent of the total population, and nearly all were enrolled in liberal art colleges. By 1899 about 0.3 percent of all Americans were enrolled in higher education. This rise in the percentage might suggest an increasing proportion in liberal arts colleges, given the proliferation of Catholic colleges, women’s colleges, and black colleges. But most of the additional students were enrolled in the new research universities, the growing state universities, and the new technical institutions and professional schools. So the percentage of liberal arts college students had not changed greatly.

By 1939 higher education enrolled about 1.1 percent of the total population, a fraction three or four times larger than forty years earlier. But the period from 1900 to 1939 had seen the emergence of scores of two-year colleges, the elevation of hundreds of normal schools to teachers colleges, the immense growth of technical institutions and degree-granting professional schools, and the expansion of graduate education and state universities, all of which account for most of the increase to 1.1 percent. Consequently, the proportion of liberal arts college students among the total population was still a few tenths of one percent in 1939. In 2008, almost seventy years later, Ferrall’s data indicate that the 225 liberal arts colleges enrolled about 349,000 students, which was still between 0.1 and 0.2 percent of the total population of the United States.[[58]](#footnote-58) The number of liberal arts colleges had decreased, but many of the remaining colleges had increased their enrollment significantly, particularly as single-sex colleges adopted co-education.

Hence, these rough figures suggest that the percentage of the population enrolling in liberal arts colleges has remained remarkably stable over the last two centuries: between 0.1 and 0.2 percent of the total population and certainly within the same order of magnitude. Apparently, then, in the history of the United States, liberal arts colleges have consistently served about one to two percent of the “talented tenth” of the entire population. Given this, proportional laments that “the share of B.A. degrees awarded in the liberal arts has declined” over “the past century” rest on the assumption that a much larger proportion of the total population should be engaged in liberal arts education and enrolled in liberal arts colleges, than has ever been the case historically.[[59]](#footnote-59) In this way, laments about proportional decline overestimate the potential population of liberal arts students.

Paradoxically, the declension narrative also undercounts the actual population of liberal arts students. It is true that the number of liberal arts majors in liberal arts colleges has fallen in discrete precipitous episodes. Farrell maintains that about one-quarter of the 349,000 students in the liberal arts colleges were enrolled in vocational majors, dropping the number of liberal arts majors to about 261,000.[[60]](#footnote-60) If only these liberal arts majors are counted, then this drop would bring their total below 0.1 percent of the population and below the historical norm of liberal arts college students in the population.

However, this refutation relies on the premise that students outside of liberal arts colleges are not enrolled in the liberal arts. Granted, some justification exists for this view. According to historian Ellen Schrecker, liberal arts enrollment has evaporated at “the second- and third-tier public institutions that educate[] the overwhelming bulk of American undergraduates.”[[61]](#footnote-61) In addition, many would argue that the “college of arts and sciences” at a research university does not provide the vibrant “community of learning” that a liberal arts college does and that a liberal arts education requires.[[62]](#footnote-62) Certainly, it is widely agreed that a university faculty does not constitute a community of learning in the way that a liberal arts college faculty usually does, because most university faculty identify more strongly with their discipline than their institution, as compared to faculty at a liberal arts college. Insofar as a liberal arts education depends on a vibrant community of learning and insofar as such a community at an institution depends on the faculty being a community of learning, then there is justification for distinguishing the college of arts and sciences at a university from liberal arts education, while there may also be other grounds for this distinction, such as class size and the amount of student-faculty contact.

In order to address the strongest form of the declension narrative for purposes of argument, let us grant the exclusion of even the college of arts and sciences at research universities, as well as the general student body at second and third-tier universities, and then ask where else could liberal arts students possibly enroll apart from liberal arts colleges? They enroll, I suggest, in the some 400 honors programs or colleges that have sprung up at universities throughout the country during the last 40 years.

III.

Honors Programs strive to create the academic experience of a small liberal arts college within a large university, and they generally receive extensive supplementary resources that support special courses, advising, dormitories, and requirements that aim at a liberal arts education. They usually have a lot of scholarship money to recruit students. In the past four decades, the number of honors programs or colleges at universities has quietly surpassed the number of liberal arts colleges in the country. Indeed, their numbers have moved inversely. While the number of liberal arts colleges in the country has fallen from about 500 to about 200, the number of Honors Programs at universities has grown from about 100 to about 400.[[63]](#footnote-63)

These are the most direct competitors for liberal arts colleges. Yet, the declension literature scarcely mentions them. Ferrall devotes a good deal of attention to the “threat” that publically subsidized universities pose for private liberal arts colleges, but he nowhere mentions Honors Programs.[[64]](#footnote-64) They are overlooked because the declension literature assumes that decreasing enrollment in liberal arts colleges means a decreasing number of liberal arts students overall. In this fashion, the declension literature undercounts the actual number of liberal arts students.

In the last four decades, the enrollment of liberal arts students has not been dropping but *shifting* from liberal arts colleges to their counterpart in universities--the honors programs and colleges. This shift means that the percentage of students enrolled at liberal arts colleges or their counterparts among the total population has held to the historical norm. The shift also helps to explain why liberal arts colleges do not recover after one of the episodic periods of decline. The honors programs absorb the lost enrollment of the colleges.

