**What’s Going On?**

**On Leaving the Marsupial Pouch**

Tussman’s Law:

Nothing is as inevitable as a mistake whose time has come.

(Note to fellow conference participants – some of the citations in this paper will be fixed.)

Joseph Tussman, a Berkeley professor and long-time Chair of its Philosophy Department, died in 2005. I never met him, though he gave the inaugural lecture for the Liberal Studies Program at Malaspina College (now Vancouver Island University [VIU]) in 1991, two years before I arrived there. After his lecture, he remained something of a presiding spook over the Program, a Program in which I was privileged to teach for eleven years, his name often invoked in (usually vain) attempts to win various arguments (always collegial). Wanting to ensure that I could formulate minimally intelligent responses to these invocations, I made sure to read his book, *Experiment at Berkeley*, published in 1969. I should add that the book itself had served to inform a lot of the curriculum and pedagogy of the Liberal Studies Program at VIU and, while I had taught in programs similar to it, it was different from them in a number of ways. And so, as I opened Tussman’s book, I looked forward, not only to adding to my argumentative arsenal, but also to an improved understanding of what was going on in the new world into which I had just been tossed, with an eye, perhaps, to better understanding my proper place in it.

The book offers Tussman’s first account of the Experimental Program he ran at Berkeley for four years, a program that opened its doors to students in 1965. That program was, in turn, modelled on a program established by Alexander Meikeljohn, a mentor of Tussman’s from his undergraduate days at the University of Wisconsin (though Tussman, himself, had not been a student in the program). Meikeljohn’s Experimental College, as it was then called, began in 1927. After a hiatus of ten years, caused, in part, by the funding shortfalls of the Great Depression, it re-emerged as the University of Wisconsin’s Integrated Liberal Studies Program in 1948.[[1]](#footnote-1) Originally, though no longer, described as a “college within a college”, the Program has evolved over the years but remains focussed on the interdisciplinary education of undergraduates in agenda-setting works and enduring questions of the, largely, Western tradition. Meikeljohn, it should be said, always found a congenial home-away-from-home at St. John’s College in Annapolis, and shared a number of hours of his life with Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, and Robert Maynard Hutchins.

In his inaugural lecture to the faculty and students of Vancouver Island University’s spanking-brand-new Liberal Studies Program in 1991, Tussman chose as his topic, “Why We Should Study the Greeks.” [[2]](#footnote-2) It was an entirely appropriate topic for a variety of reasons, of course, but one of them was that the students who listened to him were a rather odd bunch for the Program in which they found themselves. Few had any idea at all as to what they were getting into. And that’s because the Liberal Studies Program was, at the time, the first and only degree-completion program offered by the, then, college. For the first time, students in Nanaimo, British Columbia, few of whose parents had ever attended university, and many mature students who had never had the chance[[3]](#footnote-3), could complete a Bachelor’s degree close to home, without moving or commuting to Victoria, two hours south, or to Vancouver, an hour and half across the water by ferry. The catch was, of course, that while they could now earn a degree close to home, it was the *only* degree they could earn close to home.[[4]](#footnote-4) They were, as it were, conscripts. And so, unlike their colleagues at the University of Victoria or the University of British Columbia, there was no choice. They would be forced to encounter the Greeks.[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, in their first week, they were expected to engage in reasonably intelligent seminar discussions on the *Iliad* before plunging into Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato and the rest for the rest of the semester.

So, Tussman’s choice of topic for the Program’s inaugural lecture was highly fitting. And, of course, he didn’t just speak of the Greeks. He spoke of a certain conception of education generally, and undergraduate education specifically, in which studying the Greeks not only makes sense, it is imperative. Central to that imperative was Tussman’s acceptance that human beings are, fundamentally, creatures *of* culture, and not simply, as he put it, individuals “standing outside of [culture]” and “free to take it or leave it.” What Tussman means by this, he says, is most powerfully expressed in Plato’s “Myth of the Metals”, which he, Tussman, takes to be “the real heart” of the *Republic*. In the “Myth”, Tussman says,

