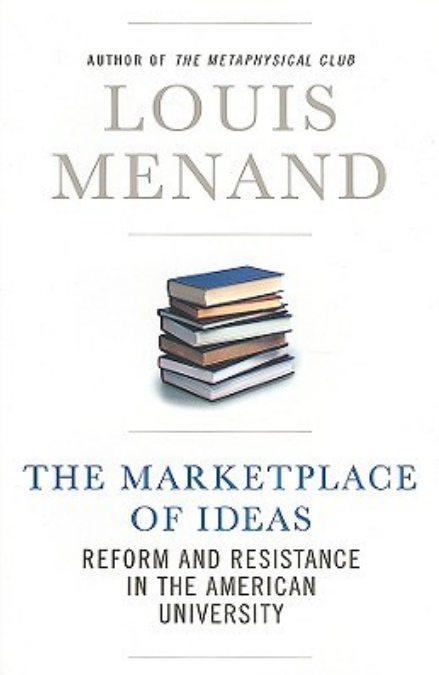

The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University

Louis Menand , Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Series Editor)

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Has American higher education become a dinosaur?

Why do professors all tend to think alike? What makes it so hard for colleges to decide which subjects should be required? Why do teachers and scholars find it so difficult to transcend the limits of their disciplines? Why, in short, are problems that should be easy for universities to solve so intractable? The answer, Louis Menand argues, is that the institutional structure and the educational philosophy of higher education have remained the same for one hundred years, while faculties and student bodies have radically changed and technology has drastically transformed the way people produce and disseminate knowledge. At a time when competition to get into and succeed in college has never been more intense, universities are providing a less-useful education. Sparking a long-overdue debate about the future of American education, *The Marketplace of Ideas* examines what professors and students—and all the rest of us—might be better off without, while assessing what it is worth saving in our traditional university institutions.

The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University Details

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From Reader Review The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University for online ebook

Antonio Baclig says

I took two classes with Menand, so I had to pick this up. I wasn't disappointed.

He draws a couple of strands into one appraisal of the American university system. The debate on the General Education curriculum at Harvard, which dragged on for years; the "Humanities Revolution" in the 70s and 80s (a revolt against the disciplines and a proliferation of fields, emphasis on diversity and the contingency of representations); the current anxiety over getting professors to do things interdisciplinarily; and the plight of graduate students (especially in English). The issues are not tied together overly tightly--that would do them injustice--but if I had to sum up the connection, it's that these supposed problems are really just products of our system of higher education (and thereby, maybe won't go away until we rethink it). To whit: Gen Ed reform has dragged on for so long because it hits a paradox in undergrad education at a liberals arts school, that it is supposed to be unconcerned with preparing students for the "real world," while preparing them for the real world; the "Humanities Revolution" was really a reversion back to a natural state of many disciplines, which was made unnatural by the money flowing into universities in the 40s and 50s and Cold War ideology; professors are professionals, their disciplines are their professions, and so discplinary walls will tend to go up; and the hurdles of graduate education perhaps need a rethinking, considering that so many graduate students do not become academics.

Lots of interesting history about universities (e.g., in 1869, half of Harvard Law studentss and 3/4 of Harvard Med students had not attended college previously; that changed drastically over the next half century). Above all, though, what I got out of this book was an examination of the university as a social creation that has its faults. I think that previously I had held up universities as semi-sacred repositories of knowledge, and the whole system of university education as made to support and extend that knowledge, but now I am thinking a little more critically on why certain things are the way they are, what incentives and historical trends have led to them, and ultimately how I view my own goals in relation to that.

Finally, a stylistic observation. As a teacher, Menand is so good at crystallizing big ideas; making them seem so self-evident, giving you the "aha" moment. You can see that, too, in his writing:

"Since it is the system that ratifies the product--ipso facto, no one outside the community of experts is qualified to rate the value of the work produced within it--the most important function of the system is not the production of knowledge. It is the reproduction of the system."

"So there is nothing transgressive about interdisciplinarity on this description. There is nothing even new about it. Disciplinarity has not only been ratified; it has been fetishized. The disciplines are treated as the sum of all possible perspectives."

