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**The Professoriate and the Post-Truth Era: A
Historiographic Analysis of Expert Judgment and the
Destabilization of Objective Truth**

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Abstract: This paper explores the role that distrust of expert judgment plays in conservative critiques of higher education. We propose that academics should abandon the insistence on truth as the standard for the evaluation of research quality. Doing so would separate conservative critiques of higher education from broader concerns over expert

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judgment via the substitution of judgement criteria more readily accessible to laypeople. Based on evidence about how expert judgment actually functions, we propose utility as a standard accessible to all. We show this by describing a historiographic model of expert judgment within the research university. We close with a call for scholars to acknowledge the conflation of facts and values in their work—that is, its post-truth nature.

Keywords: conservative critique; higher education; utility; expert judgment; pragmatism

El profesorado y la era de la posverdad: Un análisis historiográfico del juicio de especialistas y la desestabilización de la verdad objetiva

Resumen: Este artículo explora el papel de la desconfianza en el juicio de expertos en revisiones conservadoras de la enseñanza superior. Proponemos que los académicos abandonen la insistencia en el estándar para la evaluación de la calidad de la investigación. Hacerlo sería una crítica conservadora distinta del más fácilmente accesible al tipo. Con base en la evidencia de lo hábilmente hablando, proponemos la utilidad como un estándar accesible a todos. Lo mostramos describiendo un modelo historiográfico de juicio de especialistas dentro de la universidad de investigación. Concluimos con un llamamiento a los estudiosos para que reconozcan los hechos de su trabajo -es decir, su naturaleza posverdad.

Palabras clave: conservative critique; enseñanza superior; utilidad; juicio de expertos; pragmatismo

O professorado e a era da pós-verdade: Uma análise historiográfica do juízo de especialistas e a desestabilização da verdade objetiva

Resumo: Este artigo explora o papel da desconfiança no juízo de especialistas em revisões conservadoras do ensino superior. Propomos que os acadêmicos abandonem a insistência no padrão para a avaliação da qualidade da pesquisa. Fazê-lo seria uma crítica conservadora distinta do mais facilmente acessível ao tipo. Com base na evidência de quão hábilmente falando, nós propomos a utilidade como um padrão acessível a todos. Mostramos isso descrevendo um modelo historiográfico de julgamento de especialistas dentro da universidade de pesquisa. Concluimos com um apelo aos estudiosos para que reconheçam os fatos de seu trabalho - isto é, sua natureza pós-verdade.

Palavras-chave: crítica conservadora; ensino superior; utilidade; juízo de especialistas; pragmatismo

The Professoriate and the Post-Truth Era: A Historiographic Analysis of Expert Judgment and the Destabilization of Objective Truth

For nearly four centuries, higher education institutions have been depicted by both academic and political leaders as serving desirable societal ends (e.g., Dorn, 2017; Geiger, 2015). Throughout most of this history, however, faculty members have also worked to establish and defend claims of specialized knowledge and vital expertise (Geiger, 1993, 2004). By the mid-1960s, these efforts had resulted in the full professionalization of the professoriate (Labaree, 2017; Rudolph, 1977). Within a professionalized professoriate, faculty members found their primary affinity with their discipline more often than their institution; found it difficult to gain employment without a doctoral or relevant professional degree; became more mobile throughout their careers; and often completed the abrogation of responsibility for students' non-academic lives as their work lives increasingly focused

on research, teaching, and service—with research typically the most highly prized of these responsibilities (Schuster & Finklestein, 2006).

Notably, however, the final transition to faculty-as-professionals rather than faculty-as-educators occurred at precisely the same time that the profound social and political dislocations of the student protest movements arrived on American college campuses (cf. Boren, 2001; Jencks & Riesman, 1968). The result of these overlapping sea changes in the normal operation of colleges and universities saw voices across the political spectrum offer vociferous critiques of higher education (Hartman, 2016; Prothero, 2017). For liberal students and politicians, colleges and universities had grown far too cozy with the military-industrial complex and delivered a curriculum that ignored the experiences of minoritized persons (e.g., Acuña, 2011; Biondi, 2012; Carney, 1999; Ferguson, 2012; Plummer, 2013; Rojas, 2007). For conservative students and politicians, these liberal objections provided a foil for long-running objections to the perceived radicalism of the academy (e.g., Critchlow, 2011; Nash, 1976; Patterson, 1996, 2005). Ironically, the commonly held assumption that colleges and universities existed in service to society made them the perfect rhetorical battleground in the Culture Wars, a series of asymmetrical debates that have long sought to define core American values (e.g., Hartman, 2016; Petrzela, 2017; Prothero, 2017).