Plato develops what I think of as the conception of the marsupial birth of the human being.  We are born in two stages. When we emerge from the womb we are, of course, incomplete and unviable.  We are then placed in the second womb, the community, or polis, the marsupial or kangaroo pouch, in which the crucial stage of development takes place.  We are equipped with our language, habits, values—everything distinctively human—living a sort of limbo-like existence as minors—until we complete our growth, and emerge or are born as adults.  The community is, in this birth process, parental—and our fellow-sharers of that womb are siblings or fellow citizens who are to carry on the life of the community.  Note, it is not a mere handing on or transmission of a culture as  if one is delivering a message.  It is  a  carrying  on  of  a  community’s life, in which each is to discover and play a proper part.  Thus the art of education is the art of bringing a human being to full birth, it is an obstetric art.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Tussman’s key observation, for me, is that once we emerge from the communal marsupial pouch, when we can speak a language reasonably fluently, have developed opinions about music and sports teams, may find some welcome in polite company, when we can cross the street by ourselves, read, and perform enough math to read a bank statement . . . when we can do these things, there does indeed come a time when we have to “discover and play a proper part” as adults. While incubation in the pouch, that is, gives us the capacity to discover and play a role, it does not give our specific role to us, nor tell us precisely how it should be played. The discovery of our “proper part”, therefore, requires work on our part. It means asking, as Tussman later puts it, not only, “What should I do?” but, equally important, “What’s going on?” For, as any traveller or person who begins a new job knows well, we cannot, after all, know what we should do, no matter where we find ourselves, unless we have some idea as to “what’s going on”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Upon emerging from the communal marsupial pouch, however, discerning “what’s going on” is no easy feat. If we’re honest with ourselves, and pay even a little bit of attention, it should become evident that whatever is “going on” certainly did not begin yesterday or, I might add, with the market crash of 2008 or even, dare I say, with the invention of the Internet. That which we call the present, as Tussman notes, is not an infinitesimally thin slice of time, devoid of all content. It is actually quite “thick” with the past. And so, upon our emergence from the communal marsupial pouch, if we are to begin to understand the origins and significance of a great deal of “what’s going on” in the world in which we find ourselves, according to Tussman, we need to look a long ways back and a long way out. Even, of course, back to the Greeks, whose contributions to “what’s going on” (like those of many others) include some of their own interesting responses to the question of “what’s going on”.

Tussman, as one might expect, had a great deal more to say in the inaugural lecture to students and faculty in the Liberal Studies Program at VIU. I have been told that the inaugural class was very excited about what he had to say about reading the Greeks as well as what he had to say about the educational enterprise on which they were embarked. But I have landed specifically on what he has to say about our emergence from the communal marsupial pouch, and the importance of asking and understanding the question “What’s going on?” in a certain way, because I find his reflections quite helpful in thinking about undergraduate liberal education and the challenges posed to such education by the modern research university.

But before turning to those challenges, I should note that Tussman’s position on undergraduate liberal education is one that a number of programs and colleges in the US and Canada, more or less, share. They don’t all manifest that shared understanding in identical pedagogical practices or even in identical curricula. I’ve even been privileged to teach in a few of them – at VIU, Brock University in St. Catherines, Ontario, St. John’s College in Santa Fe, and recently, at Quest University in Squamish, British Columbia. And, before heading to Quest, I served as the President and Vice Chancellor of the University of King’s College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which offers a nationally renowned Foundation Year Program to all first-year students. All of these programs are very different from each other in a variety of ways (and they also differ from others of the same ilk) but they all manifest a commitment to a few things which set them apart from the more usual menu of undergraduate liberal education on offer from most universities, and not just research universities, these days.[[8]](#footnote-8)

First of all, all of these programs are interested in giving their students an immersive opportunity to pursue the broad question as to “What’s going on?” (though they usually have fancier ways of saying this). For this reason, these programs are interdisciplinary, that is, they are taught by faculty from a variety of disciplines who are often expected to address works outside their own disciplines. And their students engage with a variety of works, also across a wide range of disciplines. I suppose that this is because they agree that none of the disciplines has yet to corner the market on the answer to the question of “What’s going on?” and that, whatever else one may say about it, whatever is “going on” is studied by all of the disciplines and manifests itself in fields of creative endeavour as well. Second, such programs are also unabashedly interested in works from the past. They share a sense that whatever is “going on” today did not begin yesterday and so, if one wants to begin to understand “what’s going on”, one might want to start a little further back.

But these programs also make some interesting decisions about the sorts of things students would most benefit from encountering. Of course, every educator makes such decisions as soon as she develops a course outline because no one can teach everything that “should be taught” if only because there is never enough time. But these programs face a special challenge in that their curricula could, in theory, cover everything that can be said about the modern world and its antecedents. By and large, therefore, they get around this problem by having their students consider a selection of works that, for better or worse, have, in fact, helped set the agenda for, or which have been compelling attempts to express, “what’s going on” – whether in philosophy, literature, history, the arts, music, science, at least in the Western tradition. While not all of these programs look at the same books, or at art, music or science to the same or any degree, and not all look at what they look at in the same ways, they do look to works that have particularly informed and/or have compellingly expressed various things that have, indeed, been “going on” in the West, many of them for a long time. Finally, while always excited when one of their students elects to go to graduate school, the majority of faculty in such programs do not see themselves as providing the farm teams for doctoral programs, let alone Majors, nor are they primarily interested in cloning themselves in their students. More often, they speak in terms of educating, by and large, culturally literate, democratically habituated citizens, prepared to take on a variety of roles and vocations, people, I guess, who have some sense as to “what’s going on.” I should also note that this kind of commitment also tends to go hand in hand with an acceptance of certain limits on the freedom of individual faculty members to determine the curriculum in their own classrooms, limits that faculty, in other circumstances, would generally find quite objectionable.