If this is the case, then much of the anxiety about declining interest in the liberal arts is unwarranted. Over the last 40 years, liberal arts students have continued to enroll at roughly their historical rate of between 0.1 and 0.2 percent of the population. But that consistent fraction has divided into two hemispheres, as liberal arts colleges have suffered economic reverses for various reasons, and a few hundred honors programs at universities have supplanted a few hundred liberal arts colleges. As a result, liberal arts education is increasingly distributed into sector of well endowed liberal arts colleges and a sector of highly subsidized honors programs at universities.

The socio-economic implications of this redistribution deserve careful study. This redistribution into two wealthy sectors might appear to serve the interests of the rich. But, as Ferrall astutely suggested, the average family income of undergraduate students in flagship state institutions is higher than that in endowed institutions in every state in which a comparative study has been done. Hence, well endowed liberal arts colleges may contribute more to socio-economic opportunity than does the reduced tuition at leading state universities.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Be that as it may, what can be concluded about the declension narrative, the liberal arts college, and the university? Ironically, it would appear that the university prophets were right, but for the wrong reason. Yes, the universities have displaced many liberal arts colleges. But the reason is not that it has been “largely a waste of capital to maintain [the colleges], and largely a waste of time to attend them,” as Burgess wrote. The reason is not that the colleges do not “deserve to live” according to “the laws of institutional life,” as Harper maintained. Nor is the reason that “the college is a small university, antiquated, belated, arrested, starved,” as Jordan stated.

In fact, the university has triumphed, if it has, not by driving the liberal arts college into extinction. Rather, the university has adapted to the liberal arts college. The declension narrative has proved correct, ironically, because “the tug of the collegiate way was too strong,” as Rudolph wrote insightfully. The university has enshrined the liberal arts college as the most valued form of undergraduate education by replicating, assimilating, and intensively subsidizing it in the form of honors programs and colleges.

Whether this shift is to the benefit or the detriment of liberal arts education deserves careful consideration. In either case, it seems true that liberal arts enrollment in the United States continues in the range of one to two percent of the “talented tenth” in the population, as has been the case since the founding of the Republic. And that may be reassuring about the preservation of liberal arts education in the future.