Historians of higher education have documented the histories of student protests, political debates over the nature of the higher education, and structural changes to colleges and universities (e.g., Boren, 2001; Labaree, 2017; Loss, 2012; Thelin, 2011). Notably, however, historians have rarely systematically interrogated the interplay between these three historical narratives and the evolving nature of faculty work. As a result, we contend in this article that social scientists have not fully understood one of the key proximate causes for persistent contradictory findings about public support for higher education: the shift to a fully professionalized faculty dominated by expert judgment, a form of expertise with which some Americans have long felt discomfort (cf. Jencks & Riesman, 1968; Hofstadter, 1963). In this article, we contend that the simultaneous discomfort with and enthusiasm for higher education displayed by both liberals and conservatives stems from the opacity of the academic knowledge production process—from how research is funded to the technical language used to convey results to the limited ways that truth claims can be made—to virtually everyone not extensively trained in the academy in the same or in a closely related field. That is, both liberal and conservative critics of higher education hold that college and universities have ignored their responsibilities to “Truth” (cf. Hartman, 2016; Prothero, 2017) without clearly defining the term or recognizing that academics may use it in markedly different ways than they do.

Moreover, we contend that academics might have exacerbated the potential for distrust by failing to address critiques of higher education when they occurred and by refusing to clarify their theoretical vocabularies when called to account for their lack of ready intelligibility. To address this problem, we examine the contemporary debate around truth in both contemporary political discourse and in the academy. Notably, we show that claims of a post-truth era—particularly as it pertains to higher education—might well be overstated. We also demonstrate that most academics have a more tenuous claim to truth than they might otherwise claim. We next demonstrate the origins of these problems by tracing the historiography of expert judgment in the professions and of conservative critiques of higher education. We show that many of these conservative critiques actually respond to substantive issues arising from the very nature of expert judgment. Finally, we argue that these issues can be addressed by adopting the approach to truth advocated by Rortian pragmatism.

Post-Truth in Contemporary Discourse

Anxiety over the status of truth is a long-standing mainstay in contemporary American social and political discourse. However, concerns about truth have reached fever-pitch since the 2016 presidential campaign and election, amidst presidential declarations of *alternative facts* and accusations of deceit and misinformation targeting media outlets. Perhaps as a result of the anxiety created by these accusations, there has been concomitant concern over the role that discursive moments such as the Culture Wars might have had in creating the conditions under which *fake news* was able to emerge. In other words, many people have wondered whether concepts like cultural relativism are to blame for the president's—and others'—ability to claim that opposing views are simply misinformed or untrue. Indeed, there seems to have been an intensification of these anxieties not only over what is generally agreed upon as true, but also over the institutions that American society typically looks to that help discern what is and is not true—the media, government bodies, and experts (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

In the realm of education, one of the primary effects of this discourse concerning truth and expertise is the delegitimization of higher education. Institutions of higher education house experts in many different fields, the majority of whom produce research on issues that they believe are both relevant and beneficial to American society. However, the past several decades have seen a gradual increase in suspicion of and disregard for higher education (e.g., Gross, 2013; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). This suspicion is built, in part, from a conservative concern about an institution viewed largely as a space built by and for liberal intellectuals and wherein these same liberal intellectuals, in their roles as faculty members, might indoctrinate future voters (Gross, 2013). Reflecting this line of argument, most Republicans now believe that American universities negatively influence the country (Pew Research Center, 2017). This sentiment has increased within the past two years, coinciding with conservative political ascendance and rhetoric about fake news (Pew Research Center, 2017). Liberals, on the other hand, view higher education more favorably and typically hold that scientific and social scientific inquiry lead to the betterment of society via the production of new knowledge about social reality (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). Although simplified here, these views misunderstand both the aims of much academic research and actual scholarly debates about the nature of objectivity, subjectivity, and truth. Both of these views posit the existence of T/truth, identify the academy as a location where T/truth could be found and verified, and question whether trust can be safely placed with so-called experts. It is this complicated nexus of concerns about what constitutes the truth, suspicion of those traditionally entrusted with the truth, and the academy as a mistrusted site of truth that we interrogate in this article through an exploration of conservative critiques of higher education.

Post-Truth in the Philosophy of (Social) Science

Academics who study knowledge production in the natural and social sciences have consistently noted that there are profound discrepancies between the way that the scientific method is described in theory and the way it functions in practice (e.g., Feyerabend, 2010; Fine, 1996; Kuhn, 1996; Latour, 2010). Although the scientific method is typically regarded as a systematic approach to rigorous inquiry, the actual production of scientific knowledge, if often chaotic, and the utilization of scientific knowledge typically requires a mixture of professional expertise, popular sentiment, and political agency (e.g., Bowker & Star, 2000; Hacking, 1990; Latour, 1988, 2012; Porter, 1995). That problem is further exacerbated in the social sciences, where the connection between knowledge production and knowledge can be complicated by the involvement of human beings (e.g., Giddens,

1984; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Recognizing these differences, we regard the scientific method as the basic form of inquiry in both science-related fields and social science fields that seek to create experiments, quasi-experiments, or other conditions under which causal attributions can be made. In light of this focus, we use this section to show that two shifts—one being the shift from the conceptualization to the execution of the scientific method and the other being the shift from the production to the use of scientific knowledge—results in the conflation of what are, technically speaking, incommensurable truth claims (Feyerabend, 2010). To demonstrate how these incommensurable truth claims function, we first describe the shift from positivism to postpositivism. We then describe how both empirical findings about scientific work and philosophical discussions of truth produce considerable ambiguity within scientific practice. Finally, we suggest that the resultant scientific practice is a fundamentally pragmatic one.