In Tussman’s words, such programs (whether or not they use such words themselves) amount to “ . . .the initiation of the new generation into a great continuing and deeply rooted civilization”[[9]](#footnote-9) and, I might add, warts and all. It is a civilisation, after all, whose members have had lots to say about its warts; pointing to the warts is part of what goes on in it. But, as Tussman stresses, such programs are initiatory. None, to my knowledge, claim to offer the final word on the civilisation to which their students, having left the communal marsupial pouch, will be called upon to contribute in one way or another. Rather, by encouraging students to look for antecedents and influential accounts of what’s been going on by asking them to consider seriously some of those actual antecedents and accounts (albeit in translations of written works, slides as opposed to actual paintings, and sometimes demonstrations as opposed to “real” experiments), the aim is to show students where they might look further, and to help them develop the habits of mind that will allow them to find their feet.

Meikeljohn, Tussman’s mentor in these things, described those habits of mind that allow us to find our feet in new circumstances as constituting a general, as opposed to specialised, intelligence.[[10]](#footnote-10) As he notes, we will all become specialists of one sort or another over the course of our lives, whether as professionals, as skilled tradespeople, as researchers and scholars, and in various other ways. But that specialisation presupposes that we have already developed, more or less, a kind of general intelligence that allows us to learn and do what we have never done before, namely, to become the specialists we become. In words that one could still use publicly in 1927, Meikeljohn describes the cultivation of this general intelligence as the cultivation of “ . . . the power, wherever one goes, of being able to see, in any set of circumstances, the best response a human being can make to those circumstances. And the two constituents of that power would seem to be, first, a sense of human values, and second, a capacity for judging situations as furnishing possibilities for the realizing of these values. It is very near to “wisdom”.[[11]](#footnote-11) I should stress that Meikeljohn did not believe that such general intelligence could only be cultivated by the college or university, or that cultivating it was a matter for the young only. His concern, in 1927, was rather that the universities in America were neglecting the effort altogether, despite being charged with the education of so many who, in Tussman’s words, had only just left the communal marsupial pouch.

In a retrospective lecture on his Experimental Program, delivered at Berkeley in 1988,[[12]](#footnote-12) Tussman, for the first time, attempts to answer the question as to why his program lasted only four years, and reminds his hearers what the Experimental Program was attempting to do. It was, he says, an attempt to deal with the “wasteland” that the first- and second-year undergraduate curriculum at Berkeley had become: unloved, uncared for, and largely ignored by (mostly wonderful) specialist professors who, when they attended to it at all, did so generally for the purpose of recruiting good students into their upper-division and graduate programs. This last phenomenon, by the way, is best on display at information-sessions for parents and prospective students whenever faculty or Department Chairs at many universities are asked to tell the audience a bit about what they offer. The results at VIU, when it had become a much larger and more complicated place than when I had first arrived, were such that, when I became a Dean, I stopped inviting them.

The main reason was that, given their legitimate and articulate enthusiasm for their own fields of study, by the time faculty and Chairs stopped talking, there was usually no time left for questions from the audience. This enthusiasm was always highly revealing, however. For it very rarely extended to anything outside a faculty member’s own field, though most faculty at such sessions agreed that it was useful for students in their early years at the university to encounter a variety of new things, to figure out which ones interested them, and to remedy some skills gaps left over from high school. Faculty were most enthusiastic, however, about urging prospective students to build a program of study around a Major or two (which would leave the door open for graduate school), as it was in the upper-division Majors programs that the really exciting educational opportunities were on offer (internships, undergraduate research, field schools, study abroad, you name it). For those students not interested in graduate school, neither the time nor the money would be a waste. Upon the completion of their degrees, students would have picked up general skills deemed by the Conference Board of Canada to be useful for employment, some cool and even useful stuff would have been learned, various good habits would have been acquired (time management was invariably mentioned) and, of course, the earnings of people with Bachelor’s degrees were much higher than those without them. I should add, by the way, that VIU is not a research university. It is an institution which is devoted to primarily undergraduate education, small classes and good teaching (and which has wonderful teachers). I remain very fond of it, warts and all.

