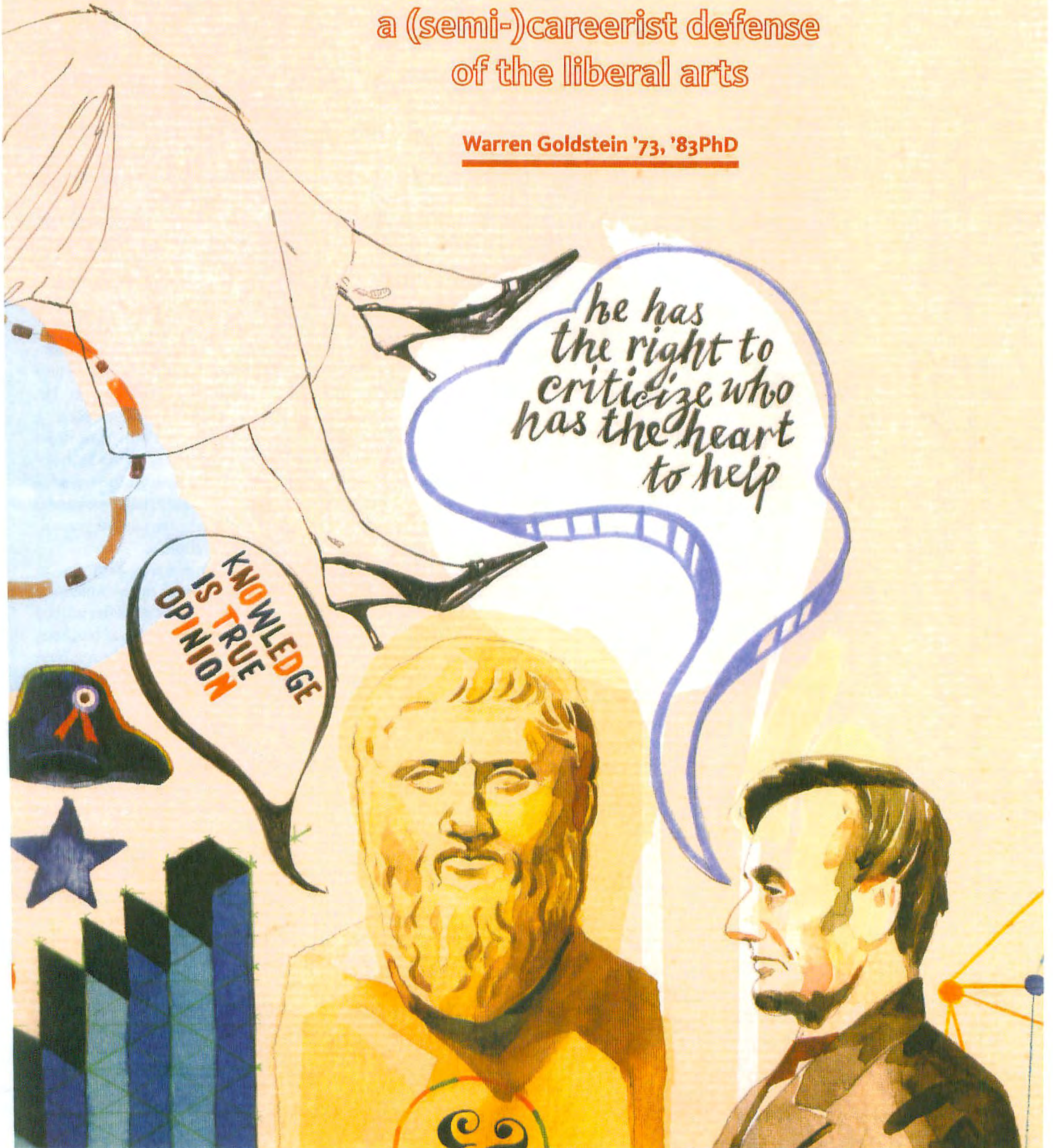
# what would Plato do?

## a (semi-)careerist defense of the liberal arts

**Warren Goldstein '73, '83PhD**



*Nahh, don't tell me — I bet I can guess your major:* art history, right?

