



The Scandal of Uneducated College Graduates



Dale Ahlquist

A few years ago, a friend said to me: “At some point, everything becomes a TLA.” I admitted that I didn’t know what he was talking about. “What’s a TLA?” I asked. “Three Letter Acronym.”

Although amused, I did not respond with: “LOL.” Of course, LOL had not yet risen to its present prominence, and even now people don’t type LOL, they use an “emoji.”

His witticism was spot on, though. Acronyms have become our substitutes for writing and speaking, catchword substitutes for thinking. They stop discussion rather than start it.

There was someone who saw this coming almost one hundred years ago, and he went by a Three Letter Acronym. It was GKC: the profound, prolific, and prophetic English writer, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936). “Catchwords,” he says, “and capricious and disproportionate splashes of news, [and] all this chaos of capital letters and uncompleted sentences, [are] very bad for the brain. It is doing exactly

About the Author



Dale Ahlquist is President of the Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton and the Chesterton Schools Network. He is the creator and host of the EWTN television series, “The Apostle of Common Sense” and Publisher of *Gilbert Magazine*. He is a Senior Fellow of the Chesterton Library at Oxford.

the opposite of all that public education is supposed to do. It is ‘stupefying:’ it is manufacturing stupid people.”¹

The rise of incomplete thinking has been marked over the last several decades by a near-total loss of true humanities

studies at many colleges and universities. It's a terrible scandal that, without authentic humanities education, universities around the world are manufacturing cohort after cohort of uneducated people.

The irrelevance of modern "humanities" programs can now be seen in the course offerings that are doing everything they can to scream relevance. At mainstream universities, besides core requirements that cover "Social Differences" (which may include Queer Studies and "Eco-Feminism"), there are electives such as: "How to Watch Television," "How to Watch Sports," and for the more actively minded: "How to Win a Beauty Contest." For those with even more supposedly specialized academic interests, there are courses on the films of Whoopi Goldberg or on the historical and cultural impact of Miley Cyrus. I wish I was making this up.

Although it takes no effort to ridicule the ridiculous, for some reason we have lost our ability to do so. A simple litany of the college

tell horror stories about humanities departments, I will restrain myself. I will simply quote Chesterton: "The modern world does not need to be satirized; for it is satirizing itself."²

Everyone agrees, or claims to agree, that we want citizens who can think for themselves. But our education system, our commercial culture, and the latent message of our social media are precisely the opposite. We want everyone to get in line.

However, in order for citizens to think for themselves, they must actually be taught how to think. To do that, they must be taught philosophy. In order to be taught philosophy, they must be taught logic. In order to understand logic, to have a logical argument, to reach a conclusion and to defend a conclusion, they must be able to articulate an idea. In order to articulate, they must be taught language. If English is their language (or even if Spanish is their language), to better understand and use their language, they really should be taught Latin, which is the foundation of their language. And since about 30% of English is based on Greek, they would do well to study Greek, too. As Chesterton says: "Greek is of all things most essential to a democracy, the very name of which is Greek. And the early history of democracy is all in Greek, while the early history of aristocracy is partly in Phoenician and other languages fortunately lost for ever."³

But most universities these days are not teaching philosophy, or logic, or Latin. Even the language that we are teaching is flat and formless and devoid of content. We have taken our great literature, the structural masterpieces of our language, and deconstructed it, that is, we have destroyed it. Now, preserving the culture has become counter-cultural.

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courses on sexual and gender identity, taught by professors who have apparently earned academic degrees and taken by students who apparently will earn them (I use the term "earn" in a rather loose manner), should be a sadly laughable indictment. But as tempting as it is to



School of Athens by Raphael

The only “culture” most young people know is pop culture—a reference less to what is popular than to, well, popcorn—fluffy and not particularly nourishing and certainly soon stale. And what you eat at the movies.

Even as clear thinking becomes a rarer and rarer skill, there ironically remains fierce competition to be accepted into many universities. In fact, one out of three parents admit that they would pay someone else to take an admissions test to get their children into a “good” college—whatever it is they mean by that term.⁴ There is a growing industry for college admissions consulting: the number of such consultants has increased 400% in the last ten years.⁵ And the headlines have recently startled us with stories about celebrities who have bribed others for the privilege of paying exorbitant tuitions at certain universities. In some cases, they are paying an extra \$100,000 to get their children into public universities.⁶

Indeed, admissions tests are of increasing importance for most colleges during the admissions process. Of course, this is a realm ruled by two giants: the SAT and the ACT. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was another acronym that served as the basis of education: “The Three Rs”: Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Rithmetic. This emphasis produced four or five generations of citizens who could actually read, write, and perform calculations without the use of a

calculator. Testing was done on a local basis, but reflected a rather universal understanding of what skills and knowledge a student needed to master.