Tussman’s concern, in 1965, however, was that this approach to undergraduate liberal education amounted to the abdication of any attempt and pretense to help those who’ve emerged from the communal marsupial pouch figure out “what’s going on” in the civilisation which nurtured them in their minority, and in which they are expected to discover and play their proper part. It echoed Meikeljohn’s concerns of the late 1920s, and inspired Vancouver Island University (then, Malaspina College) to embark on a highly unorthodox undergraduate curricular venture in 1991. Quest University, the first secular liberal arts and sciences university in Canada committed to fueling itself on private funding alone, which opened its doors as recently as six years ago, has been experimenting with a Foundation Program, avowedly intended to address similar concerns. The influence of the likes of Meikeljohn and Tussman (and they were hardly alone), not just in the American, but in the Canadian, world of undergraduate liberal education, it would seem, continues to persist. As, of course, does the form of undergraduate education to which Meikeljohn and Tussman sought to respond.

That form of undergraduate education is, of course, the product of that animal known as the modern research university, an institution conceived and born, largely, in Prussia, and which reached full maturity some time close to the founding of the University of Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1810. Much has been written about the rise of this relatively new kind of university, and of its spread around the globe over the years.[[13]](#footnote-13) One of the more interesting recent contributions to this field is William Clark’s *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, published in 2006.[[14]](#footnote-14) Clark’s account is of interest for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the wry sense of irony which pervades his almost 500-page, delightfully meandering narrative. The book is also rich in archival material dating back some five hundred years, much of it both amusing and eccentric. It is a hard book to summarise, its tone captured nicely by its opening sentence, “Befitting the subject, this is an odd book.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Among other things, Clark deftly demonstrates that the antecedents of the German research university are to be found much earlier than has been conventionally argued, particularly if one traces its emergence not so much as the product of an intellectual history, but as a particular social structure defined by evolving practices.[[16]](#footnote-16) His approach is ethnographical, his analytical apparatus largely Weberian, seasoned with a dash or two of Foucault. Clark’s central thesis, for which he provides ample documentary evidence, is as follows:

The origins of the research university lie in a transformation of academic manners by ministries and markets. German ministers of state and avatars of the market worked, as they saw it, to reform and modernize benighted academics. As a consequence of their efforts, a joint bureaucratization and commodification of academic practices took place,

from which the research university emerged.

A German Protestant academic had to pass muster with bureaucratic or rationalized criteria for appointment, which included productivity in publication, diligence in teaching, and acceptable political views and lifestyle. But to achieve success, one also had to acquire fame, be in fashion, and display “originality,” a spark of genius, in writings. This

became a new sort of academic charisma tied to writing for “applause” and “recognition.” The modern academic emerged . . . from the cultivation of this new legible charisma. (3-4)

In short, for Clark, the modern research university was the product, over time, of demands imposed by pre-Bismarkian German principalities for measurable accountability from the universities which they began to fund after the Protestant Reformation, and the desires of those principalities to enhance their own fame though the cultivation of famous universities made so because they were inhabited by demonstrably world-famous professors. As Clark tells the tale, the professors, particularly those in the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, the traditional rump behind the Faculties of Theology, Law, and Medicine in the order of the academic ceremonial procession or precedence, became only too happy to oblige. When Wilhelm von Humboldt founded the University of Berlin, he was not so much starting something brand new, though his rationalisation for it had some original elements. Rather, he was replicating a living institution that had already matured by 1797 at the University of Gottingen and elsewhere.

As Clark and others have noted, prior to the emergence of the research university, of course, professors were paid simply to teach (and often paid poorly enough that they supplemented their incomes in other ways). They might engage in various forms of scholarship (publishing one’s lectures was not unheard of, and various scholarly societies had become well-established by the end of the 1600s), but their actual remuneration from the universities was based on their services as lecturers, and as overseers of, and participants in, oral disputations. Those services, for which professors were paid, that is, were local, delivered to particular groups of students in particular times and places; they were primarily oral, as most physical classroom settings remain; and they were, generally, conservative, in that they were focussed on the transmission of existing knowledge to young people (whether theoretical or applied) and not on innovation for its own sake, whether in scholarship or curriculum. Any charisma attaching to them was attached to their offices as *magisters* of the university.[[17]](#footnote-17) Save in very rare instances, it was not generally attached to their personal acumen or accomplishments as either teachers or scholars. The research university, therefore, stood all of that on its head, making the innovating, original, world-famous faculty member, better known (through his written publications) abroad than at home, the highest paid member on the salary scale and, indeed, virtually the *raison d’etre* of the university itself. With the multiplication of research agendas that these celebrated researchers, inevitably, spawned (forming, in the early days, many new disciplines and sub-disciplines largely in what we now call the humanities and social sciences), and with the new focus of the research university very much on the production of future researchers and research, the undergraduate curriculum, needless to say, underwent a profound change.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We are now, perhaps, so accustomed to the ways of the modern research university (indeed, most of us teaching at any university or college today are products of it), that it’s easy to forget how recently it became an established and secure institution in North America. While most accounts peg its antecedent conditions as beginning in the mid-1860s in both Canada and the US, they also tend to agree that it comes into its own as the highly-recognised institution we know today only after the Second World War.[[19]](#footnote-19) I, personally, if somewhat inaccurately, will always mark its near approach to its zenith as 1972, the year my undergraduate *alma mater*, McMaster University, three years before I got there, denied tenure to an immensely popular sociology professor on the grounds that she had not published enough. She was the first professor at McMaster (est. 1887) denied tenure on those grounds. Not only did this spark the ire of one of Canada’s more famous philosophers, George Grant (who was at McMaster at the time), it triggered protests across the campus against the academic culture of “publish or perish”. Such protests, I believe, are almost inconceivable today.