Tom or Ray Magliozzi

IF YOU'RE AN NPR LISTENER, you've probably heard some version of this line on *Car Talk*. Usually the hapless college student on the phone is female, and Tom and Ray (aka Click and Clack, the Tappit brothers) are showing their avuncular concern for her employment prospects. Tom was a college professor for a while, and Ray got a degree in humanities and science, and they've done all right. But liberal arts-bashing is one of their favorite sports. As far as I can tell, from my turret in the besieged educational outpost of the liberal arts, nearly all parents of college-age students agree with them.

Degrees in history and English, not to mention philosophy, French, and art history, scare parents who worry about whether their investment in their child's college education will ever pay off. In part, they are responding—understandably—to the tidal wave of cultural interest in matters of business and technology, globalization and innovation. In what possible way can the study of John Milton, Immanuel Kant, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton prepare young people for this rapid-fire, information-glutted, globally interconnected, BlackBerried world?

The last 20 years have witnessed the dominance of the undergraduate business degree. Thirty-five years ago, business accounted for 13.6 percent of the nation's bachelor's degrees. Since 1981, the number has ranged from 19.3 to 24, and in 2002 (the last year for which government statistics are available), just under 22 percent. That's right: between a fifth and a quarter of all American bachelor's degrees—around 250,000 per year—are in business.

And what of the liberal arts—humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences? Most, in the same period, simply tanked. English accounted for almost 8 percent of degrees in 1971, but had sunk to 4 percent by 2002; history had 5 percent back then but now gets 2 percent. Even as globalization has exploded, the number of degrees in foreign languages and literatures has been cut in half, from 2.4 percent to 1.2 percent.

At our "college preview days" in the University of Hartford, kids and their parents clump at the communications table, or wander about looking for "pre-law." I remember in particular the conversation I had with Robert and his parents—no, just with his parents: Robert's opinion was not consulted. "Robert's going to be a lawyer. So, what's the best degree to get into law school?" Any liberal arts degree that emphasizes reading and writing, I told them. "No, really, we don't want him wasting his time in something that won't get him into law school. History will help, right?" Poor Robert. He began his rebellion that fall; he didn't go home for Thanksgiving.

Yale is one of the few institutions so elite as to be almost exempt from these trends: it needs no undergraduate degrees in business to draw students and satisfy parents. Humanities, Yale's historic strength, consistently account for a little over a third of Yale College majors. History is the single most popular major, attracting 13 to 15 percent of undergraduates—more than any other field—throughout the past 25 years. English has always been in the top four. But English has essentially surrendered second place to economics in the past decade. And while economics is a bona fide liberal arts major, it is also, at Yale, the closest thing to an undergraduate business degree an anxious parent can find. Nationally, economics has been taught increasingly in the past 20 years as part of a business school curriculum.

Most Americans evidently agree with Calvin Coolidge's famous line, delivered to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1925: "After all, the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing, and prospering in the world."

BUT THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, and their parents, should relax.

I went looking for Yale graduates who've had extremely successful careers in the business world. Some of them have made fortunes; some have already given away more money than I will make, cumulatively, in my lifetime. All but one inhabit worlds that are utterly nonacademic. They have no students to teach, no tenure track, not the slightest material incentive to promote the values of academia. But all of them recommend the liberal arts for those concerned with prospering in their world.

Harris Ashton '54, CEO of General Host Corporation for 31 years, points to essential skills. Majoring in sociology, he says, "taught me how to write and demanded that you write all the time." Susan Crown '80—a principal of the Chicago investment firm

WARREN GOLDSTEIN '73, '83PhD, chairs the history department at the University of Hartford. His last article for the *Yale Alumni Magazine* was "For Country" (May/June 2004), about Yale's record in producing presidential candidates.

Henry Crown and Company, Yale trustee, and self-described social activist—elaborates: "A liberal arts education teaches you how to think: how to analyze, how to read, how to write, how to develop a persuasive argument. These skills are used every day in business." She goes further: "A liberal arts education also offers the ability to focus on large ideas. We live in a world where everyone is multitasking, often skimming the surface and reacting to sound bites. But as undergraduates, we had the opportunity to read great literature and history, to focus and to consider. This developed a standard of depth and care that calibrates our work for the rest of our lives."

