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Something Big Is Happening on Campus

There’s a lot going right at universities, if you're only willing to see it.

By David Brooks | May 17, 2026

Roosevelt Montás grew up in a small mountain village in the Dominican Republic. Two days before his 12th birthday, his mother flew him up to New York, where she had found a minimum-wage job in a garment factory. A few years later, when he was a sophomore in high school, some neighbors in his apartment building threw out a bunch of books. One of them was a finely bound volume of Socratic dialogues. Montás snagged it—and Socrates changed his life.

A high-school mentor helped him get into Columbia, where students confront the great books of Western civilization in the school’s Core Curriculum. There, Montás encountered the writings of St. Augustine. “In plumbing the depths of his own psyche, Augustine gave me a language with which to approach my own interiority,” he recalled in his memoir, “he gave me a model and a set of questions with which to explore the emotional wilderness, full of doubt and confusion, that was my own coming-to-adulthood, in America.”

Augustine paradoxically caused Montás to lose his Christian faith, but led him to gain a faith in philosophy. Montás went on to lead Columbia's Center for the Core Curriculum, and he is now starting a center on citizenship and civic thought at Bard College.

I get to visit about two dozen campuses every year, and I meet at least a few teachers like Montás at each of them. I can generally spot the ones with the pure disease, the ones with that raw teacher-fire. Usually, they had some experience early in life when they fell in love with learning. This love then became a ruling passion, and now they fervently seek to share it with their students in the classroom. You can find them at Ivies and at community colleges, at big state schools and small liberal-arts colleges. They are a part of what's going right in American higher education, the part that critics (like me) don't write about enough.

These teachers talk of their vocation in lofty terms. They are not there merely to download information into students' brains, or to steer them toward that job at McKinsey. True humanistic study, they believe, has the power to change lives. They want to walk with students through the biggest questions: *Who am I? What might I become? What is this world I find myself in?* If you don't ask yourself these questions, these teachers say, you risk wasting your life on trivial pursuits, following the conventional path, doing what others want you to do instead of what is truly in your nature. If society doesn't offer this kind of deep humanistic education, where people learn to seek truth and cultivate a capacity for citizenship, then democracy begins to crumble. "What I'm giving the students is tools for a life of freedom," Montás says.

These great teachers are the latest inheritors of the humanist tradition. Humanism is a worldview based on an accurate conception of human nature—that we are both deeply broken and wonderfully made. At our worst, humans are capable of cruelty, fascism, and barbarism that no other mammal can match. On the other hand, deep inside of us we possess fundamental longings for beauty, justice, love, and truth, which, when cultivated, can produce spiritual values and human accomplishments breathtaking in their scope.

Life is essentially a battle between our noblest aspirations and our natural egotism. Humanistic education prepares people for this struggle. Yes, schooling also has a practical purpose—to help students make a living and contribute to the economy. But that practical training works best when it is enmeshed within the larger process of forming a fully functioning grown-up—a person armed with knowledge, strength of judgment, force of character, and a thorough familiarity with the spiritual heritage of our civilization. Preprofessional education treats people solely as economic animals; humanistic education also treats them as social and moral animals.

Humanistic teachers do this by ushering students into the Great Conversation—the debate, stretching back centuries, that constitutes the best of what wise people have thought and expressed. These teachers help students encounter real human beings facing the vital challenges of life: Socrates confronting death, Sun Tzu on how to manage conflict, Dante in love, Zadie Smith on living in the boundary between different identities. The Great Conversation represents each generation's attempt to navigate the dialectics of life, the tension between autonomy and

belonging, freedom and order, intimacy and solitude, diversity and cohesion, achievement and equality. The Great Conversation never ends, because there are no final answers to these tensions, just a temporary balance that works for a particular person or culture in a particular context.

By introducing students to rival traditions of thought—Stoicism, Catholic social teaching, conservatism, critical race theory—colleges help students cultivate the beliefs, worldviews, and philosophies that will help them answer the elemental question of adulthood: *What should I do next?* By introducing them to history and literature, colleges arm students with wisdom about how humans operate, which is handy knowledge to have. They offer them not only life options but also, more importantly, the ability to choose among them. "Any serious human problem is a hard problem," Andrew Delbanco, who teaches at Columbia, told me. "The fundamental obligation of a humanities teacher is to try to develop in students an allergy to ideology and certainty. To acknowledge self-doubt."

