

JOHN DEWEY AND THE IDEA OF GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE 21st CENTURY¹

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In the United States, in the Age of Obama, we are everywhere surrounded by instrumentalist claims for higher education. Lip service is sometimes paid to the importance of liberal education, or some other idealist goal, but the leaders of higher education constantly articulate and reiterate instrumentalist goals.

Recently, for instance, the president of the nation's most elite higher education association speculated that the United States might have too many "top-tier research universities" to maintain satisfactory levels of scientific research, upon which the nation's economic prosperity depends. In response, a leading education advocate in the United States Senate asked for a serious study of higher education to determine the "top ten actions" that could be taken to "maintain the quality of the universities and ensure the nation's economic growth."² Note that two claims are made here. One is that what counts is the contribution of higher education to the national economy; the second is that what counts within higher education is scientific research. Public rhetoric about higher education suggests that the general public accepts both propositions uncritically. There can be no doubt that the significant amount of funding for higher education (mostly in the form of Pell grants for student assistance and funding for NSF and NIH) in the Obama administration's stimulus package was premised on the notion that investment in higher education would be a boost for the Gross Domestic Product.

We should also note that such instrumentalist attitudes have led some prominent academics to despair for the future of the university as they have known it. Six months ago, in his very popular *New York Times* blog, Prof. Stanley Fish reiterated his view that "higher education, properly understood, is distinguished by the absence of a direct and designed relationship between its activities and measurable effects in the world." He went on to quote a recent book which had reluctantly concluded that "The for-profit university is the logical end of a shift from a model of education centered in an individual professor who delivers insight and inspiration to a model that begins and ends with the imperative to

deliver the information and skills necessary to gain employment.” This means, the book argued, that the University of Phoenix model will in the long-term replace that of Harvard University and, in the end, “professors will come to be seen by everyone (not just those outside the academy) as unaffordable anomalies.”³

It would be easy for me to come up with innumerable examples of instrumentalism, since these days most Americans (and, alas, most leaders of higher education) accept that job preparation is the primary goal of undergraduate education, and that applied research is the most important faculty activity. It would also be possible to come up with the names of learned academic commentators who have lamented that the golden era of higher education has come to an end. But the issue is not whether higher education should produce public goods. Of course it should. The issue is not whether we can recover the lost golden age. There never was a golden age. Rather, I hope to convince you that we are in danger of being too narrow in our understanding of higher education, and therefore too modest in our expectations of what the modern university can accomplish.

Throughout the twentieth century Americans consistently described the goal of undergraduate instruction as the attainment of a “liberal education,” but of course that phrase has altered dramatically in meaning relative to who is using it. The generic meaning has normally been an education that “frees” the mind (“liberal” = “liberate”) of the student, and this has ordinarily been taken to mean that the student has learned to think critically. We are all happy to endorse such platitudes, but they do not tell us much about what must be done in order to change student cognition in order to achieve them. The most commonly referred-to definition of liberal education is undoubtedly that put forward by the Association of American Colleges and Universities: “a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of value, ethics, and civic engagement. [Liberal education is] characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than a specific course or field of study.”⁴ But this definition leaves my head swimming.

In preparing these remarks, however, I was much impressed by the report on general education (a term I will discuss shortly) that the distinguished sociologist Daniel Bell prepared for his Columbia

College colleagues in the mid-1960s. Bell has come closer to my own sense of the challenge of undergraduate education than anyone else I have read in preparing these remarks. He notes:

The university cannot remake a world (though in upholding standards it plays some part in such attempts). It cannot even remake men. But it can liberate young people by making them aware of the forces that impel them from within and constrict them from without. It is in this sense, the creation of self-consciousness in relation to tradition, that the task of education is metaphysics, metasociology, metapsychology, and, in exploring the nature of its own communications, metaphilosophy, and metalanguage. This, in itself, is the enduring rationale of a liberal education and the function of the college years. (p152)

Bell goes on to specify what such a liberal education entails:

In the more limited and specific ways that such purposes can be embodied in a curriculum, the content of liberal education, in dealing with the above tasks, can be defined through six purposes:

- 1) To overcome intellectual provincialism;
- 2) To appreciate the centrality of method (i.e., the role of conceptual innovation);
- 3) To gain an awareness of history;
- 4) To show how ideas relate to social structures;
- 5) To understand the way values infuse all inquiry;
- 6) To demonstrate the civilizing role of the humanities. (p152)

This is a daunting list of objectives, and although it comes up short with respect to the importance of the life and natural sciences, it very nicely captures the central ambition of liberal education as I understand it.

Bell is wonderfully perceptive about the core intuition of liberal (and general) education, which is that generality is more important than particularity (or that cosmopolitanism is more important than provincialism):

Provincialism is a source of arrogance, and knowledge a source of humility. Yet without such exploration there can be no possibility of freedom, the freedom defined by Kant as self-imposed and self-determining.

A sophistication gained from idol-breaking is easy to achieve. But there is today a different, second kind of provincialism which more recalcitrant to change – that which arises out of expertise. For the most provincial, often enough, is the specialist who has mastery of one technique or function and is ignorant of the worlds beyond. (p154)

Are there any answers, other than the pursuit of cultivation outside the hours of one's work? I think there are, for while specialized tasks may always exist, no educated man need hold to a particular specialization for long. This means, in effect, a more liberal conception of specialization itself, one that emphasizes not the specific subject, or the training for a concrete task, but the grasp of a discipline and the grounding in method. Only in this fashion can a man relate the particular task to the general intellectual field and thus acquire sufficient agility of mind and mobility of skills to move from problem to problem in the unfolding development of knowledge itself. (p156)⁵

Bell's reason for writing his report was of course to assist his Columbia College colleagues in reconsidering the substance of the undergraduate program there. In asking himself why Columbia took undergraduate education so seriously, Bell was clear that the primary motivation was the influence of John Dewey, one of the most influential Columbia faculty members, who had emphasized both "the *process* of learning and the *continuity* of [educational] experience."⁶