Many of these businesspeople say that the liberal arts, humanities in particular, prepared them to interact with others as sophisticated adults. At the most basic level, this means making credible conversation at a cocktail party or giving a persuasive speech. Crown studied literature as an undergraduate and translated an epic poem from Spanish to English for her senior project. Today, when she has to write a speech or give a presentation, she goes back to her college notes to review some of the big ideas in literature and history. Robert M. Rubin '74 majored in history before becoming a commodities and currency trader at Drexel Burnham. (He was known on Wall Street as "the other Bob Rubin," as opposed to Robert E. Rubin '64LLB, Bill Clinton's treasury secretary.) "Because I was a well-educated person, I was able to use that education in the forging of relationships," he says. "I did a lot of business abroad, in cultures where being liberally educated matters more than it does here."

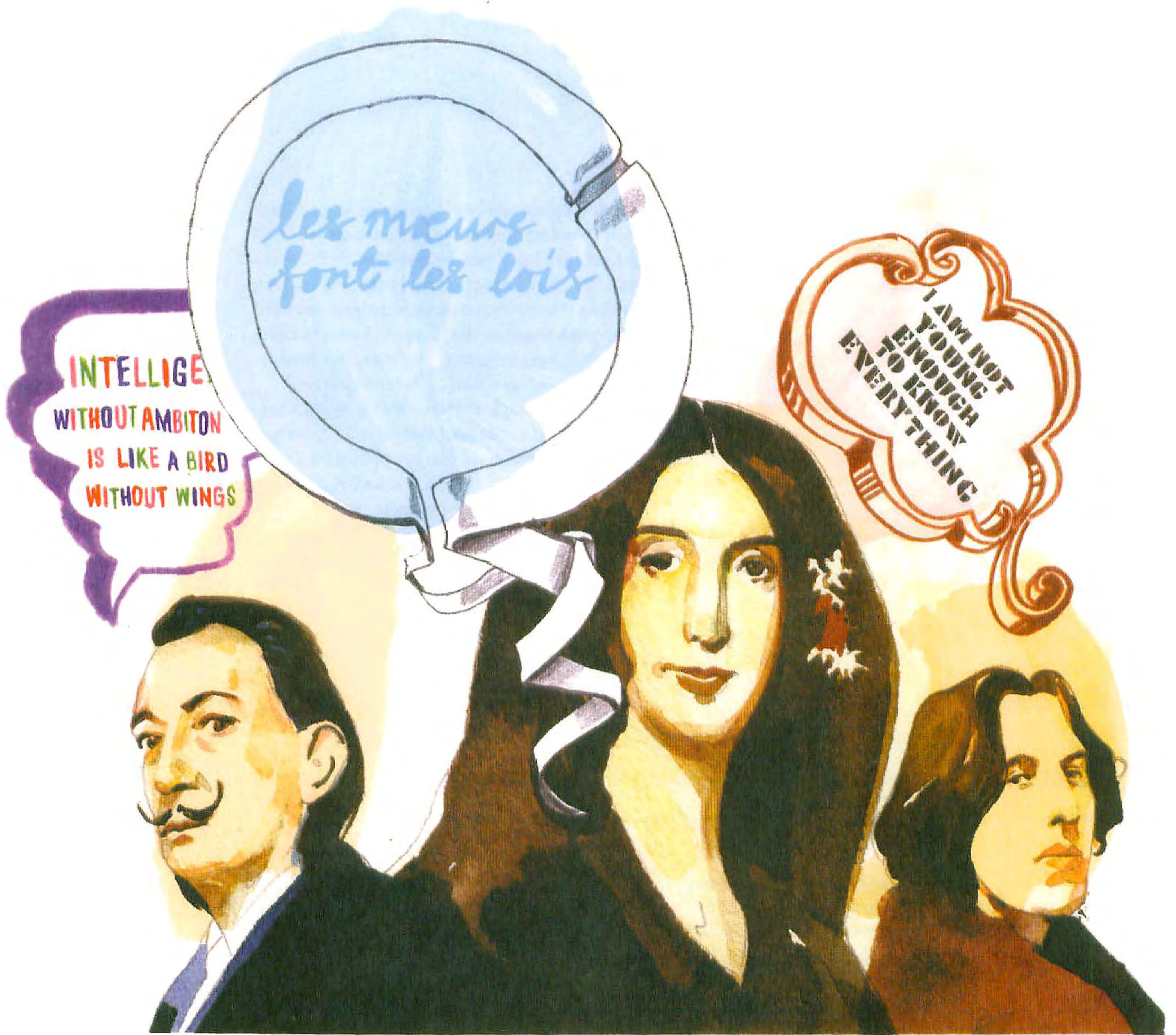
But at a more profound level, says Charles D. Ellis '59, liberal arts lay the groundwork for strategic management of people. Ellis should know: even though he majored in art history, Click and Clack's favorite field, he later founded and ran, for 30 years, the international business strategy consulting firm Greenwich Associates. "Business management as it is now best practiced," he says, "is the most liberating and creative and dynamic work people can be involved in: working all the time with human beings. The only chance you have to be successful is to think of it as a humanistic engagement, as if everyone in your business is a volunteer and could get another job—and *will* get another job if you don't deal with them in a way that they find important and meaningful, even exhilarating. The more you can learn about them and how they work together, and have a chance to think in terms of a longer-term framework and broader vision—all this comes out of a liberal education."

