

President's Address to CCAS

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Back in the mid 1980s, while teaching at Texas A&M, it was my job one morning to go recruiting young Aggies for our Liberal Arts program. We had a jazzy video set up and some time during the morning I noticed a student watching it intently. I approached and asked: "Are you interested in the Liberal Arts?" He looked at me rather startled and with a nice smile replied: "Oh no, sir. I am a Republican." He might have been surprised to know that the liberal beliefs that underpin a liberal education support very strongly the idea of personal merit. An education, particularly a liberal education, is not for the privileged, but for those who earn it. With this ideal, the young man might actually have been quite in agreement.

By now, of course, many regard a liberal education as an elaborate construct developed by dead white males and passed on to other soon-to-be dead white males in order to maintain patriarchal hegemony over the rest of society. So, in the end, that young Aggie might have been plain dumbfounded to know that the Liberal Arts were not simply conservative, but down right reactionary. In short, had he known a little more, he might have concluded that he could have taken the classes without any real danger to himself. The reason I bring such an indigestible topic to your attention today is that, as dean of Arts and Humanities, I find myself defending often the abstract idea of a liberal education. In practice, however, I see it transform itself before my very eyes practically on a daily basis, to the point where I am no longer sure what it is that I am defending. At least since the early nineteenth century, there have been voices crying in the American academic wilderness that we are in fact losing the whole notion of a liberal education. Just as firmly, there have been voices claiming that we better get on with it and recognize that our times require that we redefine ourselves. And that we have been doing with great relish. But is it thoughtful change? If liberal education stands apart and distinct from vocational education, the distance and the distinction, it seems to me, are diminishing at an astonishing pace. And what does a liberal education consist of? Does anyone know any more?

Like many other faculties before them in colleges and universities across America, I have seen the faculty of my university struggle for the past five years with the notion of a liberal education as they attempted to revamp the general education curriculum. I should say, five and one half years, because this one is almost half over, and we still don't have a finished product. At one point I found myself before some members of the faculty committee successfully defending poetry writing as an art, but failing miserably to convince them that photography, ceramics, and the serious playing of a musical instrument also qualified as artistic endeavors. At that point I realized that they were even more lost than I was. So this talk was born out of my own necessity to get to an

understanding of what confuses me. But I confess I have reached no such understanding. Let me bring up a bit of history.

It was interesting for me—an immigrant who arrived with no formal education beyond the fifth grade—to find how the whole concept of a liberal education is and is not woven into the fabric of the American democratic system. I had always taken it for granted that non-repressive governments, as contrasted with the one I left, provide their citizens with what I roughly thought to be a liberal educational system for their own benefit and protection. Jefferson understood the concept extremely well, and had a grandiose plan for developing an intellectual elite to foster democracy. He also wanted to ensure that an aristocratic gentry would not develop in this country by controlling, among other things, access to the great centers of learning as it had happened in tired old Europe (as an aside, I don't think he would have liked what has ensued). When Jefferson's nephew became of age to acquire a formal education, his uncle wrote to him from France, in 1785: "It is time for you now to begin to be choice in your reading. I have long ago digested a plan for you, suited to the circumstances in which you will be placed. This I will detail for you from time to time as you advance. For the present, I advise you to begin a course of ancient history, reading everything in the original and not in translation. First read Goldsmith's history of Greece. This will give you a digested view of that field. Then take up ancient history in detail, reading the following books, in the following order: Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon's Anabasis, Arrian, Quintus Curtius, Diodorus Siculus, Justin."¹ And that is just Greek history, there is to follow Roman history, then literature, and philosophy. A positively frightening list. On the other hand, by the time he founded the University of Virginia in 1819, he did not want the students there "holding...to one prescribed course of reading [as at Harvard], and disallowing exclusive application to those branches only which are to qualify them for the particular vocation to which they are destined. We shall, on the contrary, allow them uncontrolled choice in the lectures they shall choose to attend, and require elementary qualification only, and sufficient age."²

So in the early years of the republic, a proper education for gentlemen was already a quasi-liberal education, not always deeply rooted in the Western tradition, unless this was something well learned in high school. About fifty years later Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, that bastion of tradition, imposed sweeping changes in the academic curriculum. He actually sounds very much like Jefferson: "A mental discipline which takes no account of differences of capacity and taste is not well directed. It follows that there must be variety instead of uniform prescription...it is altogether probable that the educational value of any established study, far from being permanently fixed, is constantly changing."³ In the sentiment of the time, he was providing an easy way out for the students, and moving them away from rigorous learning. As the dean of Yale College bemoaned, the students at Harvard could now take medieval history or botany if they chose, rather than confront serious intellectual challenges. We may look somewhat bemused at the brouhaha, but there hasn't been a lot of change in the sentiment—except that the stakes keep getting lower.