I would like to focus here on Dewey, since he is the educational thinker who has had the greatest impact on my own thoughts about undergraduate education. Although Dewey is normally thought of as an expert on education in the schools, I have long been struck by his commitment to a very specific form higher education, which I think those of us concerned about liberal and general education would do well to reconsider. In the 1940s Dewey wrote an essay entitled "The Problem of the Liberal Arts College" in which he noted that in recent discussions of liberal education "*liberating*" had come to be "a synonym for "*liberal*". This was significant, thought Dewey, since "it marks a break with the traditional idea that a certain group of studies is liberal because of something inhering in them – belonging to them by virtue of an indwelling essence or nature." Dewey opposed this traditional notion

of liberal education, since “To define liberal as that which liberates is to bring the problem of liberal education . . . within the domain of an inquiry in which the issue is settled by search for what is actually accomplished. The test and justification of claims put forth is found in observable consequences, not in an *a priori* dogma.” For Dewey, that is, liberality was a verifiable process, not an abstract perception.⁷ Dewey conceptualized education as existing in and for a socio-political environment: democracy. He was committed to the view that education existed in order to create a better society:

Its acceleration depends upon men consciously striving to educate their successors not for the existing state of affairs, but so as to make possible a future better humanity. But there is the great difficulty. Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realization of humanity as humanity.⁸

Dewey perceived two opposite and opposing challenges to a proper undergraduate education, summarized in this pithy observation of 1917: “wherever you find a social reactionary, there you find an enthusiast for either classical learning on the one hand or technical or specialized training on the other – usually both”!⁹ As to the classical approach, in 1919 Dewey had this to say:

“A true education is a liberal education: that is an education designed to prepare one to share in the free life of leisure; designed to form the habits that have to do with the practice of things excellent in themselves. Its aim is not preparation for living, but for noble living, for enjoying without engaging in industrial production, science, art and the direction of public affairs. Such an education keeps itself as far as may be from everything industrial, utilitarian, professional. The functions of an artisan are not such, says Aristotle, as should be learned by any good man, except occasionally for the satisfaction of his own wants. . . .The fact that stands out here . . . is that the separation in education between culture and labor, between a liberal and a professional training, is the reflex of a more fundamental social difference between a working class and a leisure class. . . . It is not that Aristotle created these distinctions. But he honestly looked the social facts of his times in the face, and translated what he saw into their intellectual equivalents.”¹

Dewey #2

As to the alternative, professional specialization, Dewey spoke disapprovingly of “the present [1917] tendencies which operate to make collegiate education a preliminary professional education.” But his deepest animus was reserved for what he considered *faux* neo-classicism in collegiate education: “The attempt to live in the past by way of inviting the soul of our youth to a leisurely and liberal culture merely throws the mass of them upon athletics and extra-curricular activities for their daily sustentation and thereby leaves them a ready prey to the hurried excitements, the Philistinish zeal for activity without knowledge, the love of mammon-like display, which are the serious evils of our American life.” Dewey spoke out flatfootedly for “[t]he emancipation of intellectual power which would result from an open and aboveboard identification of motives for study with the main social interests of the day”¹⁰ This move would truly “[l]iberate the human motive, now furtive and choked” and enable the student’s intelligence to “flow so freely.”

Dewey’s basic conception of an appropriate undergraduate education was fully displayed in his 1936-1937 controversy with Robert Maynard Hutchins in the pages of his (Dewey’s) journal *The Social Frontier*. In the December, 1936 issue Dewey took on Hutchins’ alleged proposition that “the invasion of vocationalism is the great curse of contemporary education.” Dewey believed that Hutchins position was that “Higher education is to be purified and reformed . . . by complete separation of general and ‘liberal’ education from professional and technical education.”

The student having exclusively acquired in the liberal college the basic principles of knowledge in a purely theoretical way and having thereby learned ‘correct thinking,’ will later proceed to studies that prepare him exclusively for some line of practical activity. Moreover, even in the latter there will be as little connecting with ‘experience’ as possible, later practical life supplying the factor of experience, which Aristotle and St. Thomas have already shown to be causes.

It followed that all empirical or non-theoretical education was permissible only in so far as it “illustrate[d] or confirm[ed] principles or assist[ed] in their development. All academic studies should, then, “be pursued in ‘subordination’ to the ‘hierarchy of truths.’”¹¹

In the next issue of *The Social Frontier*, Dewey continued his assault on what he saw as Hutchins’ rejection of “practicality” as a goal of higher education in favor of “the cultivation of intellectuality for its

own sake.” Dewey acknowledged that the university exists in a world full of very real problems, but he was firm in the belief that “[e]scape from present evil contemporary social tendencies may require something more than escape. It may demand study of social needs and social potentialities of enduring time span. . . .It is conceivable that educational reconstruction cannot be accomplished without a social reconstruction in which higher education has a part to play.” And Dewey firmly rejected the notion that the undergraduate curriculum could be determined on the basis of an institutionally specified hierarchy of values: “who is to determine the definite truths that constitute the hierarchy”?¹²

Dewey invited poor Hutchins to respond in the pages of his journal, but he replied that he could not, “for Mr. Dewey has stated my position in such a way as to lead me to think that I cannot write, and has stated his own in such a way as to make me suspect that I cannot read.” Hutchins one substantive response was to reject Dewey’s dismissal of classical knowledge as useless. What Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas did “. . . was to restudy, rework, and revitalize the intellectual tradition they inherited for the purpose of understanding the contemporary world. We must do the same.”¹³ But of course Dewey was having none of it. His response in the next issue of *The Social Frontier* was to reiterate that Hutchins’ position was that “only on the basis of a hierarchical order determined on the basis of these truths could order be brought out of present disorder – a ‘hierarchy of truths’ which ‘shows us which are fundamental and which subsidiary.” Dewey insisted that ‘the way out of the present educational confusion” could only be based on ‘the primary place of experience, experimental method, and integral connection with practice in determination of knowledge and the auxiliary role of what is termed Reason and Intellect in the classic tradition.”¹⁴

