Education and Democracy
Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America

Robert Orrill, Executive Editor

College Entrance Examination Board
New York
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Editor’s Prologue

ROBERT ORRILL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS,
THE COLLEGE BOARD

Unless education has some frame of reference it is bound to be aimless, lacking a unified objective. The necessity for a frame of reference must be admitted. There exists in this country such a unified frame. It is called democracy.

John Dewey, 1937

America must be looked upon as either an offshoot of Europe, culturally speaking, or as a New World in other than a geographical sense. To take the latter view is neither brash patriotic nationalism nor yet a brand of isolationism. It is an acknowledgement of work to be done.

John Dewey, 1944

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a troubled state of mind had overtaken many leaders of American higher education. This uneasiness was not about financial resources or student enrollment. Both were increasing, and higher education on the whole was prosperous and looking toward further expansion. Rather, what disturbed educators was an uncertainty about educational fundamentals and their lack of an assured sense of direction. Most especially, they missed the organizing power of a shared and firmly held conception of liberal education. The president of Cornell, Jacob Schurman, wrote forthrightly about this difficulty in his annual report for 1906-7: “The college is without clear-cut notions of what a liberal education is and how it is to be secured, . . . and the pity of it is that this is not a local or special disability, but a paralysis affecting every college of arts in America.”

Increasingly, observers attributed this disabling condition to a growing ambivalence about curricular reforms that, by 1900, had been adopted almost everywhere in American higher education.
Often collectively referred to as the “new education,” these reforms had effectively replaced a narrow curricular model bounded and defined by the prescribed study of classical languages and literatures with one that, in principle, admitted no substantive restraints and sought to be “coextensive with the reach and interest of intelligence.” This new openness had allowed many “modern” subjects to be added to the liberal arts curriculum and, in line with a call for an end to prescription, also afforded faculty more freedom to decide what to teach and students greater opportunity to “elect” what they chose to study.

With this expansiveness, however, had also come disarray and disunity. Actions that reformers had promised would result in a much-needed “redefinition” of liberal education were instead producing an all-pervasive “confusion” about exactly what a liberal arts degree signified. If students merely chose as they liked from among an ever-more-diverse array of subject offerings, how then could it be said that one degree was the equivalent of another or that all shared in the educational purposes that an institution thought should be common to every program of liberal study? Under the pressure of this uncertainty, the impulse of many education leaders was to call a halt to further forward movement in the direction of the “new freedoms.” Even “some few... of the reformers,” John Dewey wrote, “are themselves beginning to draw back.” They “are apparently wondering,” he added, “if this new-created child of theirs be not a Frankenstein, which is to turn and rend its creator.”

Such was the unsettled state of mind of liberal educators at the beginning of this century. Some continued to proclaim the future, but others now began to consider how to reclaim the past. As Schurman reported, many simply wavered and were unsure about which direction to commend. Almost everywhere, the prescriptive “classical” model of liberal education was in full retreat, but scarcely anywhere was the “modern” and more freewheeling “elective” alternative wholeheartedly welcomed. In fact, the “elective” approach increasingly was thought not to be a model at all in that it defined an “education” (so critics said) as nothing more than any aggregation of studies that might result from the whim of this or that individual student in choosing from among a large assortment of unconnected course offerings. Moreover, these courses themselves were developed and taught by a faculty now more often invested in specialized research interests than in thinking through how what was taught and learned contributed to a broad and comprehensive conception of a liberal education. Overall, then, recent reforms had substantially expanded and diversified the educational enterprise, but, at the same time, they had left liberal education bereft of any forceful theoretical direction or unifying philosophical definition. Dewey described the educational situation this way: “There is no longer any old education save here and there in some belated geographic area. There is no new education in definite and supreme existence. What we have is certain vital tendencies.”

As the century unfolded, this condition threatened to become chronic. Left to drift, “vital tendencies” did not take on any definitive shape as Dewey earlier forecast they might. Rather, it became commonplace for educators and lay observers alike to speak of the “malady” or “crisis” of liberal education. Painfully, the recognition took hold that a centuries-old model of liberal education had collapsed without any durable and inspiring alternative having arrived to take its place. If disorder and bewilderment were not to prevail, there was a great need to construct an approach to liberal education that, as Dewey urged in 1931, would point “the way out of educational confusion.” Increasingly, other influential educators spoke of the problem in much the same way. In 1936, for example, Chicago’s Robert Hutchins prefaced his own call for the reform of liberal education with very similar words: “The most striking fact about the higher learning in America,” he said, “is the confusion that besets it.”

At the close of that same year, in an otherwise argumentative response to Hutchins, Dewey once again wrote that he fully agreed with the view “that present education is disordered and confused.” This left no doubt about what educational prob-
lem most needed attention. “The problem as to the direction in which we shall seek for order and clarity,” Dewey concluded, “is the most important question facing education and educators today.”

But which direction should be taken? Two sharply divergent schools of thought emerged in response to this question. One we can call conservative and “restorationist,” the other progressive and “pragmