In the mid-1800s, William Wordsworth wrote to his friend and fellow poet Samuel Coleridge as he confronted the disappointments of aging and yet managed to convert his gloom into generous hope for the next generation: “What we have loved,” he wrote, “others will love, and we will teach them how.” Robert Weisbuch, president of The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, questions whether higher education is living up to this simple, beautiful task. He emphasizes that this compact between the generations is within our grasp—if we would remember how to reach. Weisbuch envisions a world suffused for us and our children by the richness of the sciences and the arts, a world flaming with interest, and he believes that the liberal arts are the best chance for its achievement. In the end, he says, they are essential to nurturing our capacity to apply the gains of knowledge to the growing good of the world.

The Liberal Arts

The “liberal arts” do not occur in nature or in culture. They are the academic organization of knowledge ranging through the humanities, social sciences, and life and physical sciences, with engineering, education, and medical research as near neighbors. But they are more the free spirit of inquiry than they are a set of topics or fields. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote, “The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while
I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking, and the more valid my final conclusion, my opinion.” This capacity for thinking beyond the self is the liberal arts.

The liberal arts are in deep trouble. The bifurcation of K–12 education into the liberal arts for the privileged few and vocational preparation for everyone else is a real, democratic disaster. And now this bifurcation has moved to the college level. The expansion of the high school and college populations for the last several decades has been unaccompanied by any expansion of the liberal arts. The situation is worsened by the deep separations between public K–12 education and higher education. If one considers how little the two have to do with each other, the picture of chaos becomes clearer: there is arguably a greater gap between school and college in the United States than anywhere in the world. How will teachers engage their students in the life of the mind if they themselves are shut out of the ongoing discoveries and controversies of their fields, whose most robust lives exist in the universities? The result is rote learning and relic knowledge.

The divisions of the rich and the poor have entered into the academic disciplines themselves. The enormous external funding sources for the sciences, contrasted with the nearly nonexistent sources for the humanities, misshapes our universities. The divisions also engender, in the poor disciplinary neighborhoods, exactly the kind of complaining, self-destructive cultures that poverty in a land of riches always tends to create. One example among hundreds will have to suffice. When the president of an Ivy League institution recently received major gift funds and asked faculty to propose research uses, the scientists of his university offered 70 ideas, the social scientists 30, and the humanists none, none at all. As I have written elsewhere, an engineer takes a problem and solves it. A humanist takes a problem and celebrates its complexities—which is fine until the problem is the life of the humanities themselves.

My goal here, though, is not to mourn losses but to chart a way forward. At the same time that there is some evidence of a culture slide in the schools and universities, there is stronger evidence of a culture boom at large. If we are concluding an era of Renaissance-like greatness in the physical sciences, these disciplines are able to join in an era of indisputable advancement in the life sciences. The social sciences thrive, and many disciplines are drawing strong populations of students of color. As for the humanities, outside the academy, the megabookstores are packed from morning to midnight, cultural media proliferate, and museums and cultural institutions, excepting the orchestras, engage greater and greater numbers. How can we capitalize on this moment?

Enacting Knowledge

Eugene Lang, former chair of the board at Swarthmore College and leader of the “I Have a Dream” Foundation, reminds us in an essay in a 2000 special issue of Daedalus entitled “Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts College” (2000) that the small liberal arts colleges began with church affiliations and strong social missions. He scolds liberal arts colleges for having evolved into “academic islands that regard applied learning as somewhat déclassé.” Rarely, he notes, do colleges “engage the great issues in ways that meaningfully prepare students for active roles as citizens in recognizing and responding to them.” He criticizes the rationale of learning for its own sake to argue that colleges should “impart the knowledge, understanding, and ability to make thoughtful and ethical judgments of social issues—to feel the motivation and moral responsibility that encourage constructive participation in a democratic society.” Lang concludes that the educational preeminence of the liberal arts canon could be more important than ever as an attribute of democratic culture and a qualification for leadership.

Rich Franke, former board chair of the Yale Corporation, echoes Lang: “In response to the question of why scholars should be connected to a larger audience, there is one resounding answer—democracy. For a truly healthy democracy, we need a citizenry capable of making complex political, social, and moral decisions.”
healthy democracy, we need a citizenry capable of making complex political, social, and moral decisions.”

We must enact knowledge by thinking, by teaching, and by applying what we are learning with the same rigor and creativity we employ for learning itself. “Enacting knowledge” suggests a new ideal of the now-woebegone criterion of service, where academics judge themselves not by sitting on college committees but by engaging the world beyond the college limits. No scholar should ever have to apologize for going far, far into an interest and pushing back the darkness; yet, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, “We are not put into this world to sit still and know, we are put into it to act … we dare not keep aloof and closet ourselves … the school must be of the nation.”