Thus by the time John Dewey made his impassionate defense of a more practical learning, such reforms had actually been taking place in American education for many years. In fact, it was this relentless movement away from the core tradition of a liberal education that prompted Robert Maynard Hutchins at the University of Chicago to propose reestablishing the predominance of the classical tradition by imposing a curriculum based on the great books. The curriculum was designed to develop the intellectual capacities of the students; it was to be a curriculum for the thinking man. In his own words: "Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. Truth is everywhere the same."⁴ Happily for him he did not live to see how far relativism has moved us away from that ideal.

Dewey's more pragmatic approach rested on the belief that the country wasn't in need of a small intellectual elite, interested above all in the life of the mind. It was in need, instead, of a radical academic reform that would help transform as many citizens as it could manage into productive members of the society. Education was there to strengthen the democracy by teaching citizens practical skills and by developing a cooperative spirit among them that would extend through the very fabric of the country itself.⁵ You no doubt are familiar with this debate which went on well into the forties and took on added importance as the GI Bill was introduced at the end of War World II.

There is no denying that Dewey had a point, particularly if we consider the increasing flow of immigrants into the nation. By 1920, with a U.S. population of roughly one hundred million, over thirty million consisted of recent European arrivals and their families, most of whom had a rudimentary education, if at all. Another twelve million or so were African Americans who, for different reasons, also lacked education and, like the immigrants, they lacked a tradition of education. It was imperative, therefore, to educate as many of these individuals as possible if the democratic process and the economy were to be kept strong.

Not surprisingly, the education of the black student was debated in almost exactly the same terms as that of his white counterpart. Booker T. Washington was a strong advocate for a practical education that would quickly improve the standard of living of the graduates. W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, advocated a liberal education. This is part of what he said: "We are training not isolated men but a living group of men...[a]nd the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man."⁶ Today, the job is all, and students seldom go to college to get an education; they opt for the brickmason approach; it is the diploma that actually matters.

The debate between advocates of a "true" liberal education and those pushing for a more "practical" education subsided when Harvard proposed a compromise approach in a report known as the "Red Book." The authors acknowledge that, on one hand, there was "a need for diversity, even a greater diversity than exists at present in the still largely bookish curriculum, since nothing else will match the actual range of intelligence and background among students; and on the other, a need for some principle of unity, since without it the curriculum flies into pieces and even the studies of any one student are atomic or unbalanced or both."⁷ Harvard's program provided thus for a liberal education core, a set of electives and specialized studies beyond that, taking on a more or less practical bent, to be determined by the will of the student and the academic emphasis of

the institution. This you will no doubt recognize as the generally accepted plan for most universities, particularly the public comprehensive ones. At one time, these institutions intended to provide an education for the average American closely resembling the liberal education provided by the elite universities. With the years, that also changed; what most of us do on a daily basis is so different from what happens at the elite institutions as to be irrelevant in terms of today's discussion. I have little doubt that the issues that concern AASCU-about which we heard yesterday⁸-are in fact true and troubling. I have little doubt also that they will have a far greater impact on my institution than they will have at Vassar or Amherst. The gap between them and us will continue to grow. The difference has become one of kind, not just of degree.

In concept, a liberal education was an education for gentlemen-and "gentlemen" is the operative word; you see it everywhere on writings about liberal education. Education was there, above all, to develop the thinking man. It was designed for the man of leisure-schooling in the literal sense. It was the education that characterized the free man, meaning those with enough free time and resources to acquire it and develop it. But it is not the kind of education that characterizes my institution, and, I suspect, many of yours. There are no men of leisure at my university-except perhaps for two of my own sons. The average student is twenty-six years old, married, with children and a job that occupies him a minimum of thirty hours per week, while attempting to carry a full program of studies. Whatever the meaning of leisure in his life, I am sure it does not include reflective contemplation of Epaminonda's stunning and successful campaign against Sparta in the fourth Century BC. Even more bluntly, our average student is no gentleman at all; he is a she.

So we must pose the question of whether a liberal education modeled for gentlemen and steeped in the western tradition coming out of Greece, should be equally useful and appropriate to educate women, who now comprise the majority of our student body. I do not wish to debate this issue, simply to pose the question. Women are evidently successful in the current system-just take a look at the list of your graduates with the highest grade point. Nevertheless, the past twenty-five years have seen a new consciousness, and today practically every university has some form of women studies program or department, as a reminder that something is missing or not right. But in general, the women and these programs must fit within existing rubrics in order to survive. So we have within women studies, critical thinking courses, literature courses, sociology courses, and so forth-all basically conforming to the norms of such courses within their usual disciplines. The programs could not maintain themselves otherwise. Such as they are, they tend to be small and isolated. Most women opt for degrees in standard departments, in part because their diplomas must look like everyone else's in the market place.