R says

Much in the spirit of Allan Bloom's "The Closing of the American Mind", Menand's "Marketplace of Ideas" is a disconcerting exposé of the current university system, specifically in the Liberal Arts. Suffice to say that during the past 150 years universities were frequently reinvented--with good intentions--but have become (at

best) a monstrosity incapable of providing a real education, and even (at worst) a drain of society's best & brightest.

Robin Friedman says

Louis Menand On The Marketplace Of Ideas

In 1903, the philosopher William James wrote an essay, "The PhD Octopus" in which he expressed concern about over-specialization in the academic world and about the increased and not entirely beneficial effect on students and teachers alike resulting from efforts to pursue the PhD. Louis Menand wrote about James and his pragmatist colleagues in his Pulitzer-prize winning study "The Metaphysical Club" which broadly examines changes in American intellectual life during the period of roughly 1870- -- 1920. Menand's most recent book, "The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University" (2010) makes no mention of James or his essay. But Menand uses the history of the reform of the American university system during the late 1800s to suggest how and why the structure of American higher education established over 100 years ago may not be entirely conducive to the educational role of the university in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. The book is succinctly and engagingly written but also difficult and challenging. Menand is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of English at Harvard University.

Menand addresses four questions about contemporary higher education in the United States: "Why is is so hard to institute a general education curriculum? Why did the humanities disciplines undergo a crisis of legitimation? Why has 'interdisciplinary' become a magic work? And why do professors all tend to have the same politics?" (p. 16) Each question is discussed in a detailed chapter drawing on both history and on contemporary studies of the state of the American university. As he did in "The Metaphysical Club" Menand pays much attention to the educational reforms in post-Civil War Harvard under its president, Charles Elliott. Elliott drew a sharp distinction between professional and liberal education. Under his administration, a baccalaureate degree became a prerequisite for education in law, medical and other professional schools. Undergraduate education was not intended to be career-oriented. Rather, during this phase of their lives, students were encouraged to pursue knowledge and learning for their own sakes. Liberal arts faculty, the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences to a degree, were not expected to be career oriented but to encourage the pursuit of disinterested knowledge. The partial exception to this would be in the training of other scholars in graduate PhD programs who would carry on the research and teaching of their disciplines. The lines of the various disciplines themselves, such as English, philosophy, history, social sciences, were themselves established in the universities during the late 1900s. Through a process Menand develops, they assumed a degree of fixity which was became both useful and problematic.

Menand applies his historical approach to the questions he addresses. The demands on the university have stretched beyond the reforms of Charles Elliott and others. Thus, from the earliest years of the 20th Centuries, some universities tried to counter trends towards academic specialization by establishing either distribution requirements in courses students were required to take or a core curriculum separate from a departmental major in which all students were to be exposed to seminal books and ideas in literature, history, or science. These programs, particularly the latter, are difficult to establish and maintain because they cut across entrenched lines of academic disciplines and specializations. But the purpose of these programs is to show students how education and ideas matter in life and to socialize students, to a degree, by exposing them to a range of books and methodologies deemed valuable. Disciplinary lines and disinterested research in part are in tension with this idea.

So as well, Menand shows how each ostensibly separate academic discipline, again mostly in the humanities and social sciences, is in part predicated upon assumptions and upon human experiences arising from outside the boundaries of the discipline. He finds that this point has been made sharply in recent years by deconstruction and less notorious forms of critical theories. While each field of academic study has tended to become more intensive and ingrown, it faces challenges from other forms of thought. Menand takes this difficult tendency and uses it to explore what he calls the "crisis of legitimation" in the humanities and the difficulties of "interdisciplinary" programs, in which specialists from different academic fields try to team-teach or to create an academic program crossing narrow lines. These programs, Menand believes, usually have unsatisfactory results as specialists in different programs find themselves talking past each other.