1. John W. Burgess, *The American University: When Shall It Be? Where Shall It Be? What Shall It Be?* (Boston: Ginn, Heath, 1884), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William R. Harper, “The Situation of the Small College,” 349–89, in *The Trend in Higher Education in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1905). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nicholas Murray Butler, *Annual Report of the President of Columbia University 1901-1902* (New York: Columbia University, 1902), 37-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Starr Jordan, “An Apology for the American University,” 53-54, in David Starr Jordan, *The Voice of the Scholar with Other Addresses* (San Francisco: Paul Elder, 1903). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Leon B. Richardson, *A Study of the Liberal College* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 1924), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1962), 443-444. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark H. Curtis, “Crisis and Opportunity: The Founding of AAC,” 5, in *Enhancing, Promoting, Extending Liberal Education: AAC at Seventy-Five* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Breneman, “Liberal Arts Colleges. What Price Survival?” 87, in Arthur Levine, ed., *Higher Learning in America, 1980-2000*, rev. ed. (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), 20-21. Breneman actually identified 212 liberal arts college, but included six colleges that granted less than 40 percent of their degrees in the liberal arts. The figure 206 is used here to maintain consistency with Breneman’s own standard. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 2, 11-14, 139-140. See David W. Breneman, “Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges?” *AAHE Bulletin* 43.1 (1990): 3–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Michael S. McPherson and Morton O. Schapiro, “The Future Economic Challenges of the Liberal Arts Colleges,” *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts College, Daedalus* 128.1 (Winter 1999): 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Francis Oakley, “Prologue: The Liberal Arts College: Identity, Variety, Destiny,” 5-6, *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities* (New York: ACLS, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Victor E. Ferrall, Jr., *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Vicki L. Baker, Roger G. Baldwin, and Sumedha Makker, “Where Are They Now? Revisiting Breneman’s Study of Liberal Arts Colleges,” *Liberal Education* 98.3 (Summer 2012). Accessed at <http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-su12/baker_baldwin_makker.cfm>, in May 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 160-163, 246.  [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). See Charles W. Eliot, *A Turning Point in Higher Education: The Inaugural Address of Charles William Eliot as President of Harvard College, October 19, 1869* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Burgess, *American University*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Harper, “The Situation,”378. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jordan, “An Apology,” 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Harper, “The Situation,” 375, 377. See David S. Jordan, *The Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of Races through the Survival of the Unfit* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Harper, “The Situation,” 369. See Jordan, “An Apology,” 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Jordan, “An Apology,” 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Orrin L. Elliott, *Stanford University: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1937). See David Starr Jordan, “An Apology for the American University,” 217, 213-225. National Education Association, *Journal of the Addresses and Proceedings of the Thirty-eight Annual Meeting held at Los Angeles, California, July 11-14, 1899*, vol. 38, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1899). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jordan, “An Apology,” 46, 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Richard J. Storr, *Harper's University: The Beginnings; a History of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 260; Ron Chernow, *Titan: the Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York: Random, 1998), 318, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Butler, *Annual Report*, 15, 37-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Richardson, *A Study*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America; the Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 263-290; Henry A. Yeomans, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell 1856-1943* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Rudolph, *The American*, 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rudolph, *The American*, 443, 447. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Breneman, “Liberal Arts,” 88; Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 21. See Hugh Hawkins, “The Making of the Liberal Arts College Identity,” *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts College, Daedalus* 128.1 (Winter 1999): 8-12; Curtis, “Crisis,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Quotation is from Oakley, “Prologue,” 2. See Curtis, “Crisis,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 21. See Hawkins, “The Making,”15-16; Oakley, “Prologue,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Richard M. Freeland, *Academia’s Golden Age: Universities in Massachusetts 1945-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70-120; Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 21; McPherson and Schapiro, “The Future,” 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Joan Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts College—Is It Really An Endangered Species?” *Change*  27.5 (Sep.-Oct. 1995): 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 2; Hawkins, “The Making,” 15-16; Oakley, “Prologue,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 139-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. McPherson and Schapiro, “The Future,” 48. Oakley, “Prologue,” 5, 1-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, argues that in the two decades after 1987, “the percentage of graduates of the 225 liberal arts colleges...who majored in vocational disciplines increased from 10.6 percent to 27.8 percent” (p. 155). But this conclusion raises a significant definitional issue. For example, over this period, Amherst College supposedly went from 0.0 to 4.8 percent vocational majors, while Bowdoin went from 0.0 to 6.2 percent. Among the list of majors at Amherst, the only vocational possibilities seem to be: Computer Science, Theater and Dance, Film and Media Studies, and Legal Studies as a liberal discipline. At Bowdoin, only Computer Science, Government and Legal Studies, and Educational Studies seem to be candidates. One doubts that the Amherst or Bowdoin faculty would agree with Farrell, who does not identify the vocational fields, apart from legal studies (p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 157, 75-8. There 265 such colleges, but Ferrall studied 225, omitting those that are public and unranked. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 2, 139-140; Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 184-195. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Baker, Baldwin, and Makker, “Where Are They Now?” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 184-195. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Baker, Baldwin, and Makker, “Where Are They Now?” [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Francis Oakley has pursued “forms of significance other than the statistical” in suggesting, “the drop in numbers notwithstanding, that the declension narrative may still serve to mislead. Certainly,...it is far from catching or disclosing the full story, which coveys...some real grounds for encouragement.” “Prologue,” 6. The following argument challenges the inferences of the declension narrative that are drawn from the statistical drop in numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts,” 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts,” 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 30-31; T. D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993); Susan B. Carter, et al., eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition On Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), "Table Bc523-536: Enrollment in Institutions of Higher Education, by Sex, Enrollment Status, and Type of Institution: 1869-1995," accessed May 2013 via <http://hsus.cambridge.org/HSUSWeb/HSUSEntryServlet>; National Center for Education Statistics, *Higher Education General Information Survey* [HEGIS] (2008). (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2009), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, 1966 through 1985; and 1986 through 2007 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, "Fall Enrollment Survey" (IPEDS-EF:86–99), and Spring 2001 through Spring 2008, accessed May 2013 via <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/glossary/?charindex=H>. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts,” 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 11n30. The belief is sometimes qualified by saying that liberal arts colleges are indispensable because they preserve the “understanding of what liberal arts teaching really is.” McPherson and Schapiro, “The Future,” 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 20-21, 154. The decline of liberal arts colleges is often cited to demonstrate the general decline of students in the liberal arts. See Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), xvii-xviii, 1, 3, 125; Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 145; Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 187-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. McPherson and Schapiro, “The Future,” 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Breneman, *Liberal Arts*, 21. See Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts,” 36-38; Hawkins, “Making,” 15-16; Oakley, “Prologue,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Snyder, ed., *120 Years*; Carter, et al., *Historical Statistics*; HEGIS, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2008* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2009), ch. 3. Consulted May 2013 via <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2009020>. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Robert M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. On the following, see Robert L. Church and Michael W. Sedlak, *Education in the United States: An Interpretive History* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 41-60; U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Statistics of the United States...The Final Exhibit of the Eighth [1860] Census (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1866), x, xiv; Snyder, ed., *120 Years*; Carter, et al., *Historical Statistics*; HEGIS, 2008; *Digest of Education Statistics, 2008*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts,” 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 2, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Schrecker, *The Lost Soul*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). See the insightful discussion in Mark Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*(South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 1-14. Quotation at p. 47. Cf. Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution*, 2d ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 20-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. National Collegiate Honors Council (2011) “About NCHC.” (2011), accessed July 2011 at <http://www.nchchonors.org/aboutnchc.shtml>; and “Members” (2013), accessed May 2013 at <http://nchchonors.org/members-area/member-institutions-4/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 75-78, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts*, 77-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)