In this context, I think it interesting that both Meikeljohn’s and Tussman’s programs were called “experimental.” The assumption, I think, is often that programs which teach old things are themselves old-fashioned and hearken back, sentimentally and nostalgically, to educational curricula of the past. It might appear that Meikeljohn and Tussman really were being old-fashioned, and the use of the term “experimental” was a rhetorical ploy to appeal to a modern audience fascinated with academic originality and innovation, a kind of conservative Trojan horse, perhaps. But I don’t think so. In *The Experimental College*, Meikeljohn makes it clear, in instances too numerous to cite, that he understood himself to be proposing something new, something that none of the universities or colleges in the US had ever done before. And, whenever Tussman hearkens to an older model for his own program, Meikeljohn’s program alone is the reference. If both were old-fashioned in any sense, it was simply in their desire to restore a certain ideal of teaching to the undergraduate education which had prevailed before the rise of the research universities, an ideal that, as Tussman’s invocation of Plato’s “Myth of the Metals” suggests, goes much further back than simply to colonial America or the Middle Ages. For them, the realisation of that ideal was not to be in the resurrection of a particular curriculum or pedagogical approaches that antedated the research universities. The curriculum and the pedagogical approaches they had in mind were new, and were designed to help undergraduates to find their feet in a very modern world. But I stress that they were not operating in a vacuum. They were explicitly and self-consciously responding to what undergraduate liberal education had become once the research universities got a hold of it.

As I have already noted, the kind of concerns that animated both Tussman and Meikeljohn continue to persist both in the US and in Canada. The programs they devised in response to those concerns find siblings and cousins in various institutions in both the US and Canada. Some are older, such as the Program in Liberal Studies at Notre Dame, and some are younger, such as the brand-new Foundation Program at Quest University, started six years ago in Squamish, BC. And not all trace their origins, of course, specifically through Tussman and Meikeljohn. St. John’s, for instance, traces the origins of its program to Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr, while Columbia’s Core Curriculum owes much to John Erskine and Mortimer Adler. Some of these programs are found in such stand-alone colleges as St. John’s and Quest which are generally beholden only to themselves for their own destinies.[[20]](#footnote-20) Others, perhaps more common, live in larger and more organisationally complex institutions either as Majors or Honours programs or as constituting a chunk of the general education curriculum required for a degree.

But while they persist, and that’s the good news, many face considerable challenges. While today we may be tempted to find the causes of these challenges in the legacy of the culture wars, the soaring costs of a university degree (particularly in the US where demands for a better “return on investment” fill the news), or on the concerns that higher education make itself “more relevant” to a changing economy (a concern heard much in Canada), I think it’s worth noting that some of these challenges have been around since these programs began. Meikeljohn, in 1927, and Tussman, in 1965, certainly struggled with a number of them. Both certainly felt it was important to make the case that the programs they were interested in were comparatively inexpensive (which they are), and both also argued, as I’ve noted, that their programs were highly practical, especially when it comes to fostering the kind of general intelligence required to learn new and specialised things. That is, in some ways, their appeals to their own institutions, which were facing some of the criticisms that higher education faces now, was that the institutions would be made stronger by adopting such programs.

But not in all ways. Looking back on his four years in the Experimental Program at Berkeley, Tussman describes a number of challenges the Program would have had to address if it were to have become a permanent feature at the University.[[21]](#footnote-21) There was the issue of tenure, on what basis it would be awarded to teachers in the program and, if the program was to be run on secondments alone, how to pacify the departments from which those secondments had come. Meikeljohn had struggled with similar issues.[[22]](#footnote-22) But there were two other challenges that Tussman was not sure could ever be overcome: the problem of the academic charisma fostered by the research university which, he believed, had no place in the general, liberal education of undergraduates at all; and the challenge posed, specifically, by scholarship in the Humanities. About the first, he says:

The competition of Scholars, the thirst for distinction, [is] a familiar and almost comical fact of academic life.  But we encounter it, the vanity of *scholars* at a distance . . . You published your stuff; he published his; and when he excitedly waved the telegram announcing his award you would say . . . “What! You!” The scholarly community is diffused through the world, and you usually appeal to it in writing. Its vanity, although sometimes flagrant, is generally tolerable and not too greatly obstructive.