Almost all the people I interviewed spoke of learning, as undergraduates, a mode of analysis deeper and ultimately more reliable and more creative than what they learned in business school. Donna Dubinsky '77, CEO of Numenta, was the business brains behind the PalmPilot and the newer Handspring Visor. At Yale she majored in modern American political history and wrote her senior essay on nativism and the Rosenbergs. She sees a strong analogy between history and business. "Business is a giant jigsaw puzzle, with the market, product, right financial and people resources, understanding of the environment," she reflects. "If all those pieces fit together, you do well in business. If you focus on just some of the pieces, you won't succeed. History is a lot like that; you have to look at environment and technological development and philosophy and competition with neighboring countries. You learn to understand how critical context and complex systems are."

**"No, really," Robert's parents informed me, "we don't want him wasting his time in something that won't get him into law school."**

Richard Franke '53, retired CEO of the investment firm John Nuveen & Co., adds, "Whatever has made you good and your firm a success is probably going to change within five years or so. You have to recreate the firm through an orderly process every five years. If you hired only on the strength of the technical training a person has—well, you need someone who can think through a set of issues and come out the other side with a practical set of conclusions. Because I was CEO of our company for 24 years, I had a unique opportunity to set the culture and to bring on people who could flourish in that culture. I looked for a liberal arts background."

Hire liberal arts majors in preference to business majors? Can Franke be serious? Yes, if the opinions of his peers are any evidence. Says Dubinsky, "I am not wild about business degrees for undergraduates;




that's a vocational-school sort of thing. I would say, for an entry-level job, if I'm hiring people I would absolutely prefer a liberal arts degree to a business degree." Charles Ellis is still more emphatic: "For leaders and managers, an undergraduate degree in business is a genuine, serious mistake. What you're going to learn is an advanced version of bookkeeping; you never learn the most rigorous thinking taught in professional business schools. I don't know anybody who recommends undergraduate study in business, certainly not over liberal arts, and I include science."

YET THIS PAST APRIL, Princeton historian Stanley Katz wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that, in the modern research university, "liberal education for undergraduates . . . is in ruins." Katz, president emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies, argues that the major universities "have reversed our priorities and now give precedence to research and graduate and professional training—in the kind of faculty members we recruit, in the incentives (light or nil teaching loads) we offer them, and even in the teaching we value (graduate over undergraduate students)."

Katz makes a complex argument about causes. One of his points is that inside the research university, graduate and professional research and education attract much more funding and many more professional accolades for faculty than undergraduate teaching. He also cites a state of affairs every humanities scholar knows intimately: "the difficulty of financing the humanities and soft social sciences." Scholars in these fields "teach more, get paid less, and have fewer resources for research than their col-

leagues in the natural sciences and hard social sciences. They have less leverage in the institution to get what they want, from secretarial services and office space to computers."

Here's an example close to home. If I, a historian, were to receive a prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities research fellowship, the most I could get paid is $40,000 for a 9- to 12-month grant period. This sum (I can now happily say) would not cover my salary during that time. I would have to either find another grant to supplement it, convince my employer to make up the difference, or take the financial hit myself. Moreover, my university receives no overhead expenses for administering the grant; nor does the grant support any technical personnel, research assistants, junior faculty, or secretarial services. Understandably, universities are far more interested in the grants scientists and engineers bring in—which can be in the hundreds of thousands and millions of dollars, with hefty overhead provisions. If those of us in the humanities occasionally seem intemperate on these matters, the truth is that we work in a world that tosses leftover chump change our way after taking care of business.