But humanistic education is no mere intellectual enterprise. Its primary purpose is not to produce learned people but good people. When teachers do their job, they arouse in their students not only a passion for learning but also a passion to lead a life of generosity and purpose. "The correct analogy for the mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting—no more—and then it motivates one towards originality and instills the desire for truth," Plutarch observed many centuries ago.

Teachers do this by making excellence attractive to the young—excellent lives, excellent ideas, excellent works of art, commerce, and science, and, above all, excellent ideals. The students who are captivated by these ideals find some cause to advance, some social problem to address, some business to start. When confronted by inspiring ideals, many students say: *I care intensely about this, I want to orient my life around this.* It's not only their minds that have been refined but also their desires and ambitions. In a true humanistic education, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote, "the shaping of the will is thoroughly more important to man than the shaping of the intellect."

Preprofessional education is individualistic and selfish. Such students learn to ask: *How can I outcompete my peers and beat them up the ladder to success?* In a humanistic program, by contrast, groups of people gather to form communities of truth, to reason together, to explore life together, to pool their desires and seek the common good.

I find that students flock to humanistic teachers who radiate a sense of urgency. They tell students: We are doing something important here. College is not just frat parties and internships; it's potentially the most important four years of your life. You can emerge either an anesthetized drone or a person fully curious, fully committed, and fully alive.

I know this kind of education can have this effect because it is the education I got decades ago at the University of Chicago. I knew I could never be as learned as the professors I encountered,

but their passion for large topics and great books seemed so impressive to me. I yearned with all my soul to understand the world as best I could, to embark on a lifelong journey of growth. Whatever my ample failings, that yearning, kindled in those classrooms with those books and those teachers, has never gone away. I stumbled unknowingly into a humanistic education, because it was the only college I got into, but I can tell you, it totally worked on me.

Today, the teachers I'm talking about tend to feel like dissidents within the academy, like they are doing something countercultural. That's because at most schools, humanistic education has been pushed into the remote corners of academic life. It's not that people woke up one morning and decided to renounce the humanistic ideal, it's just that other goals popped up. It was easier to fundraise for them, easier to sell them to tuition-paying parents. The idea of forming students into the best version of themselves sort of got left behind.

Meghan Sullivan grew up in a working-class family in Florida, with her parents running through a series of jobs, punctuated by periods of unemployment. She went through grade school thinking she wanted to be a teacher, because she admired her teachers. Then in high school she joined the debate team and decided she was put on this earth to become a lawyer. She had a friend whose father taught philosophy. She was struck by what a dumb profession that was. As she told an interviewer, Tom Burnett, she decided that "there's no universe where being a philosophy professor is more important than being a lawyer."

Sullivan went to college fully intending to major in prelaw. But one semester, she didn't get into the classes she wanted, and her adviser suggested she take a philosophy class. She rolled her eyes but signed up. Her first assigned paper asked her to consider whether it is ever morally permissible to commit suicide. She went to her teaching assistant and asked, "Am I allowed to, like, answer this? Like, are we allowed to talk about this?" He told her that not only was she allowed to do so, but it was a course requirement. "I found it just totally exhilarating," she recalled. Now she teaches philosophy at Notre Dame.

Mark Edmundson also grew up in a working-class family, in Medford, Massachusetts. He got into college, something no one else in his family had done, and told his father that he might study prelaw, because you could make a decent living as a lawyer. His father, who had barely graduated high school, "detonated," Edmundson later recalled. *You only go to college once*, his father roared, *you better study what genuinely interests you*. *The rich kids get to study what they want, and you are just as good as any rich kids.*

Edmundson soon encountered Sigmund Freud and Ralph Waldo Emerson. "They gave words to thoughts and feelings that I had never been able to render myself," he wrote in his book, *Why Teach?* "They shone a light onto the world, and what they saw, suddenly I saw, too." Edmundson now teaches poetry and literature at the University of Virginia.