Writing on another occasion, Dewey summarized his discontent with Hutchins’ educational classicism: “. . . if there is a demand for the kind of education which suits the needs of those whose economic condition liberates them from taking part in the useful work of the world, there is no reason why there should not be an institution or two whose curriculum is based upon reading and discussion of literary masterpieces, , where the medieval trivium of grammar, rhetoric and logic is taken to be sufficient for the requirements of the life they propose to lead.” A democracy, that is, can survive a few institutions (like Hutchins’ University of Chicago). But they cannot be the mainstream of higher education:

But to urge this kind of education as *the* way out of all educational confusion and conflict is possible only for those who fail to recognize the realities of social change and their connection with the kind of change which education must undergo. The way out will be found as we effect a more intimate and vital union between theory and practice, science and action, culture and vocation, not by trying to keep them in separate compact work.

“Tradition,” Dewey concluded, “looks forward as well as backward. To transmit the powers and achievements of our day to the future is as important as to transmit the past to the present.”¹⁵

Dewey advocated liberal minds as developed in liberal colleges. He insisted that colleges must train students to “discriminate, to see things for what they are, to maintain consistent poise” and to go against the current of show, of deteriorated standards, of flashy novelties that sweep us away.” The liberal college must, that is, sustain “an intelligence both emancipated and generous, both critical and sympathetic.” The enemy of such a truly liberal education is that prescribed by those who are certain that they know (and teach) the truth. Dewey’s verdict was that “such direct effort to gain specific ends is itself proof of the operation of the illiberal mind,” for the liberal college trusts students to think freely and creatively. It is not that such students will be concerned with “contemporary social issues,” however sound their views may be, but rather “the mark of a liberal mind is not that [such views] are held, but is the *way* in which they are reached and accepted.” Liberality of ideas lies not in their content, but in the manner in which they are arrived at.¹⁶

The problem of securing to the liberal arts college its due function in democratic society is that of seeing to it that the technical subjects which are now socially necessary acquire a humane direction [since such subjects] cannot be liberating if they are cut off from their humane sources and inspiration.

In the end, Dewey concluded, “the obstacles to the development of the liberal college are not found primarily within the college. They lie rather in the temper of the American public.” The answer lies in squaring the needs and interests of the community with those of the college.¹⁷

Before addressing the question of what advice John Dewey might have for us as we reconsider the role of general education in the context of twenty-first century undergraduate education, it will be

useful briefly to remind ourselves of the origins of general education a century ago. Undergraduate education in nineteenth-century America was of course the province of a remarkable network of colleges, most of which were Protestant in origin. This meant that education had a strongly and deliberately moral orientation, culminating in a senior year course on ethics (frequently taught by the president of the college). Professional education began to be added to these institutions starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the period during which the influence of the modern German university began to provide the model for higher education in this country. This Humboldtian conception of the university was strongly scientific in orientation. It was also distinctly secular, as the scientific notion of truth replaced Revelation. Its focus was on the creation of knowledge rather than on the education of young people.

The driving factor was the explosion of knowledge created by the second Scientific Revolution, which dramatically increased the range of teachable knowledge for undergraduates. This Revolution stimulated the modern conception of the discipline, which emerged as the characteristic way to organize academic knowledge by the early twentieth century. This orientation produced the new system of doctoral training in the disciplines, the creation of national disciplinary organizations to organize the agendas of the new Ph.D.s and the emergence of the disciplinary department as the principal organizational form of the new university. Faculty, that is, were no longer primarily those who were “called” to “profess” their learning for the cultivation of youth – they were now primarily the producers of scientific knowledge whose commitment was more to their disciplines than to their students – at least their undergraduate students. The result, by the early twentieth century, was to throw into question everything that had been taken for granted about undergraduate education in the collegiate system of the previous century.

The new universities were forced to expand their curricula, since their rapidly-expanding faculties wanted to propound their disciplinary knowledge. They packed this knowledge in courses, and as these proliferated, developed rules to guide the selection of courses – since the completion of a set number of courses was now understood to qualify a student for graduation from college. The most extreme version of these rules left students free to elect any courses they wished – they could, that is, construct their own educational programs. But most faculty and administrators felt the need for intellectual structure in the emerging marketplace of undergraduate courses, and their normal strategy

for imposing structure was to require students to “major” in a disciplinary field. The problem was then to determine how many courses were needed to constitute a major in a discipline – and how many courses were too many? The disciplines were thus coming to own the university, and the curriculum. This was in part because of the tremendous intellectual power unleashed by modern development of disciplinarity, and in part the result of the increasing departmental domination of university structure.

But it raised the question, put by thoughtful faculty and administrators, of how disciplinary training related to the total educational development of the undergraduate? Wasn't there something more to undergraduate education than mastering a single intellectual discipline? What was the obligation of the university to guide students in constructing the substance of their education? What mechanisms were available to structure undergraduate educational choices? Wasn't there more to education than the selection of specialized courses? None of these questions had been relevant in the nineteenth century, when the curriculum had largely been prescribed, and when the major purpose of the institution had been undergraduate education. In a sense, it was only after the (modestly?) liberal education of the collegiate system had been uprooted by the entirely different practices and priorities of the research university that these questions needed to be asked.

We are still asking the same questions a century later, and there is still surprisingly little agreement on what the answers are. In general, however, the dominant response to the fear of the undermining of liberal education through the hegemony of the disciplines in undergraduate education was the broad notion of “general education.” [extract from 4-1-05 CHE piece] As it has expanded throughout higher education, it has suffered inevitable losses and unresolved tensions. As it spread from what were once primarily church-related colleges, for example, it lost its focus on moral values. But even the surviving emphasis on an orientation that stresses general values has been an uncomfortable fit in the modern research university, which has increasingly stressed the production of scientific knowledge over the transmission of culture.