Virtually all definitions of the scientific method include the same features: the formulation, testing, and revision of hypotheses; systematic observation and measurement; and the use of experimental methods (e.g., Carey, 2011; Gauch, 2002; Gower, 1996). However, although both scientists and the general public would likely agree that these features are critical to good science, they would likely diverge with regard to the end product of scientific inquiry. The public conceptualization of science emphasizes the pursuit of universal truths (big “T” Truths), which is how originators of the scientific method from antiquity until the mid-1900s would also likely have framed their work (Godfrey-Smith, 2003). However, since the Popperian Revolution, scientific inquiry has been oriented toward falsification rather than Truth (Sigmund, 2017). According to this formulation, scientific inquiry can never demonstrate conclusively that something is “True” but rather when things are “Not True” (Popper, 1959/2002). Notably, however, the movement toward Truth remains the goal. That is to say that, under experimental conditions, the results of one’s inquiry show merely that one particular set of conditions results in a particular outcome. It cannot show conclusively why or how that occurs—although further experiments can help to rule out potential explanations while also marking others as more or less plausible. With sufficient evidence, scientists begin to treat the explanations that they generate as small “t” true while also acknowledging they do so only provisionally. Importantly, this distinction between truth and Truth can easily be forgotten in practice and is often missed entirely by non-scientists (cf. Kuhn, 1996; Neal, Smith, & McCormick, 2008).

In an attempt to describe how knowledge production functions in general and in science specifically, some pragmatist philosophers have suggested that utility might be a more useful criterion for evaluating science than is truth (James, 1907/1981, 1909/1978). For pragmatists, utility is used to capture the capacity of an idea to generate understanding or to solve a problem of practical significance. This understanding of utility is predicated on the recognition that universal claims—that is, statements of big “T” Truth—can never be substantiated and that continuing to use the word truth to describe the results of inquiry is, therefore, problematic. Instead, pragmatists hold that both individuals and society as a whole have ever-evolving narratives that they use to explain observations of the world (Rorty & Engel, 2007). As new observations call into question prior knowledge, this narrative is adjusted continuously. Understandings that comprise the pragmatist’s narrative reality are inherently useful. They enable prediction of future events and explanation of past ones, but they are also subject to ongoing reevaluation and, according to Rortian pragmatism (Rorty, 1990, 1999), do not reflect meaningfully an objective reality but rather a socially constructed one. That is, once falsified, accounts of reality must be replaced by new explanations, which are always mediated by human experience. In other words, Rortian pragmatism recognizes that the things people label as *true* are, in fact, merely a story connecting those ideas that are *not false*.

Historiography of Expert Judgment

As we have shown, concerns about truth are widespread in both social and political discourse and in the philosophy of social science. These concerns both reflect and contribute to a foundational anxiety over the role and power of expert judgment in American society. In this section, we construct a brief historiography of expert judgment by drawing on two critical and interconnected histories: the development of professions and professionalization and the development of an American bureaucratic system. Exploring these historical developments provides several answers to the question of why Americans mistrust expert judgment quite so much: the democratic nature of the United States, the distance between those who are experts and those who are effected by expert decisions, and the persistent thread of anti-intellectualism that cycles throughout American history.

Professions: Breadth versus Depth

While the traditional professions (e.g., the clergy, law, or medicine) emerged in the late medieval and early modern era, professionalization sped up and hit its stride in the United States in the late 19th century (Siegrist, 2015). Broadly speaking, occupations become professions through parallel processes that involve, on the one hand, demarcation of specialized knowledge (Bowker & Star, 2000) and, on the other, developments on the social, political, and cultural levels (Siegrist, 2015). Typically, in order for a job to be considered a profession, there needs to be a well-defined body of knowledge over which the profession has control—both in terms of what the knowledge is and who has access to it—autonomy over their working environment, and a commitment to service to the public through their profession (Goldstein, 1984; Hatch, 1988; Siegrist, 2015). Additionally, professions require credibility; more often than not, that credibility is protected by requiring members to be certified by an institution, such as the state, legislation, or a higher education institution (Goldstein, 1984; Hatch, 1988; Siegrist, 2015). To a certain extent, this professionalization occurred due to the expansion of the capitalist state—there were more customers and more demand for goods and services (Siegrist, 2015). In the 20th century, the underclass created by a capitalist system required medical and social services, which led to increased professionalization for those realms, such as nurses or social workers (Siegrist, 2015).