“To get an education, you’re probably going to have to fight against the institution you find yourself in—no matter how prestigious it might be,” Edmundson once told an audience of students. “In fact, the more prestigious the school, the more you’ll probably have to push.”

The forces arrayed against humanistic learning are many:

Specialization. Aside from educating the young, universities have another perfectly noble mission—the advancement of knowledge. This goal requires that academics be trained to specialize in a single narrow discipline. They are often given jobs and awarded tenure because of their contribution to that narrow discipline.

The resulting system often values research instead of teaching. Sullivan observes that in graduate school “the message you get overwhelmingly is that you need to be a narrow research specialist, you need to impress the grand poohbahs of your discipline. Teaching is something you do to pay the bills.” And, as Anthony Kronman of Yale has argued, when academics specialize, it starts to seem downright unprofessional even to ask the big general questions of life. Specialization, even for a noble purpose, is a dehumanizing force, one that induces universities to turn their back on the formation of the young.

Preprofessionalism. Every year, UCLA surveys freshmen about what they hope to get out of college. Back in the 1960s, more than 80 percent—the top answer—said they hoped to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life.” Over the ensuing decades, that priority has plummeted. Now, more than 80 percent of freshmen say the purpose of college is to help them become “very well off financially.” Going to college has become a consumer experience—you pay huge tuition and in return you get rewarded with a pleasant time, career prep, a network of connections, and some fancy credentials. Interest in subjects like history and humanities has plummeted. More subtle is the effect preprofessionalism has had on the student mindset. A tone of cynical calculation prevails as students learn to manipulate the game. Many read just enough to get by, optimizing time management in the general frenzy for merit badges. An ethos of detached knowingness displaces an ethos of passionate inquiry. Humanistic education says: *You need to elevate your desires!* The consumer mindset says: *Tell us what you want, and we will give it to you.*

Politicization. The humanistic ideal has been replaced in some departments by the activist ideal. The purpose of the professor is to indoctrinate students so they can resist the structures of oppression. The activists naturally focus more on power and social systems than on the subjective inner experience of an individual heart, an individual soul. Politics, rather than the pursuit of truth, goodness, culture, or beauty, becomes the cause that gives life meaning.

Political radicalism once seemed exciting, but now it just makes parts of academic culture dreary. I used to love going into the Seminary Co-op bookstore at the University of Chicago or the Harvard Coop bookstore in Cambridge, both of which feature the latest academic books. Now there’s much less on those sales tables I’d want to buy. It’s the same ideological story, the same jargon, applied to different subject areas: oppressor/oppressed, transgression, deconstruction,

intersectionality—the aging Foucault-inspired monoculture. Students have learned to manipulate this hustle. You don't have to work on your soul in order to be counted as a good person, you just parrot the approved progressive attitudes on your way to Goldman Sachs. Roughly 88 percent of students at the University of Michigan and Northwestern admit to researchers that they lie in their papers and pretend to be more progressive than they really are in order to get a better grade.

The crumbling of humanistic self-confidence. Many people who work in the humanities have lost faith in the idea that a book or a course can transform a life, or even that literature is a repository of great wisdom to which one must humbly submit. The old humanistic ideal seems to many archaic, outmoded, reactionary. Thus, passionate attempts to transform students have been replaced by a dispassionate application of theory on behalf of some geriatric race, class, and gender ideology. Why would anybody major in English if the stakes involved are really so trivial?

The loss of national purpose. In his 1996 book, *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings wrote that universities once saw themselves as the defenders, creators, and transmitters of the national culture. That is, they served the same function as the cathedrals of the Middle Ages: cultural and intellectual furnaces whose influence radiates outward and elevates the broader society. Earlier generations of university leaders like Charles William Eliot, Vannevar Bush, and Robert Maynard Hutchins saw themselves as public figures with national roles. But, Readings argued, universities have lost any notion of serving the national culture, replacing it with the pursuit of excellence. Like any corporation, they seek to provide excellent services to consumers in order to move up the ranking systems.