Many of the attempts to package liberal education in the modern university have centered on "general education." The idea of general education derives from Matthew Arnold, and it was picked up and Americanized in the United States early in the 20th century. Although we seldom recognize the fact, there have actually been three streams in American thinking at the time. The first stream is perhaps one

of the oldest, but still continues. It has been the self-conscious rejection of specific courses in favor of a vague notion of enforced diversity of subject matter, to be provided by regular disciplinary departments. Here the pre-eminent example is, alas, my own university, Princeton. Under the leadership of James McCosh in the late 1880s, Princeton developed the "distribution" system that is still all we have to provide structured liberal education at Old Nassau.

At Princeton it was not necessary to offer special courses or designate faculty members to provide the content of liberal education -- just to ensure that students did not concentrate too narrowly by requiring a variety of what McCosh called "obligatory and disciplinary" courses. With the exception of a sequence of humanities courses and a large program of freshman seminars, present-day Princeton still has neither non-departmental general-education courses nor any structured mechanism for thinking about the broader contours of undergraduate liberal education. We review the program periodically, but we seem always to conclude that McCosh had it right. Well, perhaps.

The most obvious and most highly publicized example of the next stream of thinking and practice concerning general education began at Columbia University as the United States was entering World War I. This was an attempt to ensure that undergraduates in an increasingly scientific university would be broadly educated across the fields of the liberal arts and to integrate their increasingly fragmented selection of courses into some coherent form. (Admittedly, it was also fueled by a felt need to promote Western civilization in the face of German barbarism.) Combining new synthetic courses outside the disciplinary-obsessed department structure with the inculcation of a notion of democratic citizenship, the curriculum was organized around surveys of "Contemporary Civilization." In essence, the Columbia sequence humanized the now-secular university curriculum by broadly historicizing it. As time passed, most other elite institutions did the same.

In the 1930s Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler at the University of Chicago launched an important experiment in this approach. It was complex and somewhat inwardly self-

contradictory, but the bottom line was an insistence on the centrality of the Greek classics and other Great Books to undergraduate education, later supplemented by the construction of a "core curriculum" to educate undergraduates across the liberal-arts subjects and to force them to think through and across traditional disciplinary approaches. Hutchins believed in a prescribed curriculum for all students, aimed (in Bell's account) "to define a common body of materials in the various fields of knowledge which should be mastered by any person who considers himself to be educated."

The heart of the Chicago plan . . . was the organization of all knowledge into a comprehensive number of fields which would give the student not the sum of factual knowledge in that field but its basic organizing principles.¹⁸

The Chicago approach was too austere and concentrated to be suitable for most undergraduate programs, but the purity and rigor of its approach emboldened many institutions to adopt partial versions of the Hutchins-Adler model.

The next step in the development of the general education model too root in the General Education Committee created during World War II at Harvard, Under the leadership of Paul Buck, in this committee issued *General Education in a Free Society*, commonly known as the *Harvard Red Book*. The political rationale for the *Red Book* was grander than Columbia's or Chicago's, although the wartime rationale was similar to that of Columbia, but the basic principles of general education were not that different, based on sweepingly synthetic historical approaches to classically great ideas. The attempt to give all undergraduates at least a taste of different disciplines is now one of the unchallenged principles of general education. Bell's comment is that "the emphasis on general education at Harvard was not on a common course, a basic theme and its coverage, but on varied treatments of a subject by an outstanding figure."

Not a "great ideas" or "great books" course, the Harvard program, in effect became a "great man" course. As one of the "great men" at Harvard explained the system: "We expose the students to a great mind and hope . . . that they will educate each other."¹⁹

Paul Buck's approach was replaced in the 1970s by the creation of a "core curriculum" --another attempt to problematize and repackage general-education courses in a manner consistent with the epistemology and intellectual progress of the era. This twist on general education dehistoricized it, organizing the curriculum around abstract concepts like "moral reasoning," "quantitative reasoning," or "social analysis." Then, in 2004 Harvard seemed to concede the failure of that approach and began to put into place what I would call "Core Two." According to the then dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, William C. Kirby the aim of the new core was to empower students to "grasp the importance and relevance of fields to which they do not themselves owe personal allegiance and in which they have not developed special expertise" so that they may "understand, criticize, and improve our world constructively." The most that can be said of the new core is that it is a very partial and modest reform. But my intention in rehearsing this mini-history of general education is not to prefer any particular definition, but to suggest that we have not traveled far in our definitions over the past 100 years.

The third stream, which in some ways has had a more profound influence on our actual educational practices, was that championed by John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy. This effort focused on cognitive development and individual student growth, and its key was the idea of reflective thinking as a goal of liberal education. That concept was institutionalized at Columbia under the leadership of Dewey and at the Johns Hopkins University under Lovejoy. This approach was entirely cognitive, lacking in specific education content. To this day it forms the basis of the stress on process at the heart of approaches to liberal education, and it is to Dewey's contribution that I wish to return at the end of this essay.

To be sure, there have been many other approaches to liberal education over the years. Until recently, many liberal-arts colleges used both sophisticated distribution systems and a variety of innovative course designs. Many still continue to search for useful adaptations of general education programs in the current context of higher education. [End CHE extract] Let me mention two of the most recent examples. The first is the ambitious attempt of the University of California system to think through the problem of "General Education in the 21st Century," as its April 2007 report is entitled.²⁰ The report was provoked by the recognition by University of California faculty and administrators of "A subtle but profound change in curricular emphasis, with an eroded consensus on (and discomfort with) setting priorities for what constitutes necessary general knowledge for undergraduates."

One facet of this change is the continued dominance of the “cafeteria-ization” of course selection. Another facet of this change is reflected in the cultural controversies over curricula of the 1980s, which generated dissatisfaction with long-standing priorities for general education and disputes as to what should be regarded as the country’s shared heritage.²¹

The Commission defined “liberal education” as “a historic ideal to which a whole collegiate education should aspire,” and “general education” as “a specific set of programs in American education intended to offer a counter-balance to what is provided by a disciplinary major.” Its bottom line was the recognition that general education “cannot be attained by any particular content of courses taken, but only by habits of mind that students acquire regardless of course content.”²² Taking a very matter of fact, structural-functional approach to analyzing the problem, the Commission found that much of the fault for the current narrow, disciplinary undergraduate curriculum in the imperatives of departmental control of the curriculum and their habit of rewarding faculty research rather than teaching, especially in interdisciplinary programs. They acknowledged that the long-term challenge of providing general education was currently exacerbated by the sociological diversification of the American college student body:

American higher education appears to have evolved into a mix of diverse -- and politically conscious -- cultural constituencies with the result that efforts to impose specific, binding requirements on all students typically end in bitter conflict, paralysis, or watery compromises. Under these circumstances, the “cafeteria” style is an easy path . . .²³

The Commission, realizing that the clock cannot be turned back “to past visions of uniformity” nor can universities “resolve this endemic tension,” recommended “. . . further developing and publicizing timely issues such as environmental sustainability, technology and society, bureaucracy and society, military and society, and political and ethical dimensions of biological knowledge.” Such “thematic minors” would serve to broaden the outlook and sharpen the understandings of twenty-first century California students. They also recommended support for several already-existing curricular strategies (such as frosh-soph seminars, problem-oriented courses and undergraduate research) and increased attention to “civic education,” especially through experiential education. Somewhat plaintively, at least to my ears, the Commission called for publicizing “general education’s value, and, where possible, [rewarding] the constituents and individuals involved in it.”²⁴

Of course the California Commission was attempting to plan for the nation's largest system of research universities, but my second example comes from Brown University, which has a quite different challenge. In 1969 Brown embraced what it called the "New Curriculum," which removed most course requirements for Brown undergraduates, who were expected to build their own core curriculum. This modern version of the old Harvard "free elective" system appears to have worked well at Brown, but a curriculum review in 2008 recommended some important changes, many of them intended to ensure that undergraduates receive the benefits of a general education. The committee called for a "new statement about liberal education at Brown," one that "should clarify the principle of 'breadth' by articulating the areas of intellectual inquiry that all students are expected to build into their core programs." These "areas" are actually the capacities normally thought to define liberal education these days, such as "including real-world-experiences." But the underlying concern of the report seems to be that departmental concentrations are too narrow.

We enjoin all academic departments . . . to construe their intellectual mission as a *double* mission: not only to craft concentrations that provide undergraduates with a solid grounding in their disciplines, but also to create courses that reflect on the significance, and the 'fit,' of these disciplines within the larger intellectual and social culture of Brown and beyond.²⁵

The report emphasizes that "the focus is on connection. The conventional view of a divided curriculum – with the concentration on one side and 'everything else' on the other __ is . . . profoundly misleading. At Brown, " . . . the commitment to diverse areas of inquiry and knowledge must also be seen as the main event, not the leftovers, of the college experience." The "connections" sought by the committee are to be engendered through "a range of meaningful and connective intellectual experiences" including a variety of capstone activities (senior honors theses, senior seminars in the field of concentration, collaborative research with faculty members, experiential education internships).²⁶

Both the University of California and Brown reports are thoughtful efforts to re-engineer the 21st century curriculum to ensure that undergraduates receive the benefits of a general education. The review committees at both of these universities perceived the enemy of general education to be the disciplinary department with its narrow focus on a particular methodology and domain of knowledge – just as it was a century ago. This has led them to revive the historic concern of liberal educators that

“depth” would drive out “breadth” in the undergraduate curriculum. But it is fair to say that the consolidation of departmental hegemony is not the only change in higher education that has given us reason to fear that undergraduates, especially in research universities, are receiving a genuinely liberal education. This is not the place for a mini-history of the twentieth-century university, but I will pause to note a few developments that seem to me to have had direct impacts on undergraduate education, impacts that in each case appear to be in tension with the capacity of the university adequately to educate undergraduate students.

The place to begin is with the faculty. Whereas in the nineteenth-century college the primary duty of the professor was to “profess,” since the early twentieth century his or her duty was, increasingly, to produce publishable research. That definition of the job has hardened in all fields of knowledge, with the expected quantity and quality of research steadily increasing. This was accompanied by a narrowing of the focus of research due to newly emerging standards excellence – deeper, not broader research was rewarded with promotion, tenure, compensation and lowered teaching loads. The research professor also found himself increasingly overburdened with administrative responsibilities (both in his department and in newly proliferating research centers and institutes) and with graduate supervision. Some professors (many, in some institutions) had few or no undergraduate teaching responsibilities. When they did teach undergrads, they seldom taught broad or synthetic courses, preferring the easier (and, to them, more important) specialized, research-based course. And of course fewer faculty members had either the time or instinct to teach introductory courses or, more significantly, non-departmental general education courses for underclassmen. Neither John Dewey nor his colleagues at Columbia during the First World War would have recognized the faculty of the early 21st century.

Of course the students are different too. The universe of students a century ago was much more homogeneous – dominantly white, European, and male. This was the situation until after World War II, when the combination of widespread prosperity and federal tuition subsidy broadened the socio-economic composition of the college population. The explosion in the number of colleges and universities in the 1960s dramatically increased the number of places available, as did the further expansion of two-year institutions. The assumptions of earlier generations about who would attend college and what students (and their parents) expected from college were thus completely undermined

by the 1970s. Students were more diverse in every respect, including their motivations for attending post-secondary institutions. College was no longer even remotely the place where gentlemen-in-training were nurtured. Secondary education was also in a state of flux, in part disorientated by its inability to determine what the colleges were looking for in pre-collegiate training. The question was whether the new students, barely house-broken educationally, knew for sure what their expectations were. The universities struggled, with difficulty, to find out.