The Liberal Arts at Work

The liberal arts are rapidly emerging into a larger function in the world. The examples that follow may seem inadequate to the larger challenge, but the liberal arts takeover of America will not occur this year. We are in the beginning stages of an epochal turn, one we can accelerate only if we recognize it. This epoch will require a whole number of changes, each of which could take a lifetime to achieve. It will require a new universal meeting ground for the two separate worlds of the disciplines. It will require a new financial and lobbying support system for the humanities and arts, something roughly equivalent to a national academy and the National Science Foundation, so that differences in disciplinary wealth do not misshape our schools and universities. It will require vertical organizations to capitalize on the different sets of resources that each kind of educational institution can bring into play when they discover each other. But what this epoch most requires is a new academic soul, a spirit of interchange between the academy and the world. My examples attempt to give this soul a palpable shape.

The Responsive Ph.D.

The doctoral degree has been much discussed and studied in recent years. The Responsive Ph.D. program, managed by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, was designed to put the findings of these various efforts into action. We gathered 14 universities, ranging from Yale and Princeton to the University of Colorado and the University of California, Irvine, into the program. A responsive doctorate does not mean letting the tail wag the dog, that doctoral education should respond to every immediate social challenge. But it does mean letting the dog out of its cage—that is, extending the reach of academic learning.

We organized findings of the many studies into four main challenges, the four P’s:

New Paradigms: How do we encourage new interdisciplinary flexibility, which is always praised but invariably underfunded?

New Practices: How do we enact knowledge through teaching? How do we make the application of knowledge part of the curriculum?

New People: How do we capitalize on human resources and engage the entire population in all the disciplines?

New Partnerships: How do we establish a continuous dialogue between the producers and the consumers of Ph.D.s?

The participating universities have overachieved. The University of Texas pioneered a program called Intellectual Entrepreneurship, in which students and faculty throughout the disciplines not only take seminars in how to relate their knowledge to a full range of social sectors, but also respond to specific problems brought to them by local governments and community organizations. Michigan, Duke, and Washington universities pioneered multidisciplinary seminars for students and faculty. Howard and Indiana each sent doctoral students to teach in colleges very different from their own. Yale created an elaborate alumni network to mentor students on the full range of their career possibilities. Best, the 14 universities now are engaged in studying and adapting each other’s innovations.
Teachers as Scholars

The Teachers as Scholars program, pioneered at Harvard and networked by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation to 25 universities, from Princeton to UCLA, has been a life-changer for faculty on both sides of the K–12 – higher education gap. It is a simple, elegant program whereby school teachers attend a college seminar of their choosing for three or four days during the regular school year. That is, their students see them become learners: we insist that the seminars not be held after hours, on Saturdays, or in the summer—because the intellectual engagement of teachers should not be an add-on, but rather integral to their work. Almost sadly, 93 percent of the teachers describe the program as the best, or among the best, experience of their careers, and their college counterparts write dramatically of their increased interest in the schools.

The Clemente Course

Earl Shorris has written a book, *Riches for the Poor* (2000), describing the Clemente Course, which originated at Bard College. Its claim, based on a program offered every year to 400 people, is that the study of the humanities is "an answer to poverty in the United States." As audacious as that may seem, Shorris, a *Harper's Magazine* editor, puts forward a serious argument—that the poor are poor and stay poor because they lack the instruments for active participation in the public world. This capacity for action depends in turn on the quality of their reflection, that is, their ability and opportunity to understand themselves and their condition in a set of meaningful contexts. The humanities—and more largely the arts and sciences—offer that capacity, and they provide a power far beyond any job training ever proposed. Shorris quotes a prison inmate who says, "You've got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children" and thereby create "a moral alternative to the streets" and their "kingdom of force" through plays, museum visits, concerts, lectures, and readings. People learn to reflect and negotiate rather than simply react or obey, which allows them to break the cycle of poverty. Bard is currently sponsoring a formal national assessment of the Clemente Course; early results are astonishing.

Conclusion

As one who spent nearly 30 years as an English professor, I want to say to my former colleagues in the liberal arts: lose the depression, don't compromise, get out there and win the world. Recognize what you love and fight to make it prevail, as you would fight for an ideal of political liberation—for that is profoundly what the arts and sciences are. If the liberal arts are to take over, they must allow themselves to be taken over. Academics will need to acknowledge that they do not own their interests, that these interests are deeply and broadly human, and that as academics they contribute a formal intensity of extraordinary value to those interests.

The "two worlds" problem in higher education—that is, the deep divide between the hard sciences and the soft humanities—is a serious issue with far-reaching ramifications. The notion of enacting knowledge can help mitigate the problem, as it serves to harden up the soft disciplines by requiring them to mingle their learning with urgent social life. At the same time, it softens up the hard disciplines by encouraging them to make common cause—as in bioethics, information technology, or environmental studies, where the issues and questions we face are too large and complex to be considered only hard. Until we can bridge the divide, the otherwise fertile landscape that lies between the disciplines will be wasteland, to the detriment of both higher education and the greater good of society.

Robert Weisbuch is president of The Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation. He spent 29 years at the University of Michigan, where he was a professor of English and served in a number of positions, including the Arthur F. Thurnau Professorship for Pedagogical Excellence, chair of the English department, and associate vice president for research. Weisbuch also serves as director of the Mellon Fellowships in Humanistic Studies.