We're never going to go back to the humanistic ideal as it existed in the 19th century or even the 1950s—nor should we—but the failure to come up with a new version for the 21st century has been devastating for universities. They've lost a core piece of their identity. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 70 percent of Americans say universities are heading in the wrong direction. Public trust in universities is in such steep decline that President Donald Trump gets cheered on for trying to dismantle them.

It has also been devastating for students. In a Harvard survey, 58 percent of college students said they had experienced no sense of "purpose or meaning" in their life in the month before being polled. "Ideals are psychological goals necessary to the health of the mind," the literary critic Alfred Kazin once wrote. Today's students, whose educations are seldom oriented around ideals, are not in a healthy state of mind.

And it's been devastating for America's leadership class. Universities are supposed to make the great good—to train the nation's leaders in virtue so they can live up to their responsibilities as privileged members of the elite. But today's leadership class, which has not been trained to serve or even understand those who are less fortunate, has forfeited the trust of the populace. Because universities have left a cultural void, the nation as a whole has lost its humanistic core, its sense of shared morals, its shared humanity. Simultaneous technological advance and humanistic decay

have left us both objectively better off and subjectively worse. Loss of faith leads to nihilism. Might makes right. Brutality reigns. Welcome to American politics in 2026.

The good news is that things are changing. There is an interesting pattern in the history of higher education: Universities reform after confrontations with barbarism. Columbia formed its Core Curriculum program just after the horrors of World War I. It was, as the literary critic Jacques Barzun put it, a curriculum "born of trauma." During and after World War II, a slew of writers like Maritain, Hutchins, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Jaspers published books on how to reform education. People took a look at the civilization-threatening brutality unleashed by the war and concluded: *We've got to cultivate better human beings!* In 1942, the German dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer took a look at the way fascism had devoured his country and argued that the most important question for any responsible person was not just how to behave honorably during the war; it also concerned "how the coming generation is to live."

The cruelty of the Trump era has aroused a similar response. Wide swaths of Americans can suddenly see the importance of character and character formation. As public norms crumble, more and more people come to appreciate the importance of teaching citizenship. As the public culture grows more savage, people can see what catastrophes result when the nation abandons its humanistic core. Moreover, Trump is never totally wrong. His assaults on the universities, and especially on research funding, have been monstrous, but it is true that universities got a bit too ideological, a bit too preprofessional, a bit too exclusive and elite. For higher ed, these have been the worst of times but, paradoxically, also the best of times.

I've met with several dozen university presidents over the past year, and nearly every one of them is initiating some sort of new program or reform. They understand, as Rajiv Vinnakota of the Institute for Citizens & Scholars put it to me, that universities have spent so much time serving the private good of students and faculty that they have neglected their role as stewards of the public good. We are living through the greatest period of university innovation of our lifetimes.

I would lump these changes into three buckets:

Moral formation. Some colleges never got out of the character-building business, including the service academies, the Christian colleges, and the HBCUs. But over the past decade a raft of schools have introduced programs to help students become better versions of themselves. Some of these programs resemble the kind of great-books education I got at Chicago. For example, several years ago the historian Melinda Zook realized that only a tiny percentage of Purdue students had ever taken a literature or history course. She introduced the Cornerstone program, offering students the chance to study "transformative texts." In 2017, about 100 students enrolled. Now, nearly 5,500 Purdue students are reading transformative texts.

Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., who teaches at Austin Community College, decided that big ideas shouldn't be just for rich kids, and began teaching a seminar called "The Great Questions." He

then formed the Great Questions Foundation, which has trained more than 140 faculty at community colleges across the nation on the art of leading big-ideas seminars.

Wake Forest decided to put character formation at the center of its mission about a decade ago. Since 2020, it has trained 140 faculty across various departments on how to do character education, and 160 faculty on how to think about their own moral growth. The university also formed the Educating Character Initiative, which has so far dispersed more than $35 million impacting 146 institutions that are developing their own programs.

