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## What's a general education? Book by noted literary critic advocates return to the basics

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"What do *you* think?" It's a question most working in academe probably take for granted. But for others, it's transformative.

For Geoffrey Harpham, visiting scholar and senior fellow at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University and former president and director of the National Humanities Center, the question captures the essence of a higher education, or at least what a higher education should be. It's also the titular anecdote in his book on general education from the University of Chicago Press.

*What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez?: The American Revolution in Education* <sup>[1]</sup> takes its name from a conversation Harpham once had with a scholar during a campus visit. Harpham lost the man's card, and his name probably isn't even Mr. Ramirez (Harpham's memory fails here), but the life story that he shared stuck and grew legs.

As Harpham tells it, Ramirez was born in Cuba and moved to the U.S. more than 50 years ago as a teenage refugee, alone and broke. After a few years doing odd jobs to survive and learning enough English to get a GED, he enrolled in a community college. He took a literature course only as a requirement and found himself not so much studying Shakespeare's sonnets as keeping his head down in class to avoid having to participate. But one day, the instructor approached him directly and asked, "Mr. Ramirez, what do *you* think?"

The moment was tortuous, the man said, as he had "no thoughts at all, and nothing to say." But the moment was also glorious, in retrospect, as "it was the first time anybody had asked me that question."

The spoiler here -- and the point -- is that that Cuban refugee with "no thoughts at all" about Shakespeare went on to become a professor emeritus of comparative literature somewhere. His life trajectory may not have been set by that question in that moment, but what if it was? And, to Harpham's larger argument, what were the social and other outside forces acting on that moment?

Harpham says that Mr. Ramirez arrived in that classroom at just the right time, during the general

education movement. Articulated by Harvard University faculty members in a 1945 report <sup>[2]</sup> called "General Education in a Free Society" and referred to as the "Redbook," in reference to its cover hue, the movement -- in the words of James Bryant Conant, then-president of Harvard -- was not about the "development of the appreciation of the 'good life' in young gentlemen born to the purple."

Rather, Conant said in commissioning the report, "It is the infusion of the liberal and humane tradition into our entire educational system. Our purpose is to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans and are free."

Those ideals made such an impression that they influenced the Truman Report, which was commissioned by then-President Truman and is widely seen as spurring the creation of many community colleges with a broad mission of helping students who otherwise might not have gone to college. Crucially, this humane vision for general education applied not only to Harvard but to all institutions, not least community colleges. (Harvard is still considered something of a leader in general education, but it recently pushed back its new program <sup>[3]</sup> a year, citing the need for time to develop new classes.)

Throughout *Mr. Ramirez*, Harpham praises the world-renowned diversity of U.S. institution types and programs of study. But he advocates a return to the brief consensus of ideals surrounding general education reached somewhere between World War II and the social upheaval of the 1960s.

Such a period now almost seems mythical, given the current lack of consensus about what a college education should mean and do. But Harpham describes that late, great "golden age" of general education as:

- Giving people the opportunity to improve, advance and fulfill themselves in whatever they might choose, with emphasis on the "might," i.e., now or later.
- Liberal, or "various and holistic," rather than vocational or professional.
- Accessible and democratic, in that all citizens should be given opportunity to pursue it.
- Fostering "social cohesion" and a "commitment to common values," including diversity.
- Valuing the humanities as equal to the sciences and math and as "directly instrumental" in helping education realize "the promise of democracy." The humanities are more than the mere acquisition of information, and are inexpressible in quantitative terms, he says.
- Extending one's "intellectual horizons," enriching one's "stock of cultural knowledge," and deepening "one's sympathies and understanding."

Harpham says in *Mr. Ramirez* that the general education movement is, technically, a failed one. For one, the "whole man" concept underpinning it (conceived of by the all-male Harvard panel) was exclusionary to at least half the population. Cold War-era "realists" degraded the "Redbook's" emphasis on "art," seeing it as opposing science or technology. Faculty members resisted for a variety of reasons and, eventually, general education "withered away, lingering on primarily in the ghostly form of distribution requirements," Harpham wrote. "The connection between the educational system and a never-realized but often reaffirmed national commitment to equalizing opportunities for success as part of a more perfect union was broken."

## Broken but Not Forgotten

Harpham said in an interview that he did not write the book specifically for this political moment, which, in his view, is less defined by the erosion of truth than the decline of "informed opinion." But it certainly enhances his case for an education promoting common values, including democracy, informed and active citizenship, and diversity.

"You know, someone once described me as 'a great patriot of the country we've decided not to be,'" he said. "It seems to many people that we're at a point of transition, one in which we can either veer off in a direction we've never taken before, or slap ourselves in the face and recognize who we have always been and what has served us well."