          But the teacher, the aspiring great teacher, is, in a perverted version, the seducer, the enchanter working his magic on a concrete local group.  He must capture it, or he is nothing.  He does not like to share the limelight; the presence of fellow-professionals is intrusive and distracting; he is best at a one-man show; he worries about being upstaged or outshone. I think the conception of teaching as a “performing art” is deeply mistaken, but it is quite popular.  And it makes cooperative teaching almost impossible.  Teaching is a subtle quasi-therapeutic art, not a performing art.  It is very difficult to observe; it is not spectacular.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Tussman’s experience showed that those academics who are born and bred in the graduate schools of the research universities, or who are seconded from the departments of the universities, cannot easily be expected to subordinate their own encultured desire for scholarly fame to the vocation of teaching. I would add that such subordination, for some, even threatens their very notion of academic competence.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The second great challenge that concerned Tussman was the culture of scholarship specifically in the Humanities. Not that he was opposed to such scholarship. He was, indeed, a Humanities scholar himself. But, as he notes,

The natural University guardians of the great tradition are, of course the Departments of the Humanities.  But, with a few honorable exceptions, they guard the Treasure as Fafnir guarded his—they breathe fire if anyone tries to steal it, to use it, that is, without a license.  Simply put, Departments in the Humanities believe in and practice scholarship.  That is to say, they are not interested in what the people they study are interested in.  They are interested in what scholars are interested in and, generally, the people they study were not scholars.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This, of course, is the rub. It is not that the research universities have ceased to be concerned with the tradition that, for Tussman, informs our “thick” present, the “present” into which those who have recently emerged from the communal marsupial pouch deserve some initiation. It is that, in the context of the research university, that tradition has become an object of scholarship where, if any initiation is to take place, it is initiation into scholarship, into the preoccupations of scholars, and not into the tradition which, on its own, was never the product of scholars in the modern sense.[[26]](#footnote-26) Much of the culture wars, at least as they were fought in the academy, I think, had more to do with the question of towards which scholarly preoccupations the undergraduate Humanities curriculum should be directed, than the question of what undergraduates might encounter within that tradition if they are to get some sense as to “what’s going on” in the modern world.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Of the fact that his own program lasted only four years at Berkeley, Tussman suggests that, to some extent, the reason was largely due to his running out of steam and his inability to imagine carrying on the efforts required to address, at Berkeley, some of the challenges I’ve outlined above. But of his initial hopes he also says that, “The fundamental delusion may have been to suppose that it was possible for a great organism like the university to nourish or sustain for long an enterprise at odds with its essential nature.” Of the failure of the Humanities to sustain their traditional role as keepers and purveyors of the tradition (warts and all), namely, the great “context” in which the young are asked to find their feet, Tussman says this:

The failure to provide this great context is to send our students, robbed of their proper clothing, of their proper minds, naked into the jabbering world.  It is stupidly irresponsible of the University to allow this to happen.  It is a betrayal of its trust. It is, as I used to say, a consequence of the fact that the University, simply by being what it is, has killed the College.[[28]](#footnote-28)

By this, of course, Tussman did not mean that programs like the ones that he and Meikeljohn had devised could not exist again in the future or that the ones which did exist would disappear. He was well aware of such programs and even arrived to give his blessings, in 1991, in the inaugural lecture, to the Liberal Studies Program at VIU. But his insight, I think, was that what is required to sustain such programs really is antithetical to the culture of the research university, and that one should not be surprised by this. Originally conceived, at least in the early days, such programs really were envisaged very much as an alternative, and not an addition, to what passed for general liberal education in the research universities. They were infused with a focus, not on scholarship, but on teaching, the ideal of which had prevailed in the much older Colleges. For Tussman, the community of scholars, *qua* scholars, where ever it is found, will always kill the College if, *qua* scholars, they are given charge of it. They always have.

So, what do I take from all of this? Well, first, I do think, for those of us engaged in the kinds of programs which are animated by the kind of spirits that inhabited Tussman and Meikeljohn, that it’s worth reading what the likes of them have had to say. In the same way that we ask our students to encounter works in the Western tradition in order to help them develop a sense as to “what’s going on”, encountering the agenda-setters in our own educational tradition is equally important and for much the same reasons. I would also say that I think it’s especially important for new faculty in such programs who, regardless of their avowed interests in engaging in these rather odd undergraduate programs, tend, themselves, to be products of the research universities. In order for them to figure out what’s going on, to find their feet, and to figure out their own proper place and role in such programs, not only is mentorship key, so is a sense of the whys and wherefores of the occupation in which they have landed.