Higher education has been deeply involved with the professionalizing process. As mentioned previously, professionalization requires institutions to confer legitimacy. In the European context, this role was often played by the state, but higher education fulfilled that role in the United States (Hatch, 1988). It is no coincidence that, just as professionalization was increasing speed, research universities also emerged (Geiger, 1986). For research universities to emerge as a predominant institutional type, there needed to be both a proliferation of specialized subject matter over which people could become experts and increased proliferation of the idea that colleges should prepare students for careers, especially those in the burgeoning American corporate world (Geiger, 1986). Indeed, the university system was integral in the creation of esoteric bodies of knowledge that form one of the pillars of professionalization; this phenomenon was fueled by the creation of academic disciplines, communities, and associations (Geiger, 1986). The combined effect of the foundation of land-grant universities and the spread of the elective system meant that professional training became subsumed under higher education's umbrella and the university became an institution that creates professions, legitimates their expert judgment, and ultimately obscures the process by which that judgment is produced (Geiger, 1986; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). These developments were firmly in place by the 20th century and only became more deeply entrenched with the influx of federal and industrial money after both world wars (Geiger, 2004; Jencks & Riesman, 1968). However, it was

not until the Academic Revolution of the 1960s that the supply of high-qualified faculty members fully met the demands of colleges and universities (Jencks & Riesman, 1968; Thelin, 2011), which catalyzed a shift in the nature of faculty work from primarily institution-based to primarily discipline-based (Schuster & Finklestein, 2006). That is, following the 1960s, most faculty members began to see themselves as disciplinary experts within professions rather than educators within institutions.

The effects of professionalization shaped the experiences of people ranging far beyond those who did the work—indeed, these effects emanated throughout society with profound consequences for the ways that people thought about themselves and professionals. Porter (1995) discussed professionalization and the development of the standard of objectivity in conjunction with each other. Professions such as actuaries and engineers developed objective standards in the face of public mistrust—evidence that this concern over expert judgment is of long standing (Porter, 1995). Rather than submitting to public scrutiny and knowledge, these privileged workers formed professions to maintain control over information and sought to expand the power of these professions (Porter, 1995). Goldstein (1984), in reconciling Foucault's (1975/1995) disciplinary theory with the traditional sociological account of professionalization, argued that the men (as they so often were) who carried out the disciplinary mechanisms were also those whose occupations were in the process of professionalizing, such as doctors, psychiatrists, and teachers. This conceptualization puts the professions in partnership with the state as it developed bureaucratic systems to manage and to preserve populations (Goldstein, 1984).

Bureaucracy: Managing Complexity

The late 19th century found American culture and society, like its systems of knowledge and work, becoming increasingly complex. The changes caused by the scientific and industrial revolutions increased the potential complexity of social and technological problems (Cowan, 1997), which meant that no single person could possess the knowledge to solve them. This growth in complexity in combination with the emergence of a money economy gave rise to the modern bureaucracy, especially in the context of a modern mass democracy (Nelson, 1982; Weber, 1947). Bureaucracy, in turn, rested on the availability and willingness of experts not only to fulfill their calling to service but also to place themselves as experts capable of solving social problems (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Ultimately, the combination of professional expertise and bureaucratic management had a profound effect on the way that the public perceives expert judgment in a democratic context.

Similar to the history of professionalization, understanding bureaucracies has its roots in classical sociology, but can be complicated by later poststructuralist developments. O'Neill (1986) deftly synthesized Weber's formal analysis of bureaucracy with Foucault's discursively produced bodies. Although Foucault and Weber understood rationalization differently, they both contend that bureaucratization is part of the rationalization of society (O'Neill, 1986). In many ways, Foucault grounds the Weberian analysis in its effects on the bodies of individuals within a bureaucratic society—in other words, the effects of a legal-rational bureaucratic system are played out physically in the discipline of bodies (O'Neill, 1986). These disciplinary strategies are often carried out through either the social sciences or professions legitimized by the social sciences, such as education, social work, management, or the prison industry (O'Neill, 1986). In many ways, professionalization fueled the bureaucratization of society, whereas the emergent bureaucracy demanded more professionals.

Democracy and its Discontents

The interconnectedness of professionalization and bureaucratization has had a profound effect on the ways that Americans understand and trust expert judgment—or, rather, the ways that

they do not trust expert judgment. This mistrust is also connected to the distance that is in place between experts and non-experts and the long history of American anti-intellectualism.