These days, I find that almost every school I visit has at least one course that directly addresses the great moral challenges students will face. At Wesleyan, there's a course called "Living a Good Life," where students try on different moral philosophies and participate in experiences like "Live Like a Daoist Week." At Harvard, Richard Weissbourd leads a course called "Becoming a Good Person and Leading a Good Life." He covers subjects like how to raise a moral child; how to care for people across cultural, racial, and economic differences; how to cultivate romantic relationships; and how to find your purpose. He's learned that Shel Silverstein's book *The Giving Tree* particularly resonates with female students. The book is about a tree who gives and gives and gives to a self-centered boy until she is a stump and has nothing left to give. Some of the women say their romantic relationships are kind of like that.

There's a tremendous variety to these programs. Some teach character formation by holding up moral exemplars, some through the exploration of moral philosophies, some by discussing good commencement addresses. At Valparaiso University, students discuss great ideas and then have to write, produce, and perform a musical about those ideas, an exercise that requires cooperation and self-sacrifice. The University of Pennsylvania art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw taught a course in Washington, D.C., called "Memorials, Models, and Portraits of Leadership," on exploring character through the arts. Francis Su of Harvey Mudd College turned his approach into a book called *Mathematics for Human Flourishing*.

Civic thought. If democracy is not to degenerate into disorder, citizens must learn to exercise their freedom responsibly, deliberate together, and make sensible judgments about the choices before them. This requires training, and lately, a raft of citizenship programs have sprung up to provide it.

At Yale, where I also work, my colleague Bryan Garsten recently launched the Center for Civic Thought, which hosts conversations on political theory, constitutional principles, and how to disagree well. I recently sat in on Garsten's class "The Common Good." The course is structured around questions such as how much we owe to others and how political authority should be distributed. Students are asked to design their own society, with its own system of government. It's an exercise that causes them to think about power and fairness, and that challenges them to understand their own values.

In one class, Garsten showed two brief videos, one from the Trump aide Stephen Miller saying that international relations is about nothing more than raw power, and one from the former Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttegieg saying that international relations is about building a rules-based order. Then students read the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in which the Athenians make the Milleresque claim that international affairs have nothing to do with justice or the right, that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. Garsten asked students to decide if they agree.

I have found, over the past few decades of teaching, that it has become harder and harder to get students to argue in public. They are afraid of being judged by their peers and of the harsh social penalties that might follow. Gradually, the skills required to disagree well have atrophied. The new college civics programs are designed to give students and faculty the tools to do that. For example, Vinnakota has organized a coalition of more than 70 university presidents, who are launching programs to educate students for democracy, to prepare them to argue well, and to protect free speech. I recently visited the University of Michigan, where there is a new $50 million initiative designed to do this. The Greater Good Science Center at Berkeley offers an eight-month online course that discusses the latest science on the art of bridging differences.

These programs are especially vibrant in red states, where legislatures have funded a series of initiatives to widen intellectual diversity on campus. The University of Tennessee, for example, now has the Institute of American Civics; Ohio State boasts the Chase Center. These programs face intense pressure from the left-wing academics in other departments who want their scholars deplatformed—and from the right-wing state legislators who funded them (who can get a little nutty, and demand, for example, that you shouldn't teach Socrates, because he was gay).

The University of Florida now hosts the Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education. It offers courses like "Capitalism and Its Critics," "What Is Statecraft?," and "What Is the Common Good?" More than 3,000 students enrolled in Hamilton School classes in its first two years of operation.

I visited the University of Texas at Austin's version of these programs, the School of Civic Leadership. It offers courses like "Excellence of Character: The Virtues," "Great Thinkers in Realism and Geopolitics," and "Truth and Persuasion." I met faculty who had left other universities from across the country to do the sort of teaching that had inspired them to go into the profession in the first place. I was impressed by how hard they were trying to prevent this program from becoming a conservative ghetto. The students I met were all over the political map. They said they got involved in the program because they wanted to find a space on campus where they can argue things out. Some of them came from Classical Christian schools where they've been debating Aristotle since they were 11, and others came from normal public high schools where they had never heard of Aristotle, but they were mixing it up together now. One freshman told me, "This week alone two separate professors accused me of being a

Neoplatonist." I don't know exactly what they meant by that, but it sounds like he's getting a good education.

