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On the Practicality of a Liberal Education

P E R S P E C T I V E S

Is a liberal education a luxury, not to be afforded by those who have to earn a living?

FOR CENTURIES, liberal education did not need to be justified. It was simply the way one came to be educated. The curriculum, of course, evolved with the growth of knowledge and

changing intellectual fashions over the very

long stretch of time from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. However, it did not evolve as much as one might think: learning Latin and Greek and reading a selection of books written in those classical languages had remarkable staying power.

Moreover, for that long period, only a small upper-crust portion of the population was actually so educated. (Even budding lawyers and physicians bypassed what has since become required preparation and moved straight to their respective professional training.) But then two drawn-out developments in the American educational scene led to an increasing need to provide a justification for a liberal education. First, the college-bound population steadily grew and then exploded with the GI Bill of Rights; going to college became a rational ambition for a very substantial fraction of the

population. But that expansion was followed by progressive increases in the cost of a college education, going from the virtually free GI Bill and years of modestly rising tuition to the point, as we came closer to the end of the last century, when a college education at a public university became pricey and at many private institutions truly expensive.

Is a liberal education, then, a luxury, not to be afforded by those who have to earn a living? While it is true that nowadays a large proportion of decent jobs call for knowledge and skills that are not acquired in secondary schools, especially not in those as inadequate as ours, is a liberal education not an extravagant detour to the kind of training that will get the graduate respectable employment?

It has to be conceded that a liberal education does not aim at preparing students for their first jobs. That doesn't mean they won't get one, the economy willing, only that it is not likely to be one of the many that call for some specific expertise. To be sure, today the competencies needed to be a lawyer or a physician, or to hold one of the diverse positions of the business world, can be acquired only after candidates have undertaken a liberal education or something resembling it. If your goal is to be that kind of professional, the short and unsatisfying answer is that those plus or minus four years are a stepping stone; that is the way the educational system is set up. It is an inadequate answer because it answers neither the question of what a liberal education does for a student nor why professional schools require it.

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Some purposes of liberal education

I will assume that except for certain specific needs such as chemistry for medical students or statistics for would-be MBAs, the answer to both of these questions is essentially the same. A liberal education is preprofessional *and* it is pre-life. Its first ingredient is simply, but not trivially, literacy: the ability to express oneself clearly and forcefully, especially in writing, as well as the ability to comprehend, without confusion, the written and spoken language. These are among the *proficiencies* that must be developed in college. But there are also numerous *conversancies** that make the liberally educated person at least familiar with our world: that of nature and that made by man, that of the past and that of the present, that which is close to home and that which is far away. While this goal calls for acquiring a good deal of information, it requires, above all, that students gain the ability to use techniques and methods by which we come to know the laws that govern natural phenomena, the properties of the abstract worlds of mathematics, and the complex features and products of human societies.

But it is not enough to think in intellectual terms alone. By studying art, music, and literature we become not only acquainted with the most exalted products human beings have devised, but we develop both appreciation of them—that is, the capacity to enjoy them—and taste. “Arts & Leisure” is the name of the *New York Times* section; pre-life education must take us beyond the world of work.

And both for life and for work, to become educated requires learning how to delve deeply into a subject matter to attain a measure of competency in some area of knowledge. That is the central point of the major or concentration required in almost all undergraduate programs. No doubt more people wind up not working in the field of their concentration than do, but learning to dig, as well as to work with some independence of teacherly oversight, contributes signally to what is perhaps the single most important goal of a liberal education: learning how to learn.

The world is far too complex for knowledge about it to be compressed into a few years of study. Nor for a single moment does it stand still. Even if it were possible to learn in a few years all that matters, a substantial fraction of that would soon be out of date. An indispensable product, therefore, of a liberal education



must be both the inculcation of the desire to learn and the ability to do so throughout a lifetime. In complex ways, the environment in which we live is ever changing, as are the conditions under which we do our work. Knowing how to learn is the key to understanding and coping with both.

“Practical” people sometimes assail liberal education as superfluous. They are the world’s true optimists: they think that human beings

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are prepared *by nature* to understand the world, to keep pace with social and technological change, to make wise decisions about their own futures and the futures of others, to lead satisfying lives. I myself am sufficiently pessimistic to think that the least it takes is work. □

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NOTE

The author introduced the terms “proficiencies,” “conversancies,” and “competencies” in *Undergraduate Education: Goals and Means* (American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1992).