As shown earlier, professionalization and bureaucratization involve both the exertion of control and autonomy over bodies of knowledge and the use of that knowledge to administer the state and the people within it. Through the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, these processes increasingly fell under the purview of higher education. Research universities especially came to the fore in the proliferation of professions and the production of students to work in those professions (Geiger, 1986). These processes also removed decision-making from the realm of the quotidian—in other words, they introduced more distance between everyday people and the mechanisms that control their lives (Porter, 1995). Indeed, part of the professionalizing and bureaucratizing efforts was the concomitant institutionalization of objectivity as a hallmark of modern science (Porter, 1995). Quantification, objectivity, and their connection to impersonality was at once a tool to deal with distance and distrust and a way of creating that same distance for different audiences (Porter, 1995).

A key aspect of this historiography is its American context—both professionalization and bureaucratization took different routes in other countries. This context means that the development of the professions and the bureaucracy has occurred amidst American democracy and its deep-seated mistrust of elitism (Hatch, 1988; Hofstadter, 1963; Jacoby, 2008). This mistrust is neither overt nor unrelenting but is instead expressed in ambivalence and unease as well as cyclical fluctuations in levels of anti-intellectualism (Hatch, 1988; Hofstadter, 1963). Anti-intellectualism has taken several forms, ranging from general mistrust of experts to outright hostility towards universities (Hofstadter, 1963; Jacoby, 2008). Hofstadter (1963) saw anti-intellectualism's longevity linked to both the good intentions of its progenitors (e.g., the Great Awakening) and the fact that modern society will simply no longer function without experts, belying the long-standing myth of American self-sufficiency (Cowan, 1997). Notably, however, the 1960s saw a critical shift in the nature of this anti-intellectualism. What had been primarily a classed discourse (e.g., people with more education defended the idea of expertise, people with less education dismissed it) became a multivalent critique when conservative pundits began aggressively pursuing anti-intellectualism for political gain (e.g., Critchlow, 2011; Nash, 1976) and liberal intellectuals were forced to confront the high-profile failure of expert judgment in policy disasters such as school busing and the Vietnam War (e.g., Chomsky, 2002; Delmont, 2016; Formisano, 2004; Halberstam, 1972). Because experts are both produced by and housed in universities, anti-intellectualist attention most often focused on higher education.

Reinterpretation of Conservative Critique Based on Historiography

As described in the prior section, the depersonalized, unknowable nature of truth in modern society feeds into the distrust of expert judgment that pervades all segments of American society. Conservative commentators (e.g., Buckley, 1951; D'Souza, 1991; Sykes, 1990) have long-attempted to weaponize this lack of faith in expert judgment in order to frame liberal political values as problematic and to erode trust in institutions generally and universities specifically. This elision of concerns over expert judgment and faculty politics can be seen via an analysis of key texts written by conservatives during the Culture Wars. In this section, we show this process in operation using an analysis of Bloom's (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind*. We then use examples drawn from other conservative works positioned as part of the Culture Wars to show that these critiques collectively display a deep skepticism about the wisdom of professionals, which they ground in an espoused belief in objectivity and a stated objection to the conflation of facts and values. They also frequently

posit that the skills and content for a better educational model can be found in the “great book,” which substitutes the decisions of a large number of contemporaneous experts for the past judgment of a far more limited subset of minds.

Closing of the American Mind

Reacting to the threat that postmodernism posed to academic knowledge, Bloom (1987) suggested that there was only one possible solution: a fixed canon. Further, he argued that the only plausible foundation for that canon was the great books, a “generally recognized” collection of “classic texts” (p. 344), including works focused on “philosophy, theology, the literary classics, and on those scientists like Newton, Descartes, and Leibniz . . . [which] must help preserve what is most likely to be neglected in a democracy . . . not dogmatism but precisely the opposite: what is necessary to fight dogmatism” (p. 254). This quotation displays the fundamental essentialism and pretense to objectivity of most conservative critiques of higher education.

First, Bloom (1987) argued that a fixed canon centered on the great books presents value-laden content in domains ranging from philosophy to physics as merely neutral content that can function at the catalyst and content for meaningful communication. According to Bloom (1987): . . . tradition is unambiguous; its meaning is articulated in simple, rational speech that is immediately comprehensible and powerfully persuasive to all normal human beings. America tells one story: the unbroken, ineluctable progress of freedom and equality. [. . .] But the unity, grandeur, and attendant folklore of the founding heritage was attacked from so many directions in the last half-century that it gradually disappeared from daily life and from textbooks. (p. 55)

Here, Bloom responded directly to the critiques levied by liberal students and faculty members about the inattention of the academy to minoritized voices by denying the reality of their experiences. By equating American history with “freedom and equality” (p. 55), Bloom made clear that he—like many conservative commentators on higher education—believes that there is but one singular experience of reality: his own.

