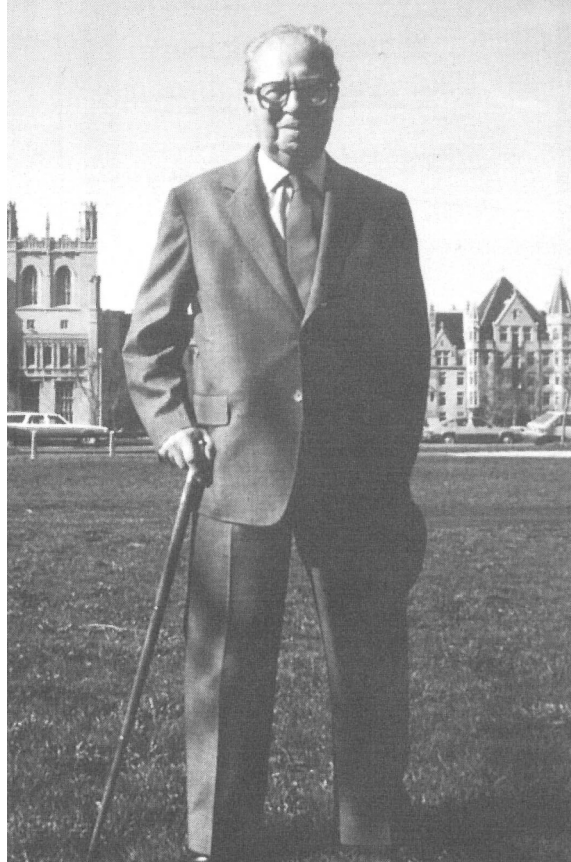


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A GUIDEBOOK TO LEARNING

For the Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom

Mortimer J. Adler

CHAPTER 3

Universities

As we have seen, most encyclopedias, past and present, do not provide guidance for exploring the world of learning that they comprehensively cover. Nor do university catalogues. They, too, are mostly A to Z affairs. They cover everything, but in the range of subjects they present, one thing is not shown to be more important than another. A university catalogue is no more a guidebook to learning than a Sears Roebuck catalogue is a guidebook to buying.

Was this always the case? Or is it largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, symptomatic of the contemporary retreat from any effort to evaluate subjects and grade them on a scale of importance or significance?

When universities came into being in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in Padua and Paris, in Oxford and Cambridge, the main divisions of learning were manifest in the four faculties that constituted them. One of these was the faculty of arts. The other three were the professional faculties of medicine, law, and theology.

The latter, in the order named, corresponded to practical concerns of less and greater importance: the care of the body, the conduct of life and of society, and the salvation of the soul. In referring to these three areas of concern as practical, I am calling attention to the fact that the men who became doctors of medicine, of law, and of theology were not only men of learning, but also the practitioners of learned professions.

In contrast, the faculty of arts represented general as opposed to specialized learning, and learning for its own sake rather than for its useful application to some special field of practice or action. This faculty consisted of teachers who bore the title Master of Arts. The students they succeeded in initiating into the world of general learning were certified as Bachelors of Arts.

As it is generally used today to signify mainly the fine arts, and sometimes even more narrowly the visual arts as differentiated from literature, music, and other fine arts, the word "arts" does not convey the scope of this nonprofessional branch of a medieval university. What was signified by the word "arts" included all the liberal arts, both those of language and those of mathematics. It also included all the sciences, which were regarded as branches of philosophy, both speculative or theoretical and practical or moral.

The faculty of arts might, therefore, have been more appropriately called the philosophical faculty or even, perhaps, the faculty of the humanities or of humane letters. But once again we must guard against the current use of these terms by remembering that the Latin word "*humanitas*," translating the Greek word "*paideia*," signifies general as opposed to specialized learning. Thus understood, it includes all branches of learning, not just those that remain after we have named the various sciences, natural and social. We must also remember that philosophy once meant the kind of learning that was everybody's business, not—as it has become in our day—a highly technical field of specialized scholarship.

It was not until the nineteenth century that German universities introduced the degree of doctor of philosophy to go along with the three professional doctorates in medicine, law, and theology. When that happened philosophy no longer stood for general as opposed to specialized learning. On the contrary, the faculty of philosophy comprehended within its scope all branches of specialized scholarship, as specialized as medicine, law, and theology, but differentiated from them by virtue of the fact that these branches of specialized scholarship were devoted to the advancement of learning for its own sake, not for the sake of applying knowledge in practice or action.

As originally established in the German universities of the last century, the Ph.D. degree signified competence in research and was awarded to scholars who intended to devote themselves mainly to research. It was not a degree that was also supposed to certify competence in teaching, as it has become in American universities today.

That the doctorate of philosophy was in origin, and still persists as, a mark of specialized scholarship rather than of broad, general, or humanistic learning is plainly indicated by the qualification that the degree always carries. One never receives a doctorate in philosophy as such, but instead a Ph.D. in history, or in English, physics, geology, economics, and so on. Even when one receives a Ph.D. in philosophy, it is not in philosophy as a general comprehension of all the arts and sciences, but in philosophy as just one among the many specialized fields of study offered in a modern university.

The oldest academic organization in the United States, concerned with the advancement of knowledge but not with the dissemination of it by teaching, is the American Philosophical Society. It was founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743; by 1769 it had established

six areas of research, as follows: Geography, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Astronomy; Medicine and Anatomy; Natural History and Chemistry; Trade and Commerce; Mechanics and Architecture; and Husbandry and American Improvements. The year 1815 brought with it the addition of a seventh area: History, Moral Science, and General Literature.

