Talk about renewal in education is at least as old as educational institutions themselves, and contemporary debates often seem like variations on past debates (Robinson, 1923; Vesey, 1973; Donaldson and Freeman, 2005; Klein, 2005; Bok, 2006). Still, we seem again to be witnessing an acute crisis in American higher education, with a widening gulf between the humanities and ‘practical’ disciplines such as the hard sciences and business. One symptom is the New York State Commission on Higher Education’s recent report, giving short shrift to the arts and humanities, while gesturing vaguely to ‘the world of ideas’ (NY State Commission, 12, 55). But, especially in contemporary America, there are many other signs of anxiety about higher education’s purpose and success. On the one hand, there is an urge to assert its relevance or utility. On the other, there is a hunger for meaning and purpose, for an intellectually, spiritually, and aesthetically fulfilling reinvention of education. This essay briefly traces some important antecedents and identifies salient contours of the current crisis and proposes a route to the renewal of American higher education along three vectors: aesthetic, structural, and philosophical.

Aesthetic renewal

The first vector, aesthetic renewal, is crucial if we wish to maintain the relevance and sustain the quality of national higher education. Yet even aesthetic renewal must be routed through the pragmatic defiles of business and submit to perennial critical vigilance about its intellectual seriousness and commitment to rigor. Among the most ‘deeply
ingrained American values' is a utilitarian conception of education, as Jennifer Washburn reminds us, 'as a means to other ends' (2005, p. 26). This can be linked to the anti-intellectualism Richard Hofstadter famously showed to be characteristic of American life, 'older than our national identity, and [with] a long historical background' (1963 [1962], p. 6). Admittedly, it may be intellectuals who are most acutely sensitive to this trait. Derek Bok, former Harvard president, writes that while academics and intellectuals have heaped criticism on contemporary American universities for their failures, most of their alumni themselves report being quite content with their perceived progress and learning at college (Bok, 2006, p. 6) Why the discrepancy?

A historical perspective is illuminating. The first American colleges, writes Washburn, were 'training grounds of a sort – not for industry but for the clergy' (Washburn, 2005, pp. 27). Before the American Revolution, there were only nine colleges in the country. Only in the last half-century have universities become established at the heart of American life. As the Civil War drew to a close, higher education entered what Bok calls 'a period of unprecedented reform.' At Harvard under President Charles W. Eliot, students were free to study whatever subjects interested them; until the end of his 40-year tenure in 1909, only one English composition course and one on the study of a foreign language ever came to be required. This was an extreme example of the commitment to the pursuit of knowledge not beholden to commercial interests or extraneous ends. Yet the model held general sway for decades, Bok notes, 'In 1890, 80 percent of the curriculum was required in the average college.' Requirements grew less stringent during the first half of the twentieth century: by 1901, curricula in more than one-third of American colleges were 70 percent elective. By 1940, the share of mandatory courses in the typical college curriculum had settled at 40 percent (Bok, 2006, p. 16). However, under A. Lawrence Lowell, Eliot's successor at Harvard, students had to choose a major or concentration and not just a string of introductory courses.

These changes reflected broader historical transformations. Starting around 1787, sectarian controversies forced the religious denominations to cede control of universities to the forces of advancing secularism. The states stopped providing tax assistance and in 1804 the federal government began granting land to states west of the Appalachians to endow new universities. This inaugurated a period of greater emphasis on 'the pragmatic uses of higher education.' In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act, expanding land-grant funding, especially to promote education in 'agriculture and mechanic arts,' in the interest of