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The Fate of Liberal Education: A Review of The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University by Louis Menand

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Louis Menand. *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010. 176 pp. Hardback: \$24.95. ISBN 0393062759

Louis Menand proposes to answer four questions about higher education concerning the problems of general education, the humanities revolution, anxiety about interdisciplinarity, and the politics of professors (p. 16). Menand argues that the aforementioned issues arise from the way in which institutions sustain and reproduce themselves (pp. 16-17). He suggests a tension exists between the ideological perceptions of higher education as a marketplace as opposed to a community of learners and scholars with the goal of producing and disseminating knowledge.

Menand weaves historical inquiry with modern preconceptions and expectations of higher education, particularly the professional and vocational emphases of higher education that underscore the progressive deconstruction of liberal education. Hence, the author diagnoses an institutional disease that demands aggressive treatment, namely, the resistance of liberal arts institutions to enact changes necessary for their survival and the failure of the system of higher education to accommodate liberal education. Menand arrives at his diagnosis through a careful examination of the historical foundation of liberal education using examples of elite liberal arts institutions, in addition to an analysis of scholarly and professional contributions relevant to higher education. The effect is an appreciation for liberal education given its noble past and uncertain future, an appreciation that can be embraced by those disconnected from liberal education.

Menand establishes his position in relation to higher education as a professor and further provides justification for his argument considering “there are things academics should probably not be afraid to do differently—their world will not come to an end—but there are also things that

are worth preserving” (pp. 17-18). He elicits compassion for liberal education because it preserves what we cherish about higher education: an investment in the power of knowledge to heal communal wounds. While the enterprise of higher education expands to meet economic demands, liberal arts institutions are more akin to family-owned businesses, which the public hopes will survive in spite of pressures on the humanities disciplines.

Although the author provides extensive historical evidence that buttresses his examination of the problems of general education, the humanities revolution, anxiety about interdisciplinarity, and the politics of professors, and further reflects on the significance of such issues to the current condition of higher education, Menand presents only a vague correlation among the issues. For example, there is a disconnect between the extent to which general education programs, which resulted in a division between liberal education and professional and vocation education, challenged the rationale for the humanities disciplines. Moreover, Menand critiques the system of higher education through a historical perspective and arrives at the source of several problems, but fails to provide solutions. That is, Menand states, “Professors teach what they teach because they believe that it makes a difference. To continue to do this, academic inquiry, at least in some fields, may need to become less exclusionary and more holistic” (p. 158). In response, I am left with the following questions: how might professors establish a holistic education; what constitutes a holistic education; and, what affect will a holistic education have on the public culture? I am left to conclude that higher education will inevitably have problems, not because its constituents fail to solve them, but because the dynamics of higher education continually fluctuate and because solutions to problems often result in problems of a different nature.