Second, Bloom’s work recalls long-running formulations of academic work that decenter the role of faculty members and assign the development of useful skills—such as the capacity to *fight dogmatism*—to the *right* kind of books (e.g., Potts, 2010; Reynolds, 2002; Sugrue, 1994). In this formulation, books are valuable because they pose difficult questions about the past and the present—and because they can represent common ground. In challenging us, they foster a mental discipline that has value in the “search for a good life,” which Bloom (1987) argued is the goal of an education (p. 34). Education then is a means to equip human beings for the constant striving for improvement that makes them “fully human” (p. 38). Notably, in his formulation of the great books curriculum, Bloom (1987) even argued against the presence of disciplines—warning the reader against “forcing them [books] into categories we make up” (p. 344). In making these claims, Bloom directly undercut the move toward expert judgment that anchors the modern systems of higher education. According to Bloom’s reasoning, no specialized disciplinary knowledge is required to confront difficult works, such as Newton’s and Leibniz’s original works on calculus, nor is the guidance of a faculty intermediary necessary. Instead, a person need only encounter these works as Bloom has and then they will presumably think as Bloom does, which is a mode of thought Bloom enjoys a great deal.

Finally, Bloom clarified that a great books curriculum serves as a guard against the postmodern slide by inviting students to think deeply and holistically about the human condition. For example, Bloom argued that: “Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West’s universal or

intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture” and fosters a false appearance of openness that “denies the special claim of reason” to help determine that which is true (p. 39). According to Bloom, the great books function as a shared topic and media for communication while also providing people the skills with which to reason. In his estimation, without this foundation, society might not have a meaningful way to communicate nor have things worth discussing. Bloom (1987) argued that education inculcates similar values—“man’s natural rights”—and that these similar values provide a “fundamental basis of unity and sameness” that causes differences to “disappear or become dim when bathed in the light of natural rights, which give men common interests and make them truly brothers” (p. 27). For those who differ from Bloom’s perceived norm, that is an irredeemably problematic position in its attention to the value of human diversity.

A Broad Context for Conservative Critique

Bloom’s (1987) critique of higher education advanced a singular view of both the role of higher education and the nature of society that can be seen across conservative critiques both prior to and subsequent to his work. This perspective holds that teaching the right sort of materials creates useful habits of mind and further delineates the bearer of that education as part of a cultural in-group. As in Bloom’s formulation, most conservative critiques of colleges and university curricula center on the perceived lack of focus on the classics—in Anderson’s (1992) framing: “It is difficult to improve on Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Adam Smith.” (p. 119). Notably, the conservative definition for the great books results in a curriculum populated almost entirely by books written by White, European men. Most conservative commentators do not ever really address the issue of representation or distinguish whether these books deliver a small “t” truth or a big “T” Truth. When they do so, they typically follow D’Souza’s (1991) reasoning: “It is in liberal education, properly devised and understood, that minorities and indeed all students will find the means for their true and permanent emancipation” (p. 23). This line of argument holds that the world is built upon a particular set of values and approaches—those developed by and for affluent White men—and the only way to become a full participant in that world is to internalize those values.

The essentialism and pretense to objectivity inherent in the conservative critique of higher education can also be seen in advocacy for a great books education as a form of cultural literacy, which is itself seen as vital for economic success and full democratic participation. The plainest statement of this belief comes from Charles Sykes (1988), who wrote: “Without apology, the undergraduate curriculum should be centered on the intellectual tradition of Western civilization. Quite simply, there are certain books and certain authors that every college graduate should read if he is to be considered truly educated” (p. 260). Like most conservative arguments regarding cultural literacy, this depiction relies on the essentialist assumption that knowledge is real and fixed—one either possesses it or does not. Consequently, a lack of familiarity with the most important of this knowledge becomes an unforgivable intellectual sin. As D’Souza (1991) wrote: “The study of other cultures can never compensate for a lack of thorough familiarity with the founding principles of one’s own culture” (p. 255). Notably, in order to function effectively, this critique of cultural pluralism as a form of cultural relativism functions to provide an inherently limited perspective on what can and what cannot count as a legitimate form of knowledge.

Conservative commentators skirt the issue of cultural pluralism by reframing cultural literacy as democracy: as Roger Kimball (1990) stated, an education in the classic texts of Western civilization provides access to “a tradition before which all are equal” (p. 61). As such, the recent postmodern argument that knowledge, as a socially constructed phenomenon, has normative implications is “as pernicious as it is common, implying as it does that political democracy is essentially inimical to authority, tradition, and rigor in its cultural institutions.” (Kimball, 1990, p. 6).

Based upon this essentialism, a fixed canon becomes important for two reasons: not only is it a democratic source of information, it is objectively good. That is, the canon creates democracy and is democracy personified.