In the final chapter of the book, Menand presents statistical evidence that shows that most American professors are remarkably similar in sharing a highly liberal political outlook which varies substantially from the overall political outlook of other Americans. He asks why this might be the case and tends to find the answer in the long process of education in the liberal arts leading the PhD. Professional education, including PhD education includes socialization as well as intellectual functions. Many humanities students require twice the length of time to earn the PhD in their chosen field than do law or medical students. They compete for academic positions that are becoming increasingly scarce with the de-emphasis on the liberal arts. The training, paradoxically, inspires both a great deal of personal independence in thought and a great deal of conformity. The situation does not admit of a ready answer. On the one hand, there is a need for a degree of independence in the academy from the community at large as the role of the university is not to be a "mere echo of public culture." (p.158) On the other, hand, the self-selection and self-replication character of the various PhD programs, Menand argues, creates its own biases and prejudgments among the university community. Menand suggests either shortening the PhD program or restructuring it to make it more accessible and less specialized to a specific discipline.

I was a liberal arts (philosophy) major many years ago but did not pursue an academic career. But I have continued to read and, I trust, to reflect, through my life. My education may have contributed to what I became. From outside the university, I remain interested in the life of the mind and its relationship to human life and needs. Menand has written a difficult book, but one that will be of interest to those concerned with, both in and out of academia, education and its purpose.

Robin Friedman

Stephen Case says

Our greatest fear as academics might be the fear of being proven futile. We know we're probably in some respect self-serving and that perhaps we magnify our own importance in the face of what we consider a hostile, indifferent, or Philistine public. But we like to maintain the fiction that we are free from parochialism to pursue the search for truth or something like it (maybe call it "free inquiry") in a value-free arena. Or at least that's the ideal, though I don't think anyone would go so far as to say this is ever actualized or even completely possible. These are ideals, and Louis Menand's slim volume offers insightful and sometimes piercing examinations of at least three aspects of these ideals: ideas about general education, interdisciplinarity, and the self-selecting nature of how we train PhDs and what we get as results.

This is not a comprehensive critique or "state of the academy" study, though as a recognized scholar Menand has done his homework. Rather, it's a collection of thoughts from someone who has made a career in the academy and who has passion and respect for what it can be. As he states near the work's conclusion:

It is the academic's job in a free society to serve the public culture by asking questions the public doesn't want to ask, investigating subjects it cannot or will not investigate, and accommodating voices it fails or refuses to accommodate.

Amen. So what's the problem? As valuable as academic endeavors are, Menand feels certain claims about higher education are not true or have been taken out of their correct context, and he's biting in his critique when he feels we need to be disabused of such claims. Because some of the chapters in this work were originally speeches, they are for the most part easy reading, even when what he is saying is difficult.

Menand begins with what has become something of a cause in higher education over the past few decades: the idea of general education. Like all of us, he's sat through seemingly endless meetings of faculty trying to decide what general education actually is and how to provide it to students, whether in shared common core courses or in a system of electives. "General education, he explains, "is where colleges connect what professors do with who their students are and what they will become after they graduate—where colleges actually think about the outcome of the experience they provide. General education is, historically, the public face of liberal education." Despite a clear importance though, Menand feels that what these conversations at universities across the country lack is a historical context of where this idea came from and why it's a distinctly American ideal. From its origins at the nation's oldest and most prestigious colleges and its evolution in response to broader societal changes, Menand argues against a perceived antiquity or changelessness in general education. Rather, he seems to be saying, general education is historically contingent-- not unimportant, but neither as uniform, enduring, or timeless as some might argue.

Another topic Menand examines involves another contemporary buzzword (or, depending on your perspective, bugbear): the idea of interdisciplinarity or teaching across the disciplines. Menand argues here, by providing another historical analysis-- this time of professionalization of the academic disciplines-- that the concept of interdisciplinarity in actuality serves to magnify and cement disciplinary distinctions and divides that are already problematic and largely artificial. The whole discussion of teaching across disciplines, he argues, masks an anxiety of scholars who realize on some level that their disciplinary divisions and structures are at least partially vacuous. "Is my relationship to the living culture," Menand asks us, "that of a creator or that of a packager?"