Another majority group of students on a growing number of campuses corresponds to the generally called minorities. On many of the campuses of the California State University, including mine, minorities are now the majority. The conditions resemble somewhat those that Dewey encountered at the beginning of the century. California houses a very large group of immigrants from rural backgrounds without a tradition of education.

Many of our students are first generation high school graduates. There is no question that these young men and women-just as those in Dewey's time-must be educated. But there is a difference now; there is no common unifying culture. Most of the immigrants Dewey saw came from relatively common European roots. Many, educated or not, came out of the same western tradition that the educational system was trying so hard to reinforce. The immigrants in California are markedly different. And I will admit readily that California is sui generis, but it also has a way of anticipating what is to happen to everyone else. In the public school district where I reside, over one hundred different languages are spoken in the homes of the students. Many of them, of course, come from the East, and their traditions are not even remotely those shaped by the West. Even the Hispanic population, which comes with a common language, often brings along traditions that have little to do with those of the western world.

But every one of these children will be eventually asked to fit within the mold of this western core of values offered with greater or lesser intensity by the academy. The alternative is to move them into the vocational training programs. The students have begun to realize that they have some say in what is being taught to them. The tradition that feeds their education gives them the means and courage to stake out a claim for their own way of life. In a world where all truths have become "social constructs," the supremacy of any idea is going to be successfully challenged. And ironically while those who remained behind in the home country become increasingly westernized, those who are here often reject the system that is the envy of their brothers.

We are well beyond the world Dewey imagined. Over two thirds of all our children complete high school and two thirds of those attend college in some form. Dewey would have been astounded, I think. Even more so if he took a close look at how the institutions have transformed themselves. To accommodate everyone we have created enormous university systems-I belong to the largest, twenty-two universities and some three hundred and seventy thousand students strong. We characterize our graduates as the engine that moves California, and measure our success by the numbers of nurses, teachers, accountants, social workers we produce. We have no means of knowing to what degree our general education programs enhance these degrees-although we are trying-which is to say, we have no idea how far we have drifted away from a liberal education.

There is an increasing and insidious relationship between demand and what is taught. It is probably inevitable in the context of most public education. But it leads to the further fragmenting of the university into ever more narrow academic disciplines. In that context, the student has acquired a new identity, that of the customer or consumer. Because he pays, his failure, if it happens, is not due to his incapacity to learn, but to our inability to teach. Given the right circumstances and incentives, everyone should be equally capable of learning anything. Not surprisingly, this does not apply to competitive sports. In broad terms, these trends all share an egalitarian perspective. There is no hierarchy of values. Everything is as worthy as everything else is, and no ideas have primacy.

We all know how much more a college grad will earn than a high school grad. Our students and their parents also know it. It is in that context that the university is there to provide a degree. If an education comes along with it, so much the better, but the degree is the key to the future. We shouldn't blame them for trying to cut to the chase.

I think we all know also that there are seriously troubling signs. It should concern us, for example, that a community service component is now becoming a standard requirement for the degree. With it the institution, quite properly, hopes to instill some degree of practical citizenship consciousness into the individual. But whether we adhere to Jefferson's lofty concept of the educated man, or Dewey's more pragmatic proposals, the educational process itself was created to provoke and sustain such democratic sentiment. It was to be its natural byproduct. In fact, both Jefferson and Dewey saw the fabric of the democracy wholly dependent on it. Dewey was particularly concerned about the creation of "egoistic specialists" if we lost sight of our democratic aims in the educational programs. How and when did we lose this component of the educational process that we now have to tack it on as an added requirement? Perhaps it was desired but never there. I told you earlier that I had found no solace in my readings on this subject. So I come to you for help in a way. At these meetings we often talk about these issues, but perhaps not in a concerted way. We worry more about the impact of distance learning, web-based courses, virtual universities, service learning. Something more fundamental needs to be discussed here. What kind of education are our institutions providing? What role do the arts and sciences play in that education? What role should we play, and what are we going to do about it? I don't believe we want to continue, like a latter-day Titanic, full steam ahead, ignoring the danger signals because we are unsinkable. No one is better suited than CCAS to re-ignite this academic dialogue.

We shouldn't doubt that big changes are on the way. For some of us they are here already. It is a question of whether we jump in and help lead or-as Dean Nice Lady of the case study-ignore what is happening hoping that it will all go away, and act surprised when the thunderbolts begin arriving from Mount Olympus. I believe the choice is still ours. Thank you.