The first multiple choice question test was invented in 1915, during World War I. A mechanized test to accompany the rise of mechanized warfare. The purpose of the tests was to attempt to assess intelligence without asking specific questions about knowledge. They were aptitude tests and not achievement tests. Then came the SAT in the 1920s. Colleges were at first wary of the College Board, but by 1940, Harvard was convinced that the SAT could predict college success. Then the ACT was introduced in 1958. There was a new emphasis on science so that America could compete with the Soviet Union in the space race. In the 1960’s, the SAT was reduced to two areas of assessment: verbal reasoning and math reasoning. In 1970, the scores for verbal reasoning started to drop and have continued to drop since. The scores for math reasoning also dropped, but have leveled off.

There is a new kid on the block in the world of admissions tests. It’s called the Classic Learning Test (CLA) and is being offered to high school students by several colleges (including Christendom) as an alternative to the SAT and ACT. The CLT is a new alternative standardized test that presents students with passages selected from the great

works of civilization. The CLT recently held a conference where the entire board—an impressive group of people, in spite of my presence on it—gathered and evaluated what is going on in the world of admissions testing.

At the CLT Conference, board member David Goodwin, who is president of the Association of Classical Christian Schools, said that the SAT and ACT regard children as computers into whom you can load data. Students train for the test not for college. That's a problem. High schools "teach to the test." That's a problem. The test scores have still gone down and have had to be "adjusted." That's a problem. Colleges admit students who are not prepared and then they have to take remedial courses. That's a problem.⁷

Another board member, Mark Bauerlein, a Professor of Literature at Emory University and a senior editor at *First Things*, talked about the collapse of the humanities. He astutely observed that this collapse has occurred with the cooperation of the professors of the humanities departments. The humanities professors have lost confidence in their own material and in their disciplines. Great literature is being phased out. The texts that are being studied and used in tests are bland, neutral, and uninteresting—passages that don't require you to

have a moral reaction. The tests are in the hands of people who don't care about tradition.⁸

As Chesterton says: "We are not familiar with any of the rational arguments for tradition, but we are almost wearily familiar with the arguments for change."⁹

And yet, while the humanities wither, the sciences seem to thrive. Fueled by the increasing pressure on our educational institutions, from both the political and commercial realms, the over-emphasis on the sciences is exerted on both public and private educational institutions. The urgent claim is that, in order for America to be competitive, even competent, we must better prepare students by emphasizing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Or, to use its acronym, STEM. These days, the funding of education, the formulation of new curricula, and all the news stories about the direction of education are driven by STEM.

Indeed, the increasing focus on STEM has coincided with the crisis in humanities departments. And yes, Chesterton predicted it:

A perfectly vigorous and intelligent young American, equipped with all the latest devices of mechanics and chemistry, bursting with all the latest business tips about salesmanship and mass psychology, is not an educated

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man. He is not educated because he has only been educated in all modern things, and not even in all mortal, let alone all immortal things. In a word, he has not been made acquainted with human things; and that is what we mean when we say that he has neglected the humanities.¹⁰

A true liberal arts education, of course, must include science and mathematics, just as it must include the humanities. The neglect of either leads not merely to incomplete thinking but bad thinking. The humanities need the rigor of reason, the sharpening of the mind by calculation and observation; the sciences need the humanities to ask out loud the questions that are implied in any analysis of the natural world: what does it mean? You can try to avoid teaching philosophy, but a philosophy still surfaces whether you know it or not.

Divorced from the true humanities, STEM is ultimately in service of the machine. Even our art and entertainment, despite their emphasis on special effects and computer-generated graphics, cannot escape the escapism. The driving plots are usually warnings about the machines that were made to serve us, but instead attempt to conquer us and possibly even destroy us. *Terminator*, *The Matrix*, name any dozen science fiction movies you want. Science fiction might not be science, but it might not be fiction either. Celluloid drama is still drama and harkens back to the roots of drama, which are religious roots, first in the Greek amphitheatre and then in the medieval miracle play. Modern drama has been a long, loud cry for God, or an even louder, longer cry to fill the void with entertainment.

The humanities have continued to decline, because we have left



H.G. Wells

out theology and religion. We have left God out of art and history, rendering both meaningless. Or worse. Chesterton says, “Take away the supernatural and what remains is the unnatural.”¹¹

H.G. Wells, an active materialist and a passive atheist, wrote pioneering science fiction, such as *The Time Machine* and *War of the Worlds*, that was as dystopian as any of today’s sci-fi films. His attempt at history also reflected his materialist views, where he paints man as just another animal, a product of evolution, and Christ as just another man. In other words, he leaves out the humanities—which is the human—and religion—which is God. Chesterton’s criticism of Wells’ *Outline of History* is that Wells tried to tell a story and leave out the main character. (And in response to Wells’ book, Chesterton wrote *The Everlasting Man*.)

