

The Anti-College Is on the Rise

By [Molly Worthen](#) May 13, 2017

A small band of students will travel to Sitka, Alaska, this month to help reinvent higher education. They won't be taking online courses, or abandoning the humanities in favor of classes in business or STEM, or paying high tuition to fund the salaries of more Assistant Vice Provosts for Student Life. They represent a growing movement of students, teachers and reformers who are trying to compensate for mainstream higher education's failure to help young people find a calling: to figure out what life is really for.

These students will read works by authors ranging from Plato and Herbert Marcuse to Tlingit writers. The point is to "develop and flex a more rigorous political imagination," according to one course syllabus. They will take on 15 to 20 hours a week of manual labor in Sitka, and set their group's rules on everything from curfews to cellphones. Last summer's cohort discouraged the use of phones during class and service hours and ordered everyone to turn off the internet at 10 p.m.

This is [Outer Coast](#), one of an expanding number of educational experiments born out of a deepening sense that mainstream American colleges are too expensive, too bureaucratic, too careerist and too intellectually fragmented to help students figure out their place in the universe and their moral obligations to fellow humans.

There are alternative colleges that replace traditional courses with personalized study; gap-year [programs](#) that combine quasi-monastic retreats with world travel; summer seminars devoted to clearing trails and reading philosophy. They aim to prove that it is possible to cultivate moral and existential self-confidence, without the Christian foundation that grounded Western universities until the [mid-20th century](#). They seek to

push back against the materialism and individualism that have saturated the secular left and right, all at an affordable price. It's a tall order.

Their work is inspiring, but it is also a sobering indictment — particularly for those of us who teach in the humanities, whose job it once was to lead students in a survey of how civilization's greatest minds wrestled with philosophical problems. In recent decades, a stultifying mix of hyperspecialized research and pressure to emphasize "practical skills" — as well as a political reluctance to prioritize canonical texts or universal questions — have sapped our confidence.

"The question of the value and purpose of living, of the sources of fulfillment available to us as mortal creatures with ambitions of the most varied kinds, has been pushed to the margins of respectability even in the humanities," wrote Anthony Kronman, a professor at Yale Law School, in his 2007 [book](#) "Education's End."

Outer Coast, founded in 2015, offers one partial solution. Bryden Sweeney-Taylor, who is 38, helped found the program in order to give young people a taste of the education he received at an older countercultural experiment, Deep Springs College, which was founded in 1917. Deep Springs — a tuition-free, highly selective two-year liberal arts college and working ranch near Death Valley in California — combines intense study, manual labor and intimate community to give students "a sense of the purpose of education not just being for oneself but for something larger than one's self," Mr. Sweeney-Taylor told me.

Outer Coast — which was co-founded by Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, an Alaskan who dropped out of Yale [to serve](#) in the Alaska Legislature — plans to eventually expand into a two-year undergraduate program. The aim is to recruit Alaska Natives and other students from underrepresented backgrounds, but also to develop a program that reformers elsewhere might copy — which means "being as financially lean and economically efficient as possible, creating a replicable model

for these micro-institutions," Mr. Sweeney-Taylor said.

Laura Marcus, who is 30, is one such kindred spirit. She was an overachieving high school student in Indiana when she read about Deep Springs and became enthralled. "So much of the effort I was putting forth was only to polish my own G.P.A. and résumé. I was staring down the barrel of a college education that seemed to be a continuation of that same mode," she told me. "I felt jaded."

She was devastated to learn that Deep Springs admitted only men (the college [welcomed](#) its first female students last fall). After graduating from Yale in 2010, Ms. Marcus founded a Deep Springs-style program for women: the Arete Project, in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. She has recently opened a second, coed program in rural Alaska.

The Arete Project — the Greek word means "excellence" in the broadest sense — [calls](#) itself "education for citizenship, stewardship and leadership." It [operates](#) on a "pay what you can" model and bans alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and recreational drugs. The project began as a summer seminar with plans to grow into a yearlong undergraduate program (participants can [earn](#) college credit). Like Outer Coast, it immerses a small group of students in the demands of self-governance, study and manual labor. Students read a mix of "classical texts and contemporary texts," Ms. Marcus said.

The curriculum has been a source of contention. "Some students feel strongly that Plato has a great deal to offer their intellectual situations, and some can't believe they're being asked to read a dead white man," she told me. Moreover, romanticizing the pursuit of the pure "life of the mind" risks alienating working-class students. "For organizations that want to be accessible to students in all walks of life, as we do, that means having some kind of value proposition that translates into other parts of their life."

The point of bringing students to live, work and read together is nothing short of “the cultivation of wisdom, the living of a good life in thought and action, and selfless devotion to world and humanity,” according to the Arete Project’s website. But what philosophical foundations underlie those ambitions?

“I do wonder whether or not it’s mission-critical for an educational institution to have a fully articulated metaphysics and ethics and politics that underpin it — or to what extent that is inhibitive to the broader project of liberal education,” Ms. Marcus told me. “There is a deep-seated human desire to feel you’re a part of something bigger than yourself, and one of the problems of liberal modernity is that it doesn’t give you a whole lot beyond the self to subsume yourself in. That gives secular institutions like ours a little bit of a question mark about what that grounding vision is going to be.”

Outer Coast and the Arete Project represent one strain of higher education reform: call them the communitarian pragmatists, with liberal arts for the mind, labor for the body and an ethos of secular monasticism for the spirit. They are the descendants of philosophers like John Dewey and educational entrepreneurs like Deep Springs College’s founder, L.L. Nunn.