Sykes (1990) reflected this argument while also invoking the conservative bogeyman of postmodernism:

. . . it is in the Western tradition that we find the origins of democratic society, of the focus on individual worth and human dignity, and of aspirations for human freedom. [. . .] To lose that legacy through a curriculum of enforced cultural amnesia is to deconstruct an entire civilization. (p. 15)

Simply put, conservative critiques of higher education attempt to conflate political liberalism and postmodernism in order to undermine faith in the academic enterprise. In asserting that without a “central body of shared knowledge at the heart of university education,” we have entered into a society where we can no longer be sure of what knowledge a given person possesses, Sykes (1988) identified the crux of the traditionalist reaction to postmodernism (p. 82). This framing presupposes that human understanding has a fundamentally synthetic quality—that is, we want to reach common ground. As such, for conservative critics, any attempt to dissolve consensus is inherently problematic. Often, these critiques are levied at groups of students and intellectuals who have been traditionally marginalized by the academic establishment. D’Souza (1991) wrote that: “The problem with the idea of ethnically determined ‘perspectives’ is that it condemns us to an intellectual and moral universe in which people of different background can never really hope to understand each other” (p. 186). Likewise, Kimball (1990) argued that “radical” feminism represents “single biggest challenge to the canon as traditionally conceived” (p. 15).

When conservative critiques of higher education shift from advocating for a return to an essentialized curriculum toward attacking particular minoritized groups, the conservative commentators make clear the stakes of the higher education-based battlegrounds in the Culture Wars. Colleges and universities function as powerful culture bearers that cannot be ideologically neutral; even as conservative commentators argue for that possibility, they also acknowledge it cannot be so, and instead advocate for individual choice in the matter. For example, Buckley (1951) described the college as a battlefield of competing ideologies:

With the stage thus set, the college student enters as a spectator in the arena in which the multifarious forces fight it out. Using the tools that his academic training has provided him, he is to pick out truth and to shovel aside error. It is important that his choice be his own, for it is all the more valuable to him if there has been no exterior persuasion on behalf of one or the other protagonist. (p. 145)

This same *choice* rhetoric is the basis for conservative commentators’ objections to being exposed to ideological positions with which they disagree. Kimball (1990), Sykes (1990), and D’Souza (1991) all decried the pernicious influence of the “victims’ revolution,” which they contend has led to unwarranted diversification of the curriculum on racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, and gendered lines. One representative passage comes from Kimball (1990):

The political dimension of this assault on the humanities shows itself nowhere more clearly than in the attempt to restructure the curriculum on the principle of equal time. More and more, one sees the traditional literary canon ignored as various interest groups demand that there be more women’s literature for feminists, black literature for blacks, gay literature for homosexuals, and so on. The idea of literary quality that transcends the contingencies of race, gender, and the like or that

transcends the ephemeral attractions of popular entertainment is excoriated as naïve, deliberately deceptive, or worse. (p. xv)

Highlighting the marginality of under-represented groups within the academy through the use of terms like *interest groups*, Kimball (1990) and others suggested that topics that would make the curriculum more representative are inappropriate on the basis of democratic power. They simply do not represent the majority point of view. As such, it becomes easy to dismiss contrary points of view as “ideologically motivated assaults on the intellectual and moral substance of our culture” (Kimball, 1990, p. xviii) and higher education institutions as ethical wastelands characterized by “the fragmentation and incoherence of the curriculum; the nihilism that passes for the humanities; the politicization of both scholarship and the classroom; and the darkening shadow of intolerance and intimidation reflected in official attempts to limit free speech” (p. ix).

Using Academia’s Post-Truth Ideology to Combat Contemporary Post-Truth Rhetoric

In this article, we have shown that: the United States has entered a post-truth era characterized by deep distrust of colleges and universities as well as deep investment in the importance of higher education; scientists and the general public utilize thinking of *t/Truth* in markedly different ways; Rortian pragmatism nicely encapsulates the natural state of scientific inquiry; distrust of expert judgment is widespread; and this distrust of experts is reflected in conservative critiques of higher education. This section advances the argument that the problem set created by the interrelationships among these observations is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle. Therefore, we suggest that the easiest way of addressing the problem of the post-truth era is to simply stop predicating the value of natural and social scientific inquiry on the idea of *t/Truth*. Indeed, we would like to advocate against using either term; rather, we put forth the term *utility* as described by James (1907/1981, 1909/1978) and reframed by Rorty (1990, 1999) as a more versatile term.

Although abandoning a *t/Truth* standard might seem problematic, there is ample evidence that scientists already do so in practice (e.g., Fine, 1996; Latour, 2010). Additionally, a debate between Richard Rorty and Pascal Engel (Rorty & Engel, 2007) forecasts how such an effort would play out in practice while also providing a brief discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. In this debate, Engel began by critiquing the pragmatic conception of truth: *t/Truth* has no explanatory use; a correspondence theory of representation is inherently false; realism and anti-realism debates are hollow; justification is a preferable epistemological aim to truth; and that this formulation does not diminish our ability to speak of causality or values, but that doing so must be predicated on contingency. Although it is quite clear from the framing he gave his arguments that Engel expected vociferous objection, Rorty simply agrees with his statement of pragmatism’s view of truth. Instead, Rorty’s response indicated the utility of this approach in redirecting non-productive discourses: his lack of argument is designed to suggest that the fundamental nature of the debate is moot. For Rorty, academic arguments about the nature of *t/Truth* obscure the critical issue of what people actually do, which matters far more. He summarized this position in two ways:

[1] To give meaning to an expression, all you have to do is use it in a more or less predictable manner—situate it within a network of predictable inferences.