H.G. Wells epitomizes the misimpression that only the empirical, what is physically quantifiable, represents reality. Only science is real, he would have us believe. Our culture uses science divorced from reality to steal souls. But the cold and clinical is sterile. It is not alive. Science without the humanities is like the cross without the corpus. It is the Protestant



preference. It is like Geometry without the poetry—angles for avoiding God. It is like a simple plus sign implying an equation that attempts to sum up everything, without the riddle of suffering.

As catchwords replace thinking, as the “TLA” replaces writing, as emojis replace words (a return to hieroglyphics, with the disadvantage that nothing we write will be preserved in stone), we are erasing our past. Soon we will run out of letters for the acronyms we will need. Just look at the growing crisis among those promoting the agenda of LGBTQRXYZ.

The problem—the scandal—with college degrees is going to be more fundamental than the poor economic return those learning a single technical function will increasingly experience as technology replaces jobs. Not only are graduates going to discover one day in bald and brutal numbers that the degree wasn’t worth it, they’re going to figure out that they didn’t learn anything.

We must differentiate, however, between crisis and scandal. A crisis is a serious problem that has to be dealt with. We might be able to solve it or avert it, or else the problem will overwhelm us. The system,

the society, will collapse. But that is not a scandal. A scandal is a willful abuse of power by those in a position of authority that causes a loss of confidence or trust in those under that authority. It is bad behavior on the part of leaders that “gives scandal” to their followers, who would normally respect them. A scandal in the Church, for instance, may cause the faithful to lose their faith. Or they may keep their faith, but lose their trust in certain Church leaders.

Likewise, a scandal in mainstream higher education may cause people to lose their faith in the institutions that represent higher education. They will either withdraw their support, causing some institutions to collapse, or those institutions will lose their authority, their credibility, and their power in our society. The wisdom and knowledge of a civilization have to be protected in order to be passed on to subsequent generations.

The next scandal in higher education is when society suddenly and certainly realizes that it has been duped; that the keepers of the light have been keeping everyone in the dark. Until then, graduates will continue to emerge from most

colleges with no sense of direction, either ultimately or immediately. At best, they might have some strong opinions about the burning issues of the day that are neither well-formed nor well-articulated

We must return to teaching the authentic humanities, an approach taken by several smaller liberal arts colleges, many with a Catholic or Christian focus. We must teach faith and reason. We must teach the human things. It is useless to manipulate the technical things without asking the question “Why?” It is useless to do the technical things, to measure the material world, to measure measurement itself in the abstract, without knowing our purpose for doing so. By neglecting—or avoiding—teaching the ultimate truth, we are not teaching any truth at all.

It comes back to Chesterton’s prophecy. As a society, we have stupefied our students. And as a society, we are manufacturing stupid people. When a person—or an institution—is on a path of self-destruction, there are only two

choices: continue on the same path and perish or turn around. Go back. That would be revolutionary. But a true Revolution, says Chesterton, is a Restoration.¹²

People will accuse us, the true Revolutionaries, the Restorers, of simply wanting to put the clock back, which they claim is impossible. They are right in their accusation. We are trying to put the clock back. But they are wrong when they say it is impossible. Chesterton, as usual, has already anticipated their objection:

*There is one metaphor of which the moderns are very fond; they are always saying, “You can’t put the clock back.” The simple and obvious answer is “You can.” A clock, being a piece of human construction, can be restored by the human finger to any figure or hour. In the same way society, being a piece of human construction, can be reconstructed upon any plan that has ever existed. There is another proverb, “As you have made your bed, so you must lie on it”; which again is simply a lie. If I have made my bed uncomfortable, please God I will make it again.*¹³ **P**

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Adam Wilson

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Niall O’Donnell

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FOOTNOTES

1. G.K.’s Weekly, Nov. 24, 1928
2. G.K.’s Weekly, Oct. 20, 1928
3. G.K.’s Weekly, Feb. 28, 1931
4. Harper’s Index, *Harper’s Magazine*, June, 2019, p. 9
5. Harper’s Index, *Harper’s Magazine*, June, 2019, p. 9
6. Do a web search for television star Lori Laughlin. She was trying to get her daughter into UCLA.
7. David Goodwin, remarks at the CLT Higher Ed Summit, Annapolis, MD, April 25-27, 2019
8. Mark Bauerlein, remarks at the CLT Higher Ed Summit, Annapolis, MD, April 25-27, 2019
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10. “The New Groove,” *The Common Man* (1950)
11. “Christmas and the Aesthetes,” *Heretics* (1905)
12. “The Fear of the Past,” *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910)
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