All of which brings us back to the fear of futility and Menand's final and most damning critique. "It takes three years to become a lawyer," Menand points out. "It takes four years to become a doctor. But it takes from six to nine years, and sometimes longer, to be eligible to teach poetry to college students for a living." Why is our method of creating PhDs so time-consuming and inefficient? More importantly though, what does this cost the field? Institutions gain cheap graduate student labor, but students labor for years gaining knowledge and expertise that quite possibly will never land them a job or even a completed degree. It's hard to argue with his views here that in at least some respects the academy has become another professionalized bureaucracy that exists to propagate itself and churn out clones already committed to its ideals and modes of thought.

"Possibly," Menand argues, "there should be a lot *more* PhDs, and they should be much easier to get. The non-academic world would be enriched if more people in it had exposure to academic modes of thought, and had thereby acquired a little understanding of the issues that scare terms like "deconstruction" and "postmodernism" are attempts to deal with. And the academic world would be livelier if it conceived of its purpose as something larger and more various than professional reproduction." What begins as an inquiry into why most college professors tend to lean the same direction politically becomes a critique of the system that produces them and that may actually be counterproductive to fostering the very free-thinking the system enshrines.

At just over one hundred fifty pages, there is a lot to chew on here. Whether or not you agree with all Menand's claims or buy his arguments, if you're part of the academic machine this is a book to consider seriously.

J. Alfred says

A tight, lively little book on some of the problems in professional academia today, including, Why does it take so long to get a Ph.D in humanities, and Why do all professors seem to think alike? It's well done and thought provoking. Menand's idea on how to solve the problem that there are too many Ph.Ds running around without enough jobs seems to be to make it easier for people to attain Ph.Ds, which seems paradoxical, but I think I follow him. A quick and enjoyable argument for people interested in the subject.

Jimm Wetherbee says

Back in the dark ages when dinosaurs ruled the earth and I was in college my father wondered aloud about the value of a BA. He argued that the literature and philosophy classes did not contribute one iota to his career as a research chemist, and that he had not any reason to refer back to a single class that did not have to do with his major in chemistry. As a philosophy of religion major, this hurt. I muttered something about a liberal arts education being valuable because it inculcates a love of learning and trains people to think, and so the lessons learned apply across all disciplines. His reply amounted to “and studying chemistry doesn't?” Either the study of humanities rubbed off on my father without his knowing it, or studying chemistry seems to work just fine for teaching people to think. Menand sets out to answer this question. Does a liberal arts education, as it is currently constructed, produce the general thinkers whose come love learning for its own sake and whose skills can readily transferred to new areas, or is a university best at reproducing university professors?

Menand investigates this question with four essays. Although these essays could stand independently, each has a way of drawing a circle around the question and tightening that circle with each turn. As on essay follows the next, the critique becomes more pointed.

The first essay in Marketplace of Ideas, involves the entire process of curriculum development and the philosophy behind general education requirements. Those involved in the past curriculum development here at Wingate might find the essay, entitled “The Problem of General Education,” at least provocative. Menand's thesis in this essay is that there are two distinct idea of what a general education is suppose to do. At one end is the view that a general education should provide a common canon for the exchange of ideas, that intellectual content precedes intellectual activity—in order to think about something, one must have something to think about. Under this model, all sections of a general education course (say World Literature) would select from the same small pool of texts and all students would take the same series of general education courses. Because everyone is examining the same topics, the synergy involved encourages thinking. At the other end is the conviction that in order to think about something, one must first learn how to think critically. In this case it does not matter so much what the subject is, but that one development the intellectual tools to evaluate and develop ideas. So then general education classes may be more al a carte and sections within those courses may be widely varied. In some cases, under this rubric, there are no general education requirements to be had.