The foregoing was simplified in 1936 by a regrouping of these areas under four headings: Mathematics and Physical Sciences; Geological and Biological Sciences; Social Sciences; and Humanities.

Many American universities today have adopted something like this fourfold classification of all departments of research and instruction. Sometimes it is a threefold classification, as in Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, which is partitioned into the Social Sciences, the Natural Sciences, and the Humanities. In any case, what is now called Humanities is the residue that remains after all the branches of science have been listed.

The listing is, as might be expected, mostly alphabetical. Thus, under Columbia's general heading of Natural Sciences, we find:

| | |
|---|---|
| Anatomy and Cell Biology | Computer Science |
| Applied Physics and Nuclear Engineering | Electrical Engineering |
| Astronomy | Geological Sciences |
| Biochemistry | Human Genetics and Development |
| Biological Sciences | Industrial Engineering and Operations Research |
| Chemical Engineering and Applied Chemistry | Mathematics |
| Chemistry | Mechanical Engineering |
| Civil Engineering and Engineering Mechanics | Microbiology |
| Mining, Metallurgical, and Mineral Engineering | Physics |
| | Physiology |

Pathology

Psychology

Pharmacology

Statistics

Under Social Sciences, we find:

Anthropology

History

Economics

Political Science

Geography

Sociology

And under Humanities, the following:

Art History and
Archaeology

Italian

Linguistics

Classics

Middle East Languages and
Cultures

East Asian Languages and
Cultures

Music

English and Comparative

Philosophy

Literature

Religion

French and Romance
Philology

Slavic Languages

Spanish and Portuguese

Germanic Languages

Whether under a fourfold or a threefold division, the number of departments in our university graduate schools is constantly on the increase. At Harvard University in 1919, there were fifteen academic departments. This increased to twenty eight in 1949 and to thirty one in 1976. At Princeton University, the number of departments increased from fourteen in 1919 to twenty-six in 1976; at the University of California at Berkeley, from thirty-nine in 1919 to forty three in 1976.

These increases are largely due to the proliferation of the specialized sciences. When it was set up in 1863, the National Academy of Sciences comprised ten sections. In a major reorganization that took place in 1975, this increased to twenty-three sections, the additions consisting entirely of sciences that did not exist one hundred years ago.

The same proliferation has occurred in the professional schools of our universities. In addition to the three learned professions of medicine, law, and theology that have come down to us from the Middle Ages, we now have schools of business, of journalism, of social service, of dentistry, of nursing, of engineering (with all its various subdivisions), of computer technology, of education, of library science, of architecture, of agriculture, of animal husbandry, and so on. The foregoing enumeration, although not alphabetical, is as much a random order as an alphabetical listing would be.

If we turn from our university's graduate and professional schools to their undergraduate colleges, the alphabetical arrangement of courses in the catalogue is determined by the initial letter in the name of the academic department under the auspices of which these course of instruction are given.

The alphabetical lists of departments in our colleges are much too long to be reproduced here in full. To serve the same purpose, I think it will suffice to present comparable samplings from four such lists, taken from the current catalogues of Columbia University, Yale University, Harvard University, and the University of California at Berkeley.

In each case, the comparable samples consist of departments running from C through F. These relatively short samples will enable the reader to compare them at a glance and to note how they differ, either by what they add or what they omit. The differences represent a concern with subjects deemed of some importance for undergraduate instruction. But in all four cases, readers should also note that all the departments named appear to have equal status, one no more important in the realm of learning than another.

These four alphabetical displays can be taken as fairly representative of what is offered in almost all of our major colleges and universities. Here and there, as in Columbia's two requirements and in Harvard's six pronged core requirement, certain fields of study are singled out as indispensable for the acquisition of general learning.

These are among the few exceptions to the unrelieved alphabetiasis of college offerings.

| COLUMBIA | YALE |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Chemistry | Cell Biology |
| Classics | Chemistry |
| Computer Science | Classical Languages and Literatures |
| Contemporary Civilization | |
| Dance | Comparative Literature |
| East Asian Languages and Cultures | Computer Science East Asian Languages and Literatures |
| Economics | |
| Education | East Asian Studies |
| Engineering | Economic History |
| English and Comparative Literature | Economics Engineering and Applied Science |
| Film | English |
| French Language and Literature | Epidemiology and Public Health |
| | Experimental Pathology |
| | Forestry and Environmental Studies |
| | French |

HARVARD**UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA**

Celtic Languages and Literatures

Chemical Physics

Chemistry

The Classics

Comparative Literature

Computer Science

Dramatic Arts

Earth and Planetary Physics

East Asian Languages and Civilizations

East Asian Programs

Economics

Engineering Sciences and Applied Physics

English and American Literature and Language

European Studies

Expository Writing

Fine Arts

Folklore and Mythology

French Language and Literature

Chemistry
Chicano Studies

Classics

Comparative Literature

Computer Science

Development Studies

Dramatic Arts

Dutch Studies

East European Studies

Economics

English

Environmental Sciences

Ethnic Studies

Film
Folklore

French

Beyond such requirements where they exist, students can exercise freedom of choice with regard to the subjects that will be of major or minor interest to them. The alphabetical listing of courses gives them no guidance at all for the exercise of that choice. It does not tell them which subjects should be of major and which of minor interest to them, and why. It leaves their choice of majors and minors to the vagaries of their own ill informed current interests.

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Keith Finlayson

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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