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Review of Louis Menand's The Marketplace of Ideas

William J. Miller

Southeast Missouri State University, wmiller@semo.edu

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Louis Menand. *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*. New York: Norton, 2010. 174 p. ISBN 9780393339161. \$14.95.

Louis Menand looks at four crucial questions for the future of higher education in our country: “Why is it so hard to institute a general education curriculum? Why did the humanities disciplines undergo a crisis of legitimation? Why has interdisciplinary become a magic word? And why do professors all tend to have the same politics?” All four come together to show why our once heralded system of colleges and universities presently finds itself at a crossroads. While not addressed specifically by Menand, SCUs will especially feel the push to determine their role and how they will continue to fill their mission of low-cost, high quality, general education.

Given the connection between SCUs and general education, for instance, Menand’s first essay strikes at the heart of many current issues. As Menand explains, some view general education as preparing students to exist as functional, knowledgeable members of society. Others argue that a general education background shows students the joy of pursuing knowledge simply for the journey and realization. In the current economic climate, with students being told more than ever before that college is a necessity for getting jobs, it seems that students are almost intolerant of the idea of taking a course that does not directly relate to their selected career. We no longer emphasize exploration or self-discovery. Instead, we are a means to an economic end. While R1 professors are largely viewed as being too worried about their research to be concerned with teaching introductory courses, their SCU counterparts are deemed too disengaged from research to do much more than continue a basic high school education for students. Until faculty determine what classifies as a general education curriculum, it will be difficult to fully understand how best to offer one.

As Menand demonstrates in the second essay, this conflict, in particular, affects the humanities. After all, there are very few jobs on Monster.com calling for undergraduate degrees in philosophy, history, or anthropology. Without being able to offer regular job placements—like their counterparts in computer science, business, or hard sciences—the humanities must instead fight against a system that devalues their work and efforts (given that external funding and public prestige gravitate less toward these disciplines) and encourages students to steer clear of programs that will require advanced degrees in order to find gainful employment.

The same can be said for interdisciplinarity. There is no question that academia is a divided world. But the divide runs deeper than between disciplines. Methodological approaches, academic pedigree, and subfield competitions all lead to canyons being created between relatively similar individuals. We spend far too much time writing for a specialized audience—typically our peers—and too little time creating research that is both comprehensible and meaningful for society at large. If we direct our research at only those within our specific subfield in our specific discipline, how can we expect there to be a broad meaningful discussion with larger aspirations? If nothing else, the push for interdisciplinarity from administrators creates an environment of strange bedfellows as academics find non-genuine ways to demonstrate interdisciplinary work. Such false efforts do little but remind us that we remain too tied to our own disciplines.

Unfortunately, graduate schools are doing little to help remedy the situation. Current doctoral students are being pressed through the same mold as their mentors and advisors. It takes more time to receive a doctorate today than a medical or law degree. And worst of all, there is a far greater likelihood of landing a job as an attorney or doctor in the city of your choice today than of finding a tenure-track position in your discipline anywhere. So students stick around, realize that their work and effort will not yield the expected results, and resign to ABD status. If students finish the PhD, they have been exposed far more to how to conduct research than they have to how to convey their knowledge in meaningful ways for students. When we think of how many faculty at SCUs are young, recent graduates who are considerably better prepared for the scholarship element of the teacher-scholar model, we can see the need to discuss reform.

Menand offers four critical analyses of what plagues the modern American state comprehensive university. Unfortunately, while he begins a needed, meaningful conversation, he offers no guidance on how best to remedy the situation. While he offers a few potential remedies, even he does not seem to fully believe that any one of them can have

a meaningful impact. Menand does succeed in putting into writing the thoughts that have long percolated on campuses across the country, yet leaves us begging for more ideas. After all, at SCUs, we are facing higher enrollments, more pressure from our administrators to hit credit hour goals, and significantly decreased state funding. If we want to continue promoting the importance of a liberal undergraduate education—complete with academic exploration and a desire to think critically in all areas—we will need to work towards answering Menand's four questions on each of our campuses while we are able.

William J. Miller
Southeast Missouri State University