Menand finds the root of this difference not in some deep philosophical difference (he maintains that discussions at that level are rare, even in the midst of a curriculum review), but instead stem from the tensions that exist in the historical development of undergraduate higher education. The narrative Menand presents goes something like this: prior to middle of the nineteenth century in America a liberal arts education was one of a number routes towards coming into a learned profession. For instance, doctors and lawyers could (and did) bypass college altogether and went straight to their professional schools. This changed when Harvard required that students entering its law and medical programs first earn a bachelor's degree. In doing so, the undergraduate program not only because a gateway toward professional obtainment generally, but also took the mantle of being universally applicable. At the same time learned societies started to spring up which sought to professionalize all academic disciplines. This required a strict demarcation between disciplines such that knowledge from one discipline is not transferable to another. This dynamic between the liberal being seen universally applicable and undergraduate education being the gateway to professions where knowledge is anything but universal led to creation of the general education requirement. The general education requirement itself, however, rests uneasily between these. If too practicable the general education component is seen as too bound to one's present situation, too much like simple training, and leaves the student without the tools to adapt as situations change. If the component is too general, it is seen as inapplicable to the discipline one is really interested in.

In his second essay, Menand's examines the development of the humanities follows a similar path. As noted, disciplines can be distinguished from one another by a given set of knowledge that is not readily transferred. The skills one learns as a surgeon do not help one in astrophysics. The question is, whether the humanities should be considered disciplines in this sense. Medand's answer would seem to be, not for want of trying. One could argue that by examining their professional literature, disciplines such as English Literature (Menand's discipline) or Philosophy (my undergraduate major) have become more esorteric over the past seventy-five or one-hundred years. Taking a cue from the previous essays, one could also say that drive for professionalizing the disciplines combined with an attempt to follow the successful model of the sciences, that areas of learning that might seem to be available to everyone would become highly specialized. Menand argues that sort of disciplinary isolation started breaking down in the nineteen-seventies when (a) the rationale for the humanities to model themselves after the science started breaking down and (b) the discipline-based model for the humanities became inadequate as the pool of undergraduates (and then practitioners in the humanities) diversified. Menand attributes the first part to the rise of the sciences following World War Two and the onset of the Cold War. The second part is a bit more difficult to justify. Menand's argument here is that prior the civil rights movement, feminism, and the subsequent reactions to each, the pool of college was fairly uniform. As such students (some of whom would be professors in their own right) already bought into the prevailing view. As disciplines diversified, the came to include those who had formally been outside the disciplinary structure had less of a reason to accept it and so it started not so much to break down but to transform itself into interdisciplinary studies. Menand wryly notes that the move toward interdisciplinary studies reinforces disciplines even while they are being critiqued (one cannot have an interdisciplinary dialog without there being disciplines). The problem with interdisciplinary courses is that it involves two groups with non-transferable knowledge bases attempting to interact by transferring knowledge.

Menand extends this inquiry with his third essay, “Interdiciplinarity and Anxiety.” In many ways this essay repackages the other two and points to the forth. It is also Menand's most introspective but in some ways the least satisfactory. After about twenty-nine pages of detached analysis, which again bring up the role of professionalization, the drive for the university to be scientific, the rise and challenge to academic disciplines, we take a sharp turn for a page and a half of academic angst that seems to come from nowhere. What is new, and what points to the final essay, is the overall structure of the university which both protects instructors but also serves to make them less relevant to the larger community.

Menand ends by asking the question, “why do all professors think alike?” He might have better titled it “grad school is professors and administrators, not students.” The question one might have expected would have been why is it that professors tend to be so liberal. Menand tackles this one by noting a number of surveys to show that while university professors have tended to track just left of center (his term is “moderately liberal,”) that except for a brief period in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, radicals are no more prevalent in academia than in the population as a whole. Menard goes on to assert that as the radicals are retiring, they are being replaced by far more moderate instructors. In short while still being just left of center, academics are becoming more homogenous. Menand seems to have solid evidence that this is the case. Undergraduate students are just as politically diverse as the population as a whole. Students going into graduate programs are also just as diverse. Those who get through PhD programs and themselves continue within academia are not as diverse. Possible explanations at this juncture would include that those interested in academia are naturally left-of-center, that those who make it through the process become acculturated, or that those that don't conform are pushed out by the system. Menand gives no clear answer, though he had already discounted the first possibility. He could have strengthened is position if he had noted that prior to the late 19th century, academia was exceptionally conservative in its general outlook. He also sites anecdotal evidence where notable neoconservatives left academia before finishing their degrees. This is a suggestive, but fragile, hook to lay any theory and Menand seems to recognize it as such.

