

Five Ways of Looking at Liberal Education

Keynote Speech
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- I. Those of you with one of the kinds of liberal education I'm going to talk about today will recognize that I cribbed the title of this talk from Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

Frankly, I don't understand most of the poem, but I do like these lines:

I was of three minds
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

Over time, I have come to be of five minds when looking at liberal education. In the course of my academic career, I have seen four of the five versions of liberal education enacted: liberal education as the liberal arts, as general education, as general intellectual skills, and as a set of learning goals that go beyond the purely cognitive. The fifth view is a version of liberal education that I have not seen fully enacted but that I hope we will reach for.

- II. With the first of my minds, I look back to the English model of higher education, replicated in our own colonial colleges, in which the object was to introduce privileged young men to what Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) called "the best that is known and thought in the world." It's generally associated with a canon of works that have been anointed as being among that stellar company—a list that changes only very slowly, and then with much hand-wringing about the laxity of modern standards. This is liberal education as an immersion in the **liberal arts**.

At its worst, liberal education of this sort has been the sign and seal of privilege, the fraternity handshake that has denoted class status and has differentiated

“gentlemen” from “Philistines” (another Arnoldean term). And as such, it resisted the inclusion of people and works that fell outside the privileged circle—or any reevaluation of the work of such people. I remember my surprise when feminist scholars rediscovered Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, one of the great English novels, until then completely unknown to me. When Cardinal Newman laid out his idea of a university in his book by that name (1852), he began with a definition of it as “a place of *teaching universal knowledge*” (italics mine). His emphasis was on the words “teaching” and “knowledge”—mine is on “universal.” We now know how many people, and how much wisdom, is excluded from that “universal.”

But at its best, this kind of liberal education is, as Maurice O’Sullivan pointed out in a somewhat crusty *Change* article, an introduction to “those subjects appropriate for preparing people to live lives as free human beings.” Such study disciplines the minds of students by asking them to read, analyze, and incorporate into their worldview key knowledge from a variety of fields, the integration of which hopefully leads to what Arnold, again, called “a free disinterested play of mind” (*Essays in Criticism*, 1865). In that sense it develops character—those who write about this kind of liberal education often use the term “self-development” to describe its chief aim (looking back to the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing).

A study of a core set of the liberal-arts texts also provides students with a common set of references that transcend their differences and bind them in intellectual fellowship. A temporary refuge from the pressures of “real life,” it helps them determine how to live a good life once they emerge from a bucolic and secluded campus such as the University of Virginia. There “the Lawn” is encircled by intermixed classrooms and residences of students and professors, thus creating the “Academical Village”—a perfect objective correlative of this kind of liberal learning.

By the “good life,” the defenders of the liberal arts don’t mean the prosperous life—although the gentlemen for whom this type of study was designed were likely, by birth and breeding, to **be** prosperous. This kind of liberal education is emphatically **not** meant to prepare people for future work, except in the broadest of terms. The *artes liberales*, as O’Sullivan points out, were contrasted by their defenders with the *artes illiberales*—that is, study for economic purposes. Arnold’s “free disinterested play of mind” could only happen, in his view, “by keeping aloof from what is called ‘the practical view of things.’” A don at Oxford is reputed to have told a group of graduating students that they would have learned nothing of practical value at university; they would know, however, “when a man was talking rot” to them.

III. But most of us in this room probably didn’t have that kind of education. With the second of my minds—the second eye of the blackbird, if you will—I see liberal education as the kind of **general education** that I, and probably most of you, experienced, and that most students today still receive. It commonly takes the form of distribution requirements: take so many courses from the humanities, so many from the social sciences, and so many from the “hard” sciences—with English 101 and maybe a foreign-language or math requirement thrown in for good measure.

The putative object of **general education** is to introduce students to a wide variety of disciplines, for two reasons: first, to give them a taste of the various disciplinary practices and habits of mind, and second, to help them decide what kind of advanced study they might want to pursue.