Harpham said his ideas are typically welcomed abroad but that in the U.S. someone inevitably accuses him of promoting American exceptionalism to the point of chauvinism. But that's simply not the case, he said, criticizing both modern-day political conservatives for embracing an agenda that is in fact radical, and liberals for failing to speak beyond their base.

Attitudes within academe about general education are similarly divided. Asked if he had faith that a new gold age of general education could be achieved, Harpham said much would need to align to reach a consensus that such an education is for everyone, and that it enriches democracy through citizens' ability to re-engage the ideas of the country's founding documents. But that's no reason to shy away from the challenge of what he called "interpretive competence."

Conant in the "Redbook" cautioned against getting hung up on terminology, specifically how a "liberal" education might differ from the kind of general education he was pushing. And of course there are major overlaps between what Harpham advocates and the liberal education and equity missions of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Lynn Pasquerella, association president, said she had her own "Mr. Ramirez" moment in a community college, attending her first professional play with a class. It was a production of Tad Mosel's *All the Way Home*, she said, remembering subsequent discussions about how Mary Follet mourned her husband, Jay, who died suddenly, hoping that he loved life despite never having lived it to its full potential.

Another moment came in a philosophy class, during a discussion about the existence of the soul.

"These were these questions that I'd been asking myself but I didn't think anybody else asked," she said. "Growing up in a small rural town in a family where neither parent had the opportunity to graduate from high school, we didn't talk about this kind of thing over dinner." The resultant feeling was one of being "home," she said.

Like Harpham, Pasquerella pushed back against some of the current rhetoric about higher education, saying there's a "false dichotomy" between liberal and vocational or professional learning. Some 167 member institutions of AAC&U are community colleges, she said, and high-impact teaching practices benefit all students. So, too, does an asset-based approach, in which certain aspects of students' backgrounds aren't seen as deficits, but rather tools with which to unlock a liberal education.

Harpham's emphasis on the role of the humanities in a general education can't be ignored, and

he pays particular attention to English departments as a transmitter of that desired interpretive competence. Kent Cartwright, a professor of English at the University of Maryland at College Park and co-author of a recent [report](#) <sup>[4]</sup> on English departments from a division of the Modern Language Association, said that English has the "advantage of being one of the most capacious of academic disciplines." One might study a literary work from historical, sociological, psychological, philosophical, linguistic and aesthetic points of view among others, for example, he said, and literature is a "locus where lots of other intellectual disciplines intersect."

Cartwright said he agreed with Harpham in that general education supports democracy and that community colleges play a big role. When he and his colleagues were working in their recent report for the MLA's Association of Departments of English, he said, "we had some anecdotal evidence that English was doing well, even growing, at some community colleges," despite the poorer trend at colleges and universities. He added, "Community colleges seem really important for first generation students, including in the deepening of their cultural understanding."

Christopher Long, dean of the College of Arts & Letters at Michigan State University, helped reshape general education in his prior post as an associate dean at Pennsylvania State University, which introduced a new integrative studies requirement for students beginning this summer. His proposal for the Penn State changes, written in 2015, begins with how students on campus in 1954 "felt unprepared to address the urgent demands of the complex international situation into which they would graduate." Students pressed President Milton Eisenhower (brother to Dwight) for an international affairs course with no prerequisites, and he began planning for something bigger: a full general education curriculum.

Long, the editor of *The Journal for General Education*, said that the journal uses the term "arts of liberty" to describe the meaning of a general education. In a 2017 [essay](#) <sup>[5]</sup> for example, he wrote -- echoing Harpham -- that general education in the U.S. "is the expression at scale of our deep historical commitment to the liberal arts. In speaking of the 'arts of liberty,' the journal's mission calls attention to the degree to which freedom itself is not so much a right bestowed as an activity cultivated."

To practice the arts of liberty well, Long added, "we need to cultivate the virtues of the liberal arts: the ability to communicate with eloquence, embrace diversity with grace, perceive globally with imagination, and respond to complexity with nuance."

[New Books About Higher Education](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

[Faculty](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

[The Curriculum](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

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#### Links:

[1] <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo26562294.html>

[2] [https://archive.org/stream/generaleducation032440mbp/generaleducation032440mbp\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/generaleducation032440mbp/generaleducation032440mbp_djvu.txt)

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/01/29/harvard-delays-new-gen-ed-curriculum>

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/07/18/new-analysis-english-departments-says-numbers-majors-are-way-down-2012-its-not-death>

[5] <http://cplong.org/2016/10/the-liberal-arts-endeavor-on-editing-the-journal-of-general-education/>

[6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/new-books-about-higher-education>

[7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/faculty>

[8] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/curriculum-1>