The task of undergraduate education was also complicated by the continuing explosion of the fields of academic knowledge and the broadening of the categories of knowledge deemed relevant to general education. As to the first, the problem was most obvious in the life sciences, which have been entirely revolutionized in the last half century -- I have in mind particularly the emergence of cell biology, but more recently the same might be said of neuroscience. The major impact of the breathtaking pace of scientific advance on general education, however, was to underscore our uncertainty as to how to convey increasing complex scientific knowledge to the non-scientist in a manner that truly advanced undergraduate understanding of how science works. Other areas of new knowledge were also producing new fields (which meant new majors) and hundreds of new courses, for which undergraduates had few roadmaps. As to second task, the humanities and social sciences came under severe pressure to attend to phenomena that had not been deemed relevant in a more culturally homogeneous era -- race, class, gender, and non-western cultures were suddenly of urgent interest to students and faculty. The same was true of other social and natural processes, ranging from globalization to global warming.

The context of the university was of course in a process of constant change. Departments continued to dominate the structure, but they were challenged by wild proliferation of institutes and centers, which were themselves monuments to the egos of the faculty researchers whom they were intended to recruit and support. The standards (measured primarily by quantity of publication) for promotion and compensation were constantly ratcheted upwards, with every escalation of research evaluation accompanied by a lowering of teaching commitments and expectations. The number of faculty increased, as did the number of courses offered, but the curriculum was dominated by narrowly defined topical courses ordinarily reflecting immediate faculty research interests. There were fewer non-departmental courses, fewer synthetic courses within departments, and an increasing tendency to

base undergraduate programs on graduate training models. That is, even concentrators in the arts and sciences were being trained to be professionals. And of course outside of the arts and sciences, more and more students were opting for professional programs in business and other fields, to the extent that vocationalism increasingly dominated undergraduate education.

It should therefore not be a surprise to find that general education as a strategy for consolidating liberal undergraduate education was under severe pressure by the late twentieth century. The notion of the role of the university, the general aims of liberal education and the conception of general education itself continued to be defined as they had been a century before, but almost everything about university structure, faculty self-awareness and student expectations had changed. A few of the major institutions, Columbia and Chicago being the most prominent examples, continued their traditional approaches to providing general education, modifying their programs somewhat but remaining true to their earlier conceptions. Others, Harvard being an example, tried to reinvent general education in the light of the changed context. Still others, like Princeton, adamantly refused to budge from their contention that distribution systems constituted general education. Yet, although there was a continuing discussion about “liberal education,” and surprising little conflict as to what constituted a liberal education (at least rhetorically), there was very little by way of national debate as to what might constitute an appropriate “general education” in the twenty-first century. The question I would like to put is whether we can articulate and defend a coherent vision of what general education would consist of in the twenty-first century. If our commitment (which most of us take for granted) to liberal education requires a special undertaking to provide general education, what structure and content should we provide? I will conclude by suggesting that we return to the ideas of John Dewey in order to make a new beginning.

I suppose I should admit that Dewey’s prose frequently (to be generous) lacks clarity. To quote Richard Hofstadter:

Dewey was hard to read and interpret. He wrote a prose of terrible vagueness and plasticity, which William James once characterized as “damnable, you might even say God-damnable.” His style is suggestive of the cannonading of distant armies: once concludes that something portentous is going on at a remote and inaccessible distance, but once cannot determine just

what it is. That this style is, perhaps symptomatically, at its worst in Dewey's most important educational writings suggests that his great influence as an educational spokesman may have been derived in some part from the very inaccessibility of his exact meanings. A variety of schools of educational thought have been able to read their own meanings into his writings²⁷⁾

Hofstadter is, as was usual, correct, and I am aware that what I am doing here is picking and choosing among Dewey's reflections on education, only some of which were intended to apply to collegiate education. Nevertheless, were he here, I think we would find ourselves very much in agreement about what the solutions to our current problems in higher education policy might be.

I also need to acknowledge that Dewey's primary concern was with what we today would call K-12 education – education in the schools. Most of his educational writing concerned pre-collegiate schooling. But in fact he thought a lot about, and over the years he frequently wrote and lectured about post-secondary education. I have tried to read everything that Dewey wrote specifically on higher education, but it is difficult to summarize his views, since they developed over half a century of thinking and writing – and since he never attempted to pull together his final conclusions. Nevertheless, I think there is an astonishing coherence and continuity in his work on higher education, and I find it moving, congenial and relevant to our present concerns.

Of course, were he with us now, the first thing Dewey would say is that the fundamental problem has not changed, since the fundamental task of education at any level is to support and sustain democracy. This notion was most fully and famously articulated in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*:

. . . the realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration, makes a democratic community more interested than other communities have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education. The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. But there is a deeper explanation. A

democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. ²⁸

I recognize that Dewey was here thinking about the situation of a democracy on the brink of entering a world war, and I also acknowledge Richard Hofstadter's warning that "Dewey did American education a major disservice by providing what appears to be an authoritative sanction for that monotonous and suffocating rhetoric about "democratic living" with which American educationists smother our discussions of the means and ends of education."²⁹ But I think there is more to Dewey on democratic education than rhetoric.

There are two sets of core ideas in the passage from *Democracy and Education* that I have just quoted. The first, and less important, idea is that democratic government depends upon a reasonably well-informed and well-educated public, since the electorate must be capable of making good choices among policy alternatives. This sets a minimal threshold for civic education. But the second, and much more important, idea is that democracy "is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." Dewey was here referring to the schools, but I want to argue that post-secondary liberal education must also be focused on preparing students for a "conjoint communicated experience." This has led some enthusiasts for service learning and other forms of experiential education to cite Dewey as the leading authority for their important project, but I want to argue that the implications for general education are far broader.

In *The School and Society* (1912) Dewey expanded the idea:

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.³⁰

Among other things, this suggests that we need to think about the individual student as part of a group, a little educational community, and that he needs to understand the responsibilities of such membership. In Richard Hofstadter's words, Dewey "felt that individual growth and the interests of a

democratic social order, far from being in any ineluctable antagonism, were susceptible to a completely harmonious synthesis.”³¹ Further, the key to this new mode of education was “the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process.”³² The new education, that is, required student input into its structure and content.