What Menand notes as peculiar is that it takes far longer to earn a PhD in one of the humanities than the social or physical sciences. It is this phenomena that he explores. Unlike the physical or social science, the skills learned by humanities scholars as humanities scholars does not translate well outside of academia. The bar for completing a program is raised, and expectations for what a doctoral dissertation are raised in the very fields where success is the most difficult to determine. On the other hand, all undergraduates have to courses in the humanities (particularly within the general education requirements). From an administrative point of view, there is every reason to keep graduate students on as graduate assistants for as long as possible and very little relax standards were success is doubtful. Menand notes that a PhD in the humanities surely cannot be required in order to teach undergraduates because graduate assistants teach undergraduates as part of their curriculum. He also argues that rigor of a doctoral dissertation (which is now seen less as an academic exercise than as the first draft of a scholarly tome) would be better served by requiring students to publish in a peer-reviewed journal. Whatever the merit of this line of reasoning, its connection to the question of why professors all think alike is tentative at best.

This forth essay to an extent summarizes what is best and most maddening about Marketplace of Ideas. The writing is engaging, the analysis clear. What seems to be missing are conclusions or at least conclusions placed firmly on the analysis proffered. Even without those conclusions, Menand offers a provocative and timely addition to academia's continual self-examination.

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Alison says

This should be required reading for all academics. Menard gives a concise overview of the history of higher education in the U.S., pointing out that a crucial moment was the separation between the idea of a liberal arts degree and professional degrees. He accepts lots of the things we claim about a liberal arts education--that it

"exposes the contingency of present arrangements" and "encourages students to think for themselves," but argues that academics--in particular those in the humanities--are too focused on reproducing specialists like ourselves and too fearful of diluting the purity of a liberal education with "instrumentalism" and "presentism": "The divorce between liberalism and professionalism as educational missions rests on a superstition: that the practical is the enemy of the true. This is nonesense." That is, he feels we should have a more open and exploratory relationship with the general culture: "It is important for research and teaching to be relevant, for the university to engage with the public culture and to design its investigative paradigms with actual social and cultural life in view" (158).

Megan says

This book was frustrating, but I'll say up front that it was probably my fault. No wait. Scratch that. It was not my fault. I'm noticing the irony that my first instinct is to deprecate myself as "too dumb" to understand the dry prose and windy academese of this book. But the author himself discusses the necessity of tenure-track professors to write books that few read and even fewer understand. Why didn't Menand follow his own cue and write something a little more engaging?

The sheer number of statistics rattled off was enough to make me fall asleep on my feet (I "read" this as an audiobook, and often walk around doing other things while listening). For example, I am FAR less interested to know exactly how many professors categorize themselves as radically liberal vs. moderately liberal-- and we get to learn ALL these numbers, ad nauseam-- than I am interested in WHY there are more liberal professors than conservative ones. And the explanation of the latter was all-too brief-- in a single sentence Menand says perhaps it's because academic institutions encourage questioning of the status quo, and conservatives, in the words of my father in-law, "want things the way they used to be" and therefore wouldn't fit into the culture of an academic institution. One sentence for this big idea? Is that it?

Aside from the less-than-interesting batches of statistics, the rest of the book spent a lot of time windbagging about issues like the overtaking of disciplinarity by inter-disciplinarity, the distinction between professionalization and specialization, and the birth of criticism as its own discipline. All things I might theoretically care about if the ideas were placed in some sort of context. Namely, what does this mean for the experience of students and teachers today?

P.S. At one point in a footnote Menand mentions my alma mater, St. John's College. He describes it as an institution where students spend four weeks read Marx. Johnnies read a hell of a lot more than Marx! For that matter they read a hell of a lot more Plato and Aristotle than Marx, but that wouldn't be as titillating a footnote, would it?

Vinay Patel says

Not very engaging and most of the new information I acquired from the book were the sections about the history of academic movements/reforms, which read insipidly. The author doesn't make a good case for why general education and attaining a "breadth" of subjects is beneficial especially in a market that demands concrete skills and reasoning abilities.