Finally, Katz has some blame for liberal arts scholars themselves. The explosion of knowledge in the past 50 years, he writes, has made faculties, now more specialized than ever before, unwilling to "identify an essential core of knowledge" for students. Where once most institutions required every undergraduate to take a "core curriculum" of philosophy, history, English, foreign language, mathematics, and science—so that even physics majors were obliged to read some literature and philosophy—that practice has now all but disappeared.

I experienced the trend firsthand in my own College of Arts and Sciences when the faculty debated a new General Education curriculum. When I realized that all three models we were considering would eliminate our core curriculum, I discovered—I hadn't recognized it ahead of time—my own conviction that all our students should be required to take a few fundamental courses. Why? Because my teaching depended on students knowing things that they would only learn, for example, in an introductory American government course. Because we are sending students out into a global world wherever they live and work, and knowing the contours of world history for the past five centuries provides an indispensable base for intelligent action in that world. Because without learning to read texts critically (hard work that many students try to avoid), our graduates cannot recognize a persuasive argument, a deep insight, or beautiful literature.

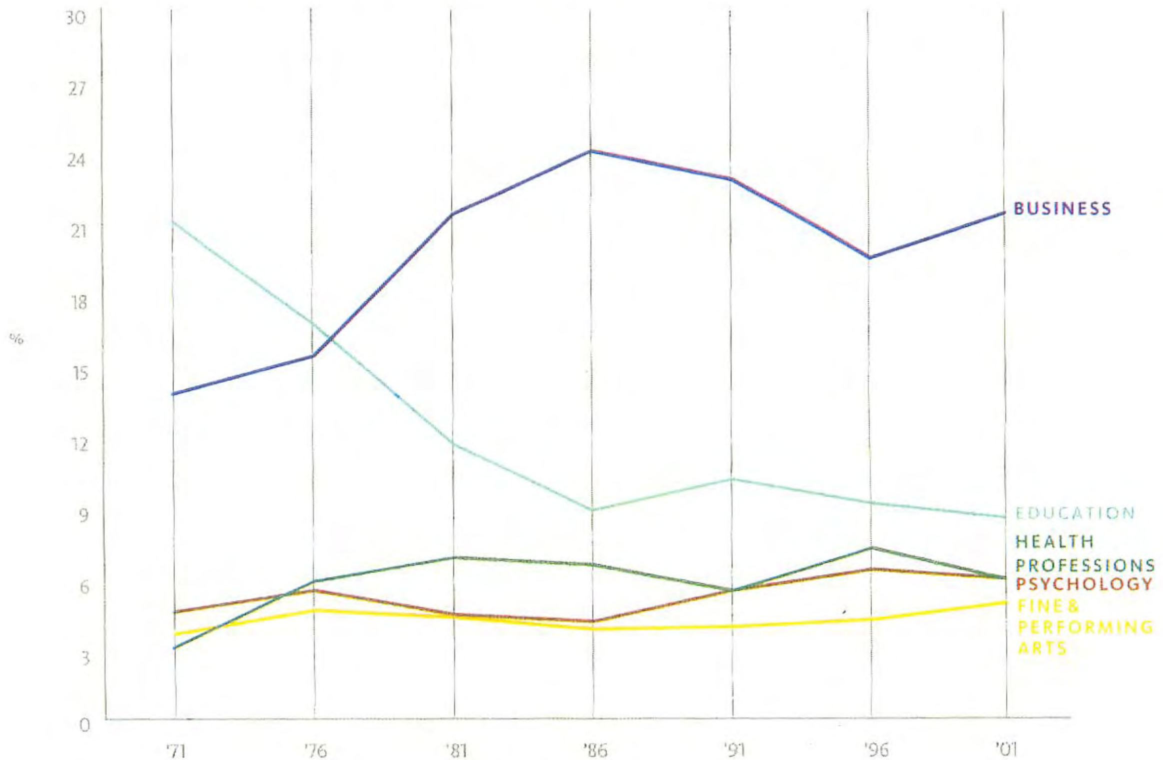
During the debate I raised all these points—unassailable arguments, I thought. Whereupon my colleagues voted by a three-to-one margin to jettison the core altogether, and the University of Hartford joined the great majority of U.S. colleges.

Most institutions, Yale among them, insist on what are essentially distributional requirements: a set number of courses (in Yale's case two) in each of social science, arts and humanities, and the natural sciences, with some overlay requirements in math, foreign languages, and writing. The theory here is that students need less a common core of knowledge than a grasp of the modes of inquiry represented by these venerable intellectual divisions.