And, as Dewey’s “debate” with Robert Maynard Hutchins revealed, he thought that a narrow, classical education focused on ancient thinkers and traditions was suitable only for aristocratic, Old World Societies should not constitute the core of undergraduate education. What American society required, according to Dewey, was a “more widespread social, or as we say ‘democratic,’ responsibility,” which requires “greater susceptibility to influences proceeding from the ordinary tone and level of beliefs.”³³

Democratic society is peculiarly dependent for its maintenance upon the use in forming a course of study of criteria which are broadly human. Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class. . . . A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest.³⁴

Dewey believed that “the subject matter of education consists primarily of the meanings which supply content to existing social life.” In a complex modern society the factors supplying social meaning are numerous, so that “There is need of special selection, formulation, and organization in order that they may be adequately transmitted to the new generation,” but the danger in the process of selection is that it may reify the topics selected, so that students will come to think of “subject matter as something of value just by itself,” rather than as “promoting the realization of the meanings implied in the present experience” of students.³⁵ The pedagogical danger for the teacher, then, is to see his or her task as to train the student to reproduce the knowledge taught by the teacher “irrespective of its organization into his activities as a developing social member.”

The positive principle is maintained when the young begin with active occupations having a social origin and use, and proceed to a scientific insight in the materials and laws involved,

through assimilating into their more direct experience the ideas and facts communicated by others who have had a larger experience.³⁶

Or, as Dewey said on another occasion, “. . . education is *the* outstanding means by which union of knowledge and the values that actually work in actual conduct is brought about.”³⁷

But for all his emphasis on community, Dewey never forgot that teachers must deal with students one at a time: “. . . all learning is something which happens to an individual at a given time and place.”³⁸ Democratic societies must “have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relations and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder.”³⁹ This said, the essential role of the teacher is to create “the kind of environment needed to liberate and to organize” the capacities of students, based upon the teacher’s own experience – the freedom of the teacher will communicate itself to students, and “[u]ntil the democratic criterion of the intrinsic significance of every growing experience is recognized, [teachers will] be intellectually confused by the demand for adaptation to external aims.” Above all, the teacher must focus on the relation of (both his/hers and the student’s) experience to learning, for this is what connects educational ends to means. Dewey was clear that “. . . the teacher should be occupied not with subject matter in itself, but in its interaction with the pupil’s present needs and capacities.”⁴⁰ And the teacher must not confuse his professional intellectual commitments with the purposes of pedagogy. Since “education is literally and all the time its own reward,” then “no alleged study or discipline is educative unless it is worth while in its own immediately having.”⁴¹

Hence simple scholarship is not enough. In fact, there are certain features of scholarship or mastered subject matter – taken by itself – which get in the way of effective teaching *unless* the instructor’s habitual attitude is one of concern with its interplay in the pupil’s own experience.⁴²

And this is as true of the professor as it is of the school teacher.

Dewey was one of the earliest advocates of “active” education. His message is then that learning is necessary for democracy, but that student learning consists in doing, not in the inherent value of what is learned. If that is so, what are the implications for curriculum and pedagogy in the

liberal arts college? In the first place, Dewey recognized the diversity of institutional forms and structures that existed even in his day, and have now ramified to an extent that would have astonished him. He distinguished between “the vocational and the liberal, the professional and cultural.”⁴³ By “vocational” he meant both purely professional education as in law school and highly practical subjects of any kind. By “liberal” he meant “[h]ospitality of mind, generous imagination, trained capacity of discrimination, freedom from class, sectarian and partisan prejudice and passion, faith without fanaticism,” a definition familiar to any current advocate of liberal education.⁴⁴

Dewey worried that colleges were “freighted with a definite body of tradition”:

Their curriculum represents the enduring experience and thought of the centuries. . . . [T]hey are under the guidance of men who have been subjected to uniform training, who have been steeped in almost identical ideals, and with whom teaching is a profession and not an accident.

But Dewey also saw a clear political distinction between the college (“the higher institutions”) and the school, since the college has both the advantage and disadvantage of “greater remoteness” from “public opinion” – the disadvantage is summed up “in the unfavorable connotation of ‘academic’.”

This has its advantages, but Dewey was quick to point out that collegiate remoteness does not mean that “. . . the college is relieved of the necessity of meeting public needs, of acting with reference to social considerations” On the contrary, “[i]f the college derives more from the past, it is only that it may put more effectually the resources of the past at the disposition of the present.

If it is more remote from immediate pressure of public demands, this should be regarded as imposing a duty, not as conferring an otiose privilege. It emphasizes the responsibility of steadying and clarifying the public consciousness [T]he college has undertaken to maintain the continuity of culture, but culture should not be a protected industry, living at the expense of the freedom and completeness of living at the expense of the freedom and completeness of present social communication and interaction.⁴⁵

It is in fact, therefore, the special responsibility of the liberal arts college “to use the resources put at our disposal alike by humane literature, by science, by subjects that have a vocational bearing, so as to secure ability to appraise the needs and issues of the world in which we live.”

Such an education would be liberating not in spite of the fact that it departs widely from the seven liberal arts of the medieval period, but just because it would do for the contemporary world what those arts tried to do for the world in which they took form.⁴⁶

This generous interpretation of liberal undergraduate education can help us to understand that Dewey was not simply being obtuse in his conflict with Robert Maynard Hutchins. He was not opposed to classical learning *per se*, but to the sanctification and veneration of ancient knowledge for its own sake. Dewey thought that his version of modernism was usefully connected to the past: “[t]he beginning of a new century surely sees us upon the verge of an analogous translation of political and moral science into terms of application.”

The ferment which the college has to face is not one which has grown up within the college walls, nor which is confined there. The ferment which is happily going on in the college is because the leaven of all modern life is at work.