[paragraph] The question that matters to us pragmatists is not whether a vocabulary possesses meaning or not, whether it raises real or unreal problems, but whether the resolution of that debate will have an effect in practice, whether it will be useful. [. . .]

For the fundamental thesis of pragmatism is William James's assertion that if a debate has not practical significance, then it has no philosophical significance.

[2] . . . our responsibilities are exclusively toward other human beings, not toward "reality." [. . .] Trying never to have anything but true beliefs will not lead us to do anything differently than if we simply try our best to justify our beliefs to ourselves and to others. (Rorty & Engel, 2007, pp. 34, 41, and 45)

Following this line of reasoning, we suggest that academics should embrace Rortian pragmatism's work on objectivity and follow it to its logical end (Rorty, 1990, 1999). Doing so requires that academics abandon any essentialist positions—foremost among them, the belief in truths or a Truth that is verifiable, communicable, or even useful.

In making this argument, we acknowledge that we live in a time of *posts*—ranging from postmodernism to poststructuralism to post-truth. All these *posts* (except post-truth) advocate that we abandon the very idea of Truth. Although quite different from the public use of post-trust, academia's time of posts reaches much the same conclusion: we lack a meaningful way to converse with one another in stable, consistent ways. Instead, consistent with the tenets of Rorty's pragmatism, we advocate adopting utility as the standard for clarifying the value and quality of academic work. Given the demonstrable political utility of this distrust of expert judgment, a central focus on utility not only would serve to reflect the actual practice of scientific inquiry but also would make clear to the public the precise way that they should consider our work. Although abstract judgments of truth might not be accessible, consistent with Rorty's pragmatism, academics—particularly those in applied fields like education—should be able to communicate why and how their work matters. Communicating utility would separate conservative critiques of higher education from broader concerns over expert judgment via the substitution of judgement criteria more readily accessible to laypeople (e.g., Porter, 1995).

Implications

We currently live in a tumultuous time: we have a U.S. president who vilifies the traditional media, declares most critiques or opposing opinions as *fake news*, and is a proponent of *alternative facts*. This rhetoric in which facts and truth are readily dismissed echoes throughout society and is discernible in the ways that people think about and talk about such issues as the value of college, faculty politics, and whether or not the Culture Wars are to blame for our current predicament. As shown earlier, distrust of academics, experts, and intellectuals is nothing new in American history (Hofstadter, 1963). But by reviewing both the historiography of expert judgment and the role of post-truth in social science, we were able to highlight the place that conservative attacks on higher education hold in that long history. We close by describing implications including: (a) a historiographic model of expert judgment within the research university; and (b) a call for scholars to acknowledge the conflation of facts and values in their work—that is, its post-truth nature.

The historiography and theoretical discussions have many implications for the ways that the academy can assert itself against both post-truth rhetoric and conservative attacks. This historiography highlights the creation and formation of experts and professionals in this country—individuals who exert a remarkable amount of power and decision-making over our everyday lives. This historiography also highlights the sources of popular distrust of expert judgment: reactions against perceived elitism, the country's history as a democracy, and the distance and obfuscation that takes place between experts and the people whose lives are affected by their expertise. Taken together, this historiographic model implies that more transparency in expertise is warranted.

Professional, experts, and academics need to be more transparent about their work—not just their conclusions or the work's utility, but the processes behind it, as well as their own assumptions about the nature of truth.

In creating this transparency, scholars must acknowledge the conflation of facts and values in their own work. This acknowledgement includes interrogating assumptions about objectivity, lack of bias, and dispassionate inquiry inherent in academic work—indeed, a belief in objectivity or postpositivism is in itself a value. Rather than continue to cling to objectivity as a golden standard, academics should instead consider the concept of *utility*. It is important to note that we are not arguing that every piece of academic research must be readily useful in some transactional way. Rather, we suggest judgments of utility are inherently contextual; that is, prior utility judgements in a given realm (e.g., engineering, philosophy, film studies, medicine) provide the criteria by which the utility of new knowledge might be assessed. As Kuhn (1996) has shown, the scientific process typically does function in this way—even it is sometimes framed otherwise. Therefore, we argue that if academics were more transparent about the processes behind their research and are able to articulate the utility of their work—why their work matters, what intellectual history they are incrementally modifying, and how it might impact everyday life—the academy as a whole might garner more support and have a more ready response to critiques about the utility of a college education.

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