**Academics in the humanities work in a world that tosses leftover chump change our way after taking care of business.**

After its recent review of the undergraduate curriculum (see "Building a Better Yalie," January/February 2004) Yale is now also ramping up its requirements for some specific skills that appear to be declining throughout the college-age population. There is no single topic on which faculty—nationwide—agree more than that student writing is atrocious and getting worse. At the same time, scientists, who have already had to rework their courses so that nonscientists can pass them, have discovered that students' quantitative reasoning skills leave much to be desired. So Yale will now require students to take two courses focused on each of these essential skills.

A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION, even vaguely defined and "core"-less, is the only intellectual antidote to the overwhelming flood of information and genuine technological change we are experiencing. A liberal arts education that works teaches students to read and to reason; to learn something about the range




Nationally, the last 20 years have witnessed the dominance of the undergraduate business degree. (Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. "Business" includes marketing operations, administrative services, and other business-related fields. Percentages are for academic years ending in the year shown.)

of human expression and experience; to consider the great literature and contending ideas of Western and world civilization; to recognize and construct arguments; and to have a sense of humility about the lives and minds that have gone before. It also makes possible a kind of citizenship without which democracy crumbles. Thomas Jefferson argued that education should "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."

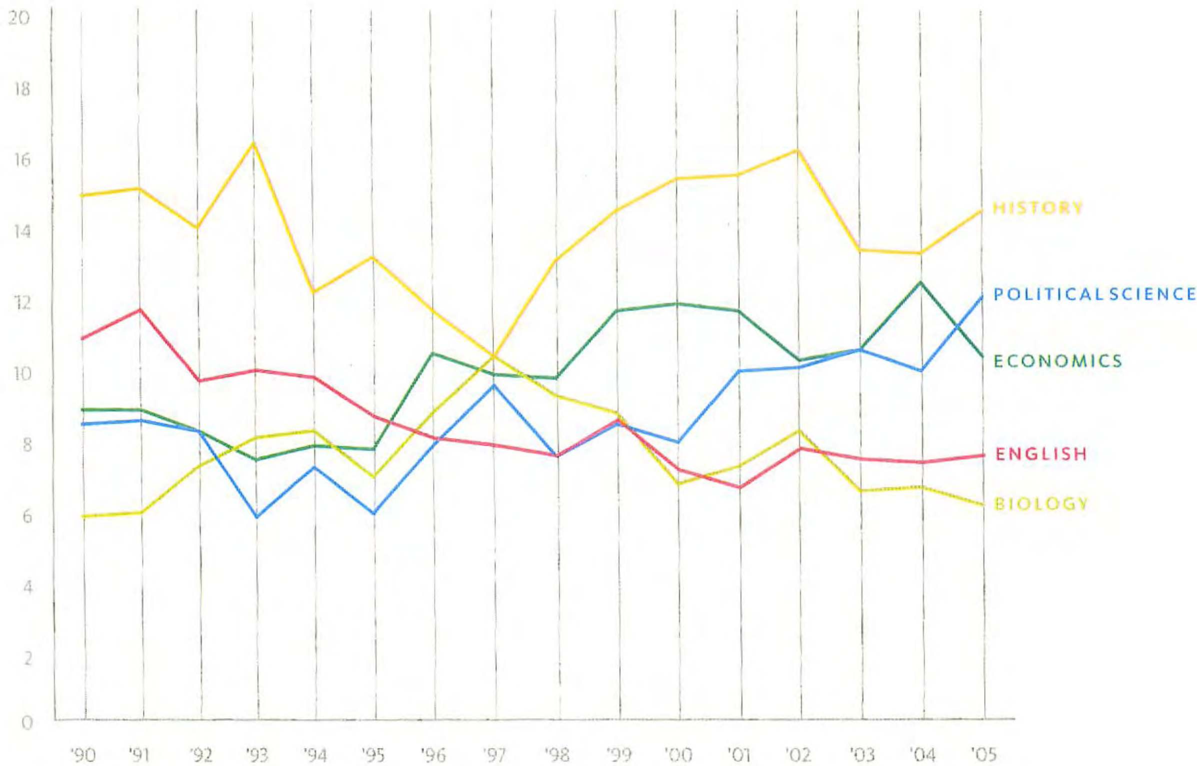
The most serious danger in the rise of pre-professional education in American society—especially when combined with a long-term decline in spending for public education—is that the electorate no longer learns to think for itself, that it learns by rote, and relies far too heavily on "training" rather than "education." Consider the fact that a majority of the American people believed in late 2003 that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11, even though there has never been any evidence of the connection. Yes, people who are trained to construct and test arguments make mistakes too. But they also learn how to self-correct: questioning and doubt are fundamental to the process.