The trick in constructing a modern (Dewey was here writing at the onset of the twentieth century) curriculum was to attain “something like philosophic organization” of “the various branches of human learning,” “until the various modes of their application to life have been so definitely and completely worked out as to bring even the common affairs of life under direction . . .” Meanwhile, Dewey rejected the notion that there was any “definite set of specific educational recipes which the managers of collegiate institutions might fall back upon . . .”⁴⁷ The curricular imperative was to “take account of the adaptation of studies to the needs of the existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past.” But for Dewey this did not mean that the curriculum should be crudely utilitarian, for “education must first be human and only after that professional,” and curricular “material is humanized in the degree in which it connects with the common interests of men as men.”⁴⁸

Neither should the curriculum be ideologically liberal, for the “hope for the liberal mind and the liberal college is not in the spread of liberal beliefs, but the hope for the spread of liberal ideas is in the development of the liberal mind.” The need is for professors to “. . . exercise their minds fully upon the topics that presented themselves . . . This frame of mind is what is meant by intellectual integrity.”⁴⁹ It is essential that the curriculum should reflect the full range of organized human knowledge:

The body of knowledge is indeed one; it is a spiritual organism. To attempt to chop off a member here and amputate an organ there is the veriest impossibility. The problem is not one of elimination, but of organization; of simplification not through denial and rejection, but through harmony.⁵⁰

But, finally, the challenge is to secure faculty acceptance of this liberal, integrated, approach to knowledge. “[T]he great enemy is specialization”:

Most teachers want to be left alone to do their own work; they kick when their special work is interfered with, but on the whole they are not anxious to take time and thought away from it to give to large educational policies . . .

Dewey, sounding like he was writing today, recognized that “[s]pecialism is the vogue of the day in scholarship. While some degree of specialism is indispensable, in excess it contributes to the decline of liberality of mind.” And the corresponding challenge to liberal education is “the departmental system within universities,” for the combination of “scholastic specialization and the departmentalization of knowledge breed indifference to larger social issues and objects.”⁵¹

Which brings me to my conclusion. I began this lecture by lamenting the instrumentalism that characterizes much of the current rhetoric concerning higher education, in part because I think such presentist and bloody-minded attitudes provide little support for liberality in undergraduate education. I have tried to contrast these attitudes with the educational thinking of John Dewey, whose democratic pragmatism might superficially appear to be a form of instrumentalism. My argument is that it is not, since there are sound educational reasons for grounding liberal education in democratic social reality. I think the most promising route to the re-imagination of the general component of liberal education lies

in basing new and old knowledge in the context of vigorous educational communities in which students and teachers work to develop the learning on which they can hope to reconstruct the world. Dewey can, I understand, be read in other ways, but my contention is that until we can agree on the goals of liberal and general education, we will not be able to reform the structure of undergraduate education. And that, I feel sure, is a task that badly needs attending to.

¹ This essay is based upon the Nevins Lecture I delivered at the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California on 29 January 2009. I am grateful to Roy Ritchie for the very welcome invitation to lecture at the Huntington.

² Paul Basken, "U.S. May Need to Prune Number of Research Universities, Lobby Group Says," 26 June 2009, CHE, <http://chronicle.com/daily/2009/06/20810n.htm>

³ Stanley Fish, "The Last Professor," 18 January 2009, NYT, <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/the-last-professor/> (discussing Frank Donoghue's book *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the University* (New York, 2008))

⁴ AAC&U

⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in its National Setting* (New York, 1966), pp. 152-156.

⁶ Bell, p.24

⁷ Dewey #1 lw. 15.276

⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p.95 #3

⁹ Dewey#4 10.157

¹⁰ Dewey #5 10.157

¹¹ John Dewey, "Rationality in Education," *The Social Frontier*, vol. III, 71-73

¹² John Dewey, "President Hutchins' Proposals to Remake Higher Education," *The Social Frontier*, vol. III, 103-4

¹³ Robert Maynard Hutchins, "Grammar, Rhetoric, and Mr. Dewey," *The Social Frontier*, vol. III, 137-9.

¹⁴ John Dewey, "Was President Hutchins Serious?," *The Social Frontier*, vol. III, 167-9.

¹⁵ John Dewey #6 14.271

¹⁶ John Dewey, 15.202

¹⁷ John Dewey 15.203

¹⁸ Daniel Bell pp.29-32

¹⁹ Daniel Bell, p.39

²⁰ *A Report of the University of California Commission on General Education in the 21st Century*, Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, 2007. I should note that I was a member of this Commission, although unfortunately I was not able to attend the meetings on the West Coast.

²¹ UC Report, p.2

²² UC Report, p.6

²³ UC Report, p.22

²⁴ UC Report, pp.ix-x

²⁵ Brown 2008 Report, p.9

²⁶ Brown 2008 Report, pp.10-11

²⁷ Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, p.361

²⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*(NY, 1917), p.?

²⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (NY, 1963) p.380n1

³⁰ Quoted in Hofstader, *Anti-Intellectualism*, p.381

³¹ Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, p.363

³² Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism*, p.382

³³ JD, 15.205 #10

³⁴ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p.192 #11

³⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p.192 #12

³⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p.193 #13

³⁷ JD, lw.13.282 #14

³⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p.108 #14

³⁹ *Democracy and Education*, p.99 #15

⁴⁰ *Democracy and Education*, p.183 #17

⁴¹ *Democracy and Education*, p.109 #16

⁴² *Democracy and Education*, p.183 #18

⁴³ JD, mw 15,200 #19

⁴⁴ JD, mw 15,200 #20

⁴⁵ JD, mw 1,300-302 #21

⁴⁶ JD, lw 15,280 #22

⁴⁷ JD, mw 1,306 #23

⁴⁸ *Democracy and Education*, p.191 #24

⁴⁹ JD, lw 15,210 #25

⁵⁰ JD, mw 1,305 #26

⁵¹ JD, lw.3,278 #27; mw.15,208 #28