Ally says

3.91

Neil R. Coulter says

I *loved* this book. It's been on my to-read list for a while, and now as I work on the details of a new doctoral program at my institution, I finally get to check out the big pile of relevant books from that list. Menand's book was right at the top. I value the history of the development of American higher education that Menand presents. It's helpful to me, in designing a new program, to understand the historical foundation and how in some areas reverence for tradition is a hindrance to where grad studies ought to be going. Menand could be quoted out of context to make him seem like a curmudgeon, but I found that he maintains a hopefulness throughout the book, that even the ways higher ed has become out of step with reality are not insurmountable obstacles. He keeps the reader clearly focused on reality, in order not to get bogged down in abstruse discussions. For example: "The divorce between liberalism and professionalism as educational missions rests on a superstition: that the practical is the enemy of the true. This is nonsense. Disinterestedness is perfectly consistent with practical ambition, and practical ambitions are perfectly consistent with disinterestedness. If anyone should understand that, it's a college professor" (57).

I enjoyed each of the four essays in *The Marketplace of Ideas*, but the third and fourth chapters were especially eye-opening for me. In chapter 3, "Interdisciplinarity and Anxiety," Menand gets at why academics idealize interdisciplinarity. What is it that we expect it to be, and what chronic shortcomings do we want it to correct? I thought his distinction of the humanities as being *transmissable* (able to be taught to students) but not *transferable* (a specialist in one area cannot make judgments about another area) was an apt way to get at the professional anxieties that academics experience. This, plus his presentation of the post-WWII changes in higher ed (growth from 1945-1970, and then a decline), leads to insightful ideas about the deliberate insularity of a humanities Ph.D. program.

Some of Menand's hardest-hitting criticisms are in chapter 4, "Why Do Professors All Think Alike?" Menand examines the ways in which a humanities Ph.D. is a self-selecting field, and the diversity that is crucial to its usefulness is removed before it even gets a chance to contribute. He points out that a humanities Ph.D. takes years longer than a medical or law degree, and that only half of the people who enter a grad program end up finishing the degree. As he says, "there is a huge social inefficiency in taking people of high intelligence and devoting resources to training them in programs that half will never complete and for jobs that most will not get" (152). The ambiguity of the purpose of a humanities Ph.D. is a huge factor in the 10 years or more that people devote to a program; "Students continue to check into the doctoral motel, and they don't seem terribly eager to check out" (150). Menand's opinion of the value of the doctoral dissertation is *exactly* what I have argued for in trying to design a doctoral program that doesn't lean so heavily on the dissertation. A he says, "the idea that the doctoral thesis is a rigorous requirement is belied by the quality of most doctoral theses. If every graduate student were required to publish a single peer-reviewed article instead of writing a thesis, the net result would probably be a plus for scholarship" (152). Preach it!
I find Menand's writing and arguments to be right on. *The Marketplace of Ideas* is one of the most enjoyable books I've read on higher ed in the US. I'll close my review with a lengthy, excellent quote from Menand's conclusion:

> People are taught--more accurately, people are socialized, since the process selects for other attributes in addition to scholarly ability--to become expert in a field of specialized study; and

> then, at the end of a long, expensive, and highly single-minded process of credentialization, they are asked to perform tasks for which they have had no training whatsoever: to teach their fields to non-specialists, to connect what they teach to issues that students are likely to confront in the world outside the university, to be interdisciplinary, to write for a general audience, to justify their work to people outside their discipline and outside the academy. If we want professors to be better at these things, then we ought to train them differently. (157-158)

It's my hope to be part of the movement to reconceptualize higher ed in some of the ways that Menand is arguing for.

Kevin says

I would walk blindfolded into traffic if I thought there was something to read by Louis Menand on the other side of the street, but since I work at what some might be tempted to call a major mid-western University, I was not anxious to hear more about what is wrong with higher education today -- a game that is generally best played at a campus bar, with rules similar to "Hi, Bob." My fears were unfounded. Menand provides a recognizable account of life on the ground, enlightening historical analysis supported by understandable statistics, all while leaving the rancor that is usually part of these discussions outside the gate.