Or, as Charles Ellis puts it, "Freedom to have doubt is the first step toward creativity, and it's very hard to get to a constructive kind of doubt without a liberal education." Judging from testimony like this, Yale is doing a fine job teaching the liberal arts. I wish more people in the business world would make these points: publicly, loudly, in newspapers and magazines and in speeches and when they receive honorary degrees. I wish they would earmark funds to support undergraduate teaching or scholarship in the humanities (as one wonderful donor to my university did). I wish they would recognize the immense advantages that sciences, engineering, athletics, and business have over the humanities, and give accordingly.

When Washington administrations (of either party) cut the budgets of the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, businesspeople could make a point of calling their senators and representatives—who will be able to make much more of their support than that of the usual suspects: the academics, artists, writers, and museum professionals dependent on NEH or NEA grants. And nearly every state has a humanities center or institute of some sort, desperate for sophisticated business support and leadership.

Here a word, again, from those who work in the world that supposedly demands the demise of the

Top undergraduate majors at Yale (percent of total)

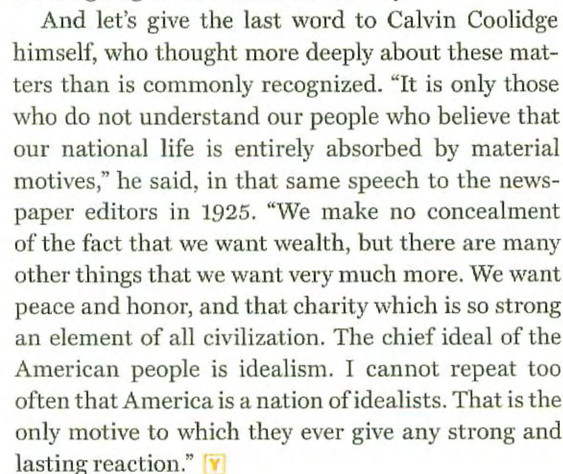



Yale needs no undergraduate degrees in business to draw students. But in the past decade, English has ceded second place. (Source: Yale Office of Institutional Research. Percentages are for academic years ending in the year shown.)

outmoded, old-fashioned liberal arts education.

"I tell people that liberal education matters because it's the whole person who advances through life," says Robert Rubin. "It's kind of a rear guard position to have, but one that I carry proudly." For Rubin, the pull toward the humanities is so strong that he has left Wall Street twice to return to the academy. In 1987 he entered Columbia for a master's degree in history; he is now working on a doctorate in the theory and history of architecture. "I find purely intellectual endeavor much harder than trading," he says. "In the PhD program at Columbia, I automatically get paid a stipend. I'm prouder of that money than the money I made on Wall Street."

Richard Franke, who has given several million dollars to the University of Chicago Humanities Institute (it is now named for him and his wife, Barbara), received the National Humanities Medal in 1997. He is one of the most eloquent liberal arts advocates I have ever heard. It is "absolutely wrong," he says, to think of business as only making money. "Business can't be only about that. It's about a life's work. If your incentive is money alone, it's the basest incentive. As an executive you must be able to say, 'What is the meaning and public purpose of what we're doing; why is it important that we buy municipal securities and finance hospitals and roads, that we are building the underpinnings of society?' You have to transfer that way of viewing what your work is, so that people, after 5 or 10 or 15 years—whenever they hit that wall of doubt—can be proud of what they do. Money alone is a bad, awkward, proven-inadequate reward. If we are so driven as to think that we should increase earnings every quarter regardless, we are going to have a soulless society."



And let's give the last word to Calvin Coolidge himself, who thought more deeply about these matters than is commonly recognized. "It is only those who do not understand our people who believe that our national life is entirely absorbed by material motives," he said, in that same speech to the newspaper editors in 1925. "We make no concealment of the fact that we want wealth, but there are many other things that we want very much more. We want peace and honor, and that charity which is so strong an element of all civilization. The chief ideal of the American people is idealism. I cannot repeat too often that America is a nation of idealists. That is the only motive to which they ever give any strong and lasting reaction." Y