General education worked for me and maybe for some of you as well. I blossomed in the course that got me started on a lifelong love of classical music; I was so intrigued by the course in anthropology that I almost majored in that field; my study of French led to a year abroad that shaped my worldview in profound ways; and the course I took in astronomy led to a lifelong fascination with science. But then, as I confessed

in a recent *Change* editorial, the only Girl Scout honor I ever won was a Dabbler's Badge.

And therein lies the danger of assuming that general education is the same as a liberal education. When I became an academic officer at the SCHEV, I was given the job of overseeing the assessment of student learning in the state. And almost the first thing we found out was that general education programs were unassessable—because, as one assessment coordinator put it, they lacked intellectual coherence. This won't surprise any of you who've participated in meetings to revise distribution requirements, which generally look less like scholarly discussions than Yalta conferences, where one department grants a bit of territory to another in exchange for a little bit of its own.

The realization of the intellectual vacuity of their general education programs led virtually all the campuses in Virginia in the late 1980s to revise them around learning goals. I don't know that it made much of a difference, though. Those goals looked wonderful on paper, but the classes that supposedly addressed each learning goal were so numerous and varied that the smattering effect has pretty much continued, as far as I can tell.

Defenders of the liberal arts have long pointed out that a supposedly liberal education of this sort can easily lead to what John Henry Newman (again, in his *Idea of a University*) described as a "passive reception of scraps and details." Alfred North Whitehead similarly cautioned us at the beginning of *The Aims of Education* that "in training a child to activity of thought, above all things we must beware of what I will call 'inert ideas'—that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combination" (here again is the notion of liberal education as requiring an **integration** of ideas).

And therein lies the key to what, with the third of my minds, I see as a liberal education—the development of general intellectual skills.

IV. Again, assessment has pushed us in this direction. The nearly infinite variety of paths through the general education curriculum and its lack of intellectual coherence mean that we can no longer assess how much students have learned the way they did, say, in the large-scale Pennsylvania assessment in the early twentieth century—a 12-hour, 3200-question objective test of content knowledge taken by 70 percent of the state’s college seniors.

So increasingly, institutions are beginning to assess the “general intellectual skills” of students. One variant of **this** version of liberal education focuses on the key skills that the standardized assessment instruments we now have—the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), for example— are set up to measure: communication, problem solving, and critical thinking, which are the three foci of the one National Education Goal that addresses collegiate education.

These skills are generally defended as crucial to the functioning of citizens and workers in a world that’s changing with dizzying rapidity. And at its best, this approach to liberal education can create a flexibility of mind that’s reminiscent of Arnold’s “free disinterested play of mind.”

At its worst, though, this model has several fatal flaws. First, it’s content-free. Are we satisfied with producing graduates who can think in a sophisticated way about sitcoms but haven’t ever read the literature that contains the sum and substance of wisdom on the human condition? Are we content with their being able to write well without “the body of knowledge, strong theoretical base, and history of reflection” that, as O’Sullivan says, is captured within the disciplines?

Second, insofar as it collapses individual human beings into the collective “human capital” that drives the economic engine of this country—insofar only “the skills that make you competitive and productive in a modern, technological economy” (in the words of our President) are our concern—we risk creating what Arnold presciently called “the drab of the earnest, prosaic, practical, austere, literal future” (*Essays in Criticism*). While I’m all for a 21st century in which the US maintains its economic hegemony, the old English professor in me believes that that’s not the only thing that we in the academy are about.

I think that a fear of education’s becoming fatally instrumental is why a variant on the general-intellectual-skills approach to liberal education has arisen. With my fourth mind, I see liberal education as including goals that aren’t strictly cognitive.

- V. This view of liberal education is captured in the goals of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, which go beyond the merely cognitive in interesting ways. They include *moral character* (“the extent to which students use higher-order . . . moral reasoning in resolving moral issues”), *inclination to inquire and lifelong learning* (which is “a student’s tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity”), *intercultural effectiveness* (“students’ openness to cultural and racial diversity, as well as the extent to which they enjoy being challenged by different perspectives, values, and ideas”), and *personal well-being* (which comprises “self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy”).

I think our willingness to go beyond the strictly intellectual in our educational aims for students stems from several recent developments.