How to do life. The third big area of change involves basic life skills—how students can lead not just a successful life but also a flourishing one. Several years ago, Lori Santos's happiness course, "Psychology and the Good Life," took Yale's campus by storm, attracting at one point a quarter of the student body. At Stanford, "Design for Living & Learning," a course based on engineering and design thinking, was also astoundingly popular.

Miroslav Volf and others designed the "Life Worth Living" course at Yale to use classic theological wisdom from the Buddha to Augustine to address fundamental questions like who we answer to and what we should hope for. In the book that grew out of the course, Volf and his co-authors Matthew Croasmun and Ryan McAnnally-Linz write, "Life isn't a series of crises calling for Heroic Moral Deeds. Most of the time, it's a series of small, seemingly insignificant decisions and nondecisions."

Meghan Sullivan's "God and the Good Life" is perhaps the most popular course at Notre Dame. She walks students through the large life topics: how to live generously with your money, how to take responsibility in your community, how to manage suffering, how to prepare for death. Over the course of the semester students compose an "apology," which is a statement in the Socratic tradition "about your beliefs and how they fit into the ongoing story of your life." Once completed, the apologies are frequently shared with family and friends.

Courses like these cut through the over-intellectualized nature of academic culture—the idea that all inquiry should be depersonalized, dispassionate, data-driven, objective. Being a good person is more about having the right emotions, perceptions, and intentions toward others in the concrete circumstances of life than it is about logic-chopping games and dry dissertations. "For Aquinas," Sullivan and her co-author Paul Blaschko wrote in the book that accompanies their course, "faith is a different sort of knowledge, closely related to the virtue of love. Love is a deeply intellectual virtue, requiring attention and understanding." By the spring of 2025, 142 classes at 35 institutions explored how to make a life-worth-living course, and more than 14,000 students had taken one of them.

Anna B. Moreland leads the Shaping Initiative at Villanova. Freshmen take a course about how to get the most out of college, and seniors can take a seminar on how to shape an adult life. Students often arrive on campus, Moreland says, underprepared to face the identity questions that meet them. She started a seminar as a sort of experiment to help them figure out who they are. "The student response was almost visceral, like I had put my finger on a raw nerve of their lives."

Students, for example, are powerfully struck by the distinction Aristotle makes between different kinds of friends—friends of utility, friends for pleasure, friends for virtue. In the highest form of

friendship, each person values the other for who she fundamentally is—for her character—not just as a means to have a good time or to secure some practical advantage.

In the fall of 2025, after I visited some classrooms at Villanova, I gave a talk in a larger hall. When I finished, a young man carrying an iPad came up to me. He was a bit pimply, a freshman all of two months into his college life. He showed me what looked like an electrical-wiring diagram, with my main points structured across the screen. He'd drawn elaborate connections between them. Then he told me that a quotation from an obscure Simone de Beauvoir book was relevant to my argument, and proceeded to read it to me. It was a brilliant quote, directly relevant, making a point that had never occurred to me. I wanted to grab this kid by the shoulders and ask him, "Who the hell *are* you?!"

On every campus there are students who haven't yet gotten the memo that they're only supposed to deconstruct, critique, dismantle. These students are willing to honor their longing to bring their lives to point. They display a willingness to be transformed.

All through history, in civilizations all over the world, peoples have sought to pass down the best of their own way of life from generation to generation, to orient those around them toward the good life, to inculcate virtue, and to aim each other toward some ultimate purpose. That our culture dropped the ball on all of that is just plain weird. Now I constantly meet people who are unfamiliar with the humanist tradition. Sometimes when I ask professors how they help their students find meaning, they admit bluntly: *I wasn't trained for that; I would have no clue how to do it.*

The student hunger never went away. The social need never went away. And now, the tide is turning. If you are a Fox News watcher who thinks that the universities are simply woke hothouses filled with Maoists plotting revolution, your views—which were always exaggerated—are out of date. Leaders are adapting. Professors are rediscovering their sense of mission. There's a ton of good stuff happening on campus these days, if you're only willing to see it.