There is a long history here. A second set of new programs — the humanist individualists — owe more to the experiments of the counterculture era: schools like Evergreen State College, founded in Olympia, Wash., [in 1967](#); Kresge College at the University of California, Santa Cruz, founded soon after; or the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, founded in Boulder, Colo., [in 1974](#) by the poets Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman. These schools combined an interest in Eastern spirituality with the principles of humanistic psychology and the human potential movement, which emphasized the goodness in all humans and their gift for self-actualization.

In the 1960s, psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers challenged the dark, animalistic portrait of human beings advanced by behavioral psychologists and disciples of Freud — not to mention the grim vision of original sin in traditional Christian theology. Their ideas caught on among educators at a time when students were already in revolt against traditional curriculums. The result was the further collapse of eroding general education requirements in favor of radical student choice, which may have felt empowering in the short term, but added more confusion and doubt to universities' sense of mission.

Some reformers abolished traditional course grades and envisioned the professor as a "facilitator" and "flexible resource" who "relies upon the desire of each student to implement those purposes which have meaning for him," as Carl Rogers wrote in "Freedom to Learn" in 1969. At Kresge College, students and faculty joined "encounter groups" and "sensitivity training" sessions to break down hierarchy and humanize a university that was heavily bureaucratized.

The trends that inspired Kresge and Evergreen State have only accelerated. Michelle Jones taught organizational behavior for 15 years in mainstream academic institutions, and in that time "higher ed became more of a business — all the administrators, all the K.P.I.s" (key performance indicators) "all detached from student experience," she told me. After she got tenure, she said, "I paused to reflect, and I said, 'I don't think this is the job I thought it was going to be.' "

In 2015, she founded [Wayfinding Academy](#) in Portland, Ore., which offers a two-year associate degree in "self and society." The curriculum is less conventionally academic than those of Outer Coast or the Arete Project, and more personalized.

Students shape their coursework with tutor-counselors called guides. They receive narrative evaluations instead of grades and design independent projects that help them learn "what it takes to do something

epic” and how to “find their way back to their purpose when they feel lost,” according to a syllabus for a course on “Making Good Choices.” In that class, assigned readings and videos ranged from interviews with Noam Chomsky to a handout on “Anti-Oppressive Facilitation for Democratic Process” by a group called the [Aorta](#) cooperative.

About 70 percent of Wayfinding students have spent some time at a traditional college, Ms. Jones said. “They want to figure out what to do with life without going into a lot of debt.” The two-year program [costs](#) \$11,000 per year; some scholarships are available. The college is accredited by Oregon, but it is not yet qualified to accept federal financial aid.

All staff members serve in multiple roles and make \$33,000 to \$35,000 a year (with annual living cost adjustments). “In traditional higher ed, there were too many barriers between administrators, faculty and staff — they were all quite separate, and rarely talked about students holistically. And the pay disparity was ridiculous,” Ms. Jones told me. “We’re not doing it that way. We call everyone ‘crew.’” She subsidizes the school through crowdfunding.



Thiago Millones a potential student, and former student, Austin Louis at Wayfinding Academy in Portland, Ore. Chad Brown for The New York Times -

Austin Louis ended up in the first graduating class of Wayfinding Academy after starting his education at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass. He had gone to Babson mainly to play baseball, but when an injury sidelined him during his freshman year, "I started to ask, 'Why am I here?'" he told me.

Mr. Louis dropped out, and after a directionless few months reading self-help books and working in retail, he heard Ms. Jones speak at a conference and enrolled at Wayfinding Academy. For a course on "The Good Life," he made a documentary about his family's experience with grief and memory (some of his relatives perished in the Armenian genocide). The project prompted a "powerful conversation" with his dad "about how we can invite more love into our relationship, knowing he and I have only so much time left together," Mr. Louis said. "That's the kind of work I feel is most important to me."

I asked Mr. Louis whether prolonged focus on one's own experience can

devolve into navel-gazing. "Yes, it is a hazard," he said. "It can be easy to slip into working on stuff you're going through, and not really bringing in outside bodies of knowledge. I'd say Wayfinding is working on that." Mr. Louis now works at a Portland preschool.

Programs like Wayfinding Academy — although they do help students translate their vocation into a job — represent a revolt against treating the student as a future wage-earner. At Babson, Mr. Louis said, "I was majoring in business, and the thing that struck me was that I didn't feel there was a lens on people. There was not much focus on the fact that these are real humans we're talking about when we talk about the consumer and the customer. Looking back I see I didn't share the same values. I didn't have the language for it that I do now."

Some students transfer from Wayfinding Academy to traditional universities (the school has a method for translating narrative evaluations into a G.P.A.) — once they have found, as Mr. Louis did, a language of vocation: a way to talk about one's higher purpose in the world, a set of guiding questions.

These tools can help students find the serious philosophical conversations that do still happen at traditional secular universities, if you know where to look. Most of these new academies and seminars struck me as moral and philosophical "summer bridge programs," boot camps meant to do what mainstream universities can't — or won't — take on in a comprehensive way.

Other educators have created summer schools in [basic skills](#), like writing, as a quick-fix attempt to help the rising number of incoming students who are unprepared for college-level work. It makes perfect sense that programs like Outer Coast and Wayfinding have sprung up to address another major deficit that afflicts students across the socio-economic spectrum, and which will leave them floundering at university and beyond: the inability to ask, and answer, serious questions about life's

ultimate purpose.

Perhaps the proliferation of programs like these will push mainstream universities to recover the moral component of their mission, and to recognize that what students need — far more than gourmet dining hall food or fancier classroom technology — is a period of discipleship, a time of discernment. They crave a means to figure out how to do what we all desperately want: to submit to a community and an ideal larger than ourselves, without losing ourselves entirely.

Molly Worthen ([@MollyWorthen](#)) is the author, most recently, of "Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism," an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a contributing opinion writer.

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