- The first is the increasingly complex notion of intelligence that’s come out of work such as Daniel Goleman’s on multiple intelligences. We’ve come to

realize that many of the competencies that enable people to live satisfactory and productive lives—the “good life” Socrates and defenders of the liberal arts believed education aimed at—are not limited to the ones we measure on intelligence tests. A person who’s effective in multicultural groups because of highly developed interpersonal skills may not also score well on the SAT.

- The second development is a better understanding of the nature of cognition itself. Researchers such as Antonio Damasio have helped us understand reason’s neurophysiological base, as well as the fact that feeling is “an integral component of the **machinery** of reason.” Martha Nussbaum makes a similar point from the perspective of philosophy.
- And finally, students are increasingly insisting that if we expect them to “engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity,” that activity needs to contribute to their “personal well-being” by helping them make meaning within their lives. There’s a long history of academics’ neglecting this aspect of life, epitomized in characters such as the scholars of Jonathan Swift’s Laputa (*Gulliver’s Travels*), Sir Walter Scott’s Dr. Dryasdust (a fictitious character to whom he dedicated *Ivanhoe*), or George Eliot’s Mr. Causabon (*Middlemarch*)—characters who know the facts and only the facts but not what those facts add up to or how they interrelate or help one have a life worth leading.

“Moral character” is a term that makes me nervous, I confess, just as “spiritual” does—both can skirt too close to dogma. But read as the disposition to use reason (understood in all its complexity) to good ends in order to create personal and collective well-being, it’s indispensable. It provides the motive power that is requisite to moral agency.

The danger of this more capacious approach to liberal education is that it can get, to use a technical term, goopy. Classic defenders of the liberal arts all emphasize what hard work it is to cultivate the intellect, as it's broadly conceived here. Newman denigrates what he sees as the "modern" tendency to believe that "learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing." "Culture," said Whitehead, "is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling." This activity doesn't come without intellectual self-discipline and emotional self-regulation, just as "advance" and "finish" don't happen with a curriculum thrown together higgledy-piggledy by each student. They require instead one constructed carefully and thoughtfully by teachers.

VI. So, given the flaws of each of these models of liberal education, with my fifth mind, I see one that combines the best of these various approaches.

- It's **grounded** in a knowledge of our collective wisdom—there are some texts and core scientific hypotheses that we provisionally agree all students should grapple with.
- It's **broadened** by a sweeping view of what each field of study deposits in that collective storehouse, and **disciplined** by a sophisticated understanding of the scholarly procedures, rules of evidence, principles, logic, and so on that characterize various fields of study—what cognitive scientist David Perkins calls "mindware." So we require students to go beyond their zone of comfort and competence to see what else the intellectual world has to offer before they dig into one discipline in particular.
- It's **tied to the collective economic and civic good** by attention, across the curriculum, to developing the general intellectual skills that all citizens and workers will need to live prosperously, and to flourish, in the flourishing country they help to create.
- And finally, it's **enriched** by an attention to meaning-making and the enlistment of the emotional side of the cognitive capacities.

The closest this vision has come to being realized is in the AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) "essential learning outcomes." As described on the AAC&U Website (<http://aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm>), they include

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, Including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, Including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative Learning, Including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems.

We could do worse than to incorporate these goals into our educational practices whole cloth.

Political leaders have been telling us that we need to produce more college graduates. That's probably true. But the real question is, can we produce them equipped with this kind of liberal education (the acronym LEAP was not chosen at random, I suspect)?

- Can we do it within existing resources—rather than becoming, as Jane Wellman puts it, worshippers in a cargo cult that expects money to drop from the sky?
- Can we do it with the kinds of students we increasingly have, who are **not** the privileged white men for whom the liberal arts were developed but exactly those people for whom the system was never designed—adults; students of color; and poor, underprepared, and first-generation students? And finally,
- Can we do it given the growing appeal of fields that are more frankly pragmatic?

I would say that we can, but only if we **are** what we want our graduates **to be**: developed, deeply knowledgeable, skillful, and imaginative adults who are oriented toward the social good and human flourishing.