Second, Tussman’s and Meikeljohn’s accounts of the struggles they faced in getting their own programs off the ground are useful case studies in the structural issues that need to be addressed in the fostering and maintenance of such programs.[[29]](#footnote-29) And such issues are anything but trivial. How one assesses faculty performance, the criteria under which faculty are hired, whether faculty receive permanent appointments into a program or are seconded from elsewhere, whether a program employs TAs, the implications of building one’s program around solo-taught discreet courses or insists that a program be team-taught . . . however one decides these things will have a tremendous bearing on the program that results. By and large, most of us who have taught in such programs have more enthusiasm for debates about books, pedagogy and curriculum than committee meetings designed to address administrivia. But administrivia matters, and neglecting it can have profound, if unintended, consequences.[[30]](#footnote-30) The structures of the research university, familiar to all who are products of it and often embraced unconsciously, are designed to support its form and function. They don’t easily support programs whose very form and function originated as a challenge to it. Tussman’s Law is worth remembering in this context: “Nothing is as inevitable as a mistake whose time has come.”

Finally, both Tussman and Meikeljohn do teach us, I think, why our programs are not likely to ever be held in high regard by the community of scholars as scholars. They well understood, not only as a matter of theory but as a result of hard practice, that a scholar, in the performance of his or her educational function, must have as a goal the production of more scholars. And the work of people like William Clark allows us to have a full appreciation as to why. While the undergraduate liberal education on offer at the continent’s research universities, and at so many other institutions which emulate them, is facing a great deal of criticism these days, I am not hopeful that these institutions will turn to the kind of programs envisioned by Tussman and Meikeljohn. They will certainly build more centres of teaching and learning, departments will get more engaged in questions of student retention, and many faculty will, no doubt, do more to make their courses “more relevant” to students. And these will all be good things. But the kind of radical reforms envisaged by the likes of Tussman and Meikeljohn will, I think, remain rare things, made more lovely, perhaps, by their rareness. They will persist, but I cannot imagine that they will prevail.

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Nanaimo, BC

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1. Meikeljohn’s discussion of the rationale and design of the Experimental College was published in his book, *The Experimental College*, Harper, 1932. It is available online at:  <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/UW.MeikExpColl> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As I say, I arrived two years late to hear it. Imagine my delight then, when I found it on-line at: <http://josephtussman.wordpress.com/2008/01/18/why-should-we-study-the-greeks/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A number of these students, over the years, would come from logging and related industries, which were beginning an inexorable decline. Many ended up in grad school, law or medical school, or became teachers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Malaspina College, as it was then known, had offered first- and second-year university transfer courses since 1970. The Liberal Studies Program took up 3/5ths of a student’s third and fourth years. Students could also complete upper-level “concentrations” in a few disciplines, alongside their work in Liberal Studies. The institution has changed considerably since then. It now offers a great many degree programs. Liberal Studies, while now offering first-year courses to interested students, is no longer the core of the baccalaureate degree in Arts. Rather, it offers a Major and Minor alongside a host of other Major and Minor programs within VIU’s BA. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The University of British Columbia has offered its justly renowned Arts One Program, in which students do study the Greeks, since 1960, and the Liberal Studies Program at VIU drew inspiration from it. Unlike the Liberal Studies Program at VIU in the early to mid- nineties, however, though immensely popular, Arts One has never been required for all UBC Arts graduates. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://josephtussman.wordpress.com/2008/01/18/why-should-we-study-the-greeks/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As I type this, I am reminded how often Tom Stoppard’s play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, popped into my mind the first week I spent answering phone calls and attending meetings as a newly appointed Dean. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These commitments may also distinguish them from the programs offered by a good number of the “liberal arts colleges” in the US as well: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/10/11/study-finds-liberal-arts-colleges-are-disappearing> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. From “A Venture in Educational Reform” in *The Beleaguered College*, Institute of Governmental Studies Press, University of California, 1997, <http://josephtussman.wordpress.com/2008/01/21/a-venture-in-educational-reform/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alexander Meikeljohn, *The Experimental College*, Harper, 1932, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/UW.MeikExpColl>, pp. 3-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Meikeljohn, p. 8. Mind you, the good reviews received by Barry Schwatrz’s and Kenneth Sharpe’s *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to do the Right Thing* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011) suggest that Meikeljohn’s language, like Aristotle’s, might be re-entering the public space, at least in management circles, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/business/16shelf.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It was later published as, “A Venture in Educational Reform” in *The Beleaguered College*, Institute of Governmental Studies Press, University of California, 1997, and may be found online at <http://josephtussman.wordpress.com/2008/01/21/a-venture-in-educational-reform/t> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A good overview of the rise and spread of the modern research university in the US, by Richard C. Atkinson and William A. Blanpied, can be found in their article “Research Universities: Core of the US Science and Technology System”, *Technology in Society* 30 (2008) 30–48, available online at: <http://www.rca.ucsd.edu/speeches/TIS_ResearchUniversitiesCoreoftheUSscienceandtechnologysystem1.pdf> An informative article on its rise and spread in Canada can be found in Yves Gingras’s "The Institutionalization of Scientific Research in Canadian Universities: The Case of Physics," *Canadian Historical Review* 67, 2 (1986): 181-94, available online at: <http://www.chss.uqam.ca/Portals/0/docs/articles/Institution_CHR.PDF> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The book has not been without its critics. Clark himself has posted reviews it has received at <http://www.academiccharisma.net/reviews.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Clark’s account suggests that the research university, as was once said of the education system in the Province of British Columbia by a Minister of Education, was particularly remarkable in “having been born before it was conceived.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. One of the more hilarious accounts in Clark’s book is of the campaign of those in the Faculties of Arts and Philosophy in the German states to win for themselves permission to use formally the title “Doctor.” Out of this campaign was born the D. Phil., first awarded in Germany in the mid-1800s. Its North American and British equivalent, the PhD, was first awarded in the US in 1861, in Canada in 1900, and in Britain in 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The sciences were added late to the agenda of the German research universities, beginning in the 1830s. Until then, scientific research had been carried out in independent seminars, institutes and societies. The claim that university research in the humanities and social sciences was spurred by university research in the sciences, while true of many research universities which emerged after the mid-to-late 1800s (especially in North America), is not true of the original German research universities. There, the philologists led the way. It’s worth noting that Meikeljohn’s Experimental College was the result, in part, of the desire of the University of Wisconsin to respond to some significant dissatisfaction expressed at the time by students and alumni. As recounted in *The Experimental College*, among the primary sources of dissatisfaction was “the disarticulation” of the undergraduate arts curriculum. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See note 13, above. Gingras, by the way, stresses the importance of distinguishing between the rise of discourse on the importance of the research university in North America and its actual development as a living institution which, to his mind, too many accounts conflate. Unlike its German original, the research university in North America was largely conceived before it was born (see note 16, above). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I do not mean to suggest, at all, that Quest’s Foundation Program is close in nature to St. John’s’. It is in many ways, much more different from St. John’s than it is the same. Some of those differences pose challenges for Quest’s Foundation Program that St. John’s is likely never to face. See note 24, below. Those challenges come from within itself, however, unlike the challenges faced by programs nestled within larger institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See note 9, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Meikeljohn, p. 280, ff. In this vein, it is also quite fascinating to read the reports of the various Directors of the Program of Liberal Studies at Notre Dame, compiled in “The First Fifty Years”. The adjustments that the Program found itself having to make as the larger institution came to define itself more and more as a research University make for an enlightening case-study: <http://pls.nd.edu/assets/72810/pls_history.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See note 9, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Which is why Quest is about to give up its original commitment to ground the Humanities component of its Foundation Program in agenda-setting works in the West. Agreeing on the curriculum, especially if that also means teaching things one hasn’t mastered as a scholar, is often very difficult for those beginning their academic careers, especially in the Humanities (see Tussman’s second reason). Many at VIU in the mid-1990s accused the Liberal Studies Program of dilettantism which, they claimed, put the new university’s academic “credibility” in serious question. These accusations ceased when those who made them got their own Majors programs (Liberal Studies was repackaged into one of them), and the university gave up on a required, core curriculum. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See note 9, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The tension here is, at times, on display at the University of King’s College among faculty in its Foundation Year Program (FYP). King’s, while an autonomous institution, offers joint, interdisciplinary honours programs in the Humanities with Dalhousie, which is very much a research university. King’s tends to ensure that those lecturing on specific works are scholars of those works and/or that an academcially credible Hegelian cast is given to the program’s various “characters” (among other things, this tends to mean that satires, traditionally, are not addressed in FYP). There is also some difference of opinion among faculty as to the extent to which FYP should be seen as a “feeder” program for the joint-honours programs, or as a stand-alone, general liberal education program worthy in itself for being what it is. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Here, I’m tempted to engage in some ruminations on C.S. Lewis’s, *The Abolition of Man*. But I won’t. It’s fairly short, and can be found here: <http://archive.org/details/TheAbolitionOfMan_229>. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See note 9, above. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. And the case studies of other programs are very useful as well, such as the one covering the history of the Program of Liberal Studies at Notre Dame, see note 22 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Such neglect, arguably, resulted in the unionisation of the (limited-term-contract) Teaching Fellows at the University of King’s College. Though their unionisation is not a completely bad thing (to my mind), it was completely unexpected by the permanent faculty and will bring unexpected changes (good ones, one hopes) to the Foundation Year Program. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)