Grace says

Louis Menand's "The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University" is an insiders guide to the history, current state, and potential future of higher education in the United States. This book is a part of the "Issues of Our Time" series "in which some of today's leading thinkers explore ideas that matter in the new millennium."

As a product of a four year liberal arts undergraduate institution in the United States, I didn't think twice about taking this book to the check out counter at my local library. I saw this as an opportunity to see the educational system from an insider's perspective and to see what goes on behind the scenes of our nation's colleges and universities. I learned just that and so much more from Menand's book. The most fascinating section, in my opinion, is the text devoted to the history of undergraduate and graduate education as we know it today. The great strides made in the last 100 years are astounding!

Menand's "The Marketplace of Ideas" also showed me how I fit into the educational system as a student as well as in our national and global economy as an educated worker. Education impacts every aspect of society and this book is just a sampling of the impact and connections education and education reform has on a person's and a society's way of life.

I definitely recommend this book to anyone pursuing or planning to pursue graduate education in the United States as well as for anyone looking to understand the undergraduate and graduate educational programs in which they attend, plan to attend, or graduated from.

Steven Peterson says

Louis Menand notes at the outset of this rather brief volume (Page 15): “There is always a tension between the state of knowledge and the system in which learning and teaching actually take place. The state of knowledge changes much more readily than the system.” We see institutions of higher education with cutting edge research housed within institutional structures that are a century or more old.

The book’s central chapters address, in order, one of four general questions: (1) Why is a sound general education curriculum so difficult to craft? (2) Why have the humanities undergone “a crisis of legitimation” (page 16)? (3) Why has ‘interdisciplinarity” become something of a mantra? (4) Why do professors tend to be so similar ideologically? His contention? These are the result of systemic issues coming from a system that has reproduced itself for over a hundred years. In the first chapter, he concludes that academics have to step back and look at their enterprise and “shake things up,” not break things up.

General education is a key issue. What approach to take? Menu? Take two courses in Area A, two in area B, etc.? One ends up with a smorgasbord and little of a center. Or a “great books” approach? But why this book rather than that one? And the process is often politicized when reexamining general education requirements. There is a nice case study of Charles William Eliot’s efforts at Harvard in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Part of his legacy was separating education aimed at becoming a professional from a liberal arts education.

Humanities? The disruptive conflicts coming from continental theory, the lengthy process by which one receives a Ph. D. Yet he is positive at the close of this chapter, noting that (Page 92): “Skepticism about the forms of knowledge is itself a form of knowledge.”

And so on, chapter by chapter, exploring the four questions.

The last chapter is one where I expected some provocative and searching questions to advance discourse on some of the issues characterizing higher education today. But the close was surprisingly subdued and comes down to a contention that we need to rethink doctoral education. He states (Page 157): “. . .professional reproduction remains almost exactly as it was a hundred years ago.” But how to address that? The answer is that academics need to rethink—but not become subject to the world’s demands that higher education serve the ends of the market and society. Interesting questions are raised, but the end result of the book is a not very penetrating analysis of the tensions between free inquiry by academics and the demands of the world on the university.

A well written book that raises provocative questions. But, in the end, not as satisfying as I had hoped. As an academic, I am concerned that sometimes those of us in higher education isolate ourselves from real concerns. On the other hand, becoming a tool to fuel economic needs of society is also counterproductive. The need to ask questions, to think critically, to challenge accepted wisdom is a valuable enterprise from higher education. Menand does a good job, though, in noting that sometimes academics don’t pursue those issues in analyzing their own domain.

Mehrsa says

This is a really narrow book having to do with changes in university structure, specifically in the humanities education at 4 year universities. But within that narrow range, it is super insightful about the reasons for changes (which have a lot to do with a diminished market demand and with institutional insecurity). I loved

the end where he talks about inter-disciplinarity and how that's actually a doubling down on disciplines. Menand is such an excellent writer and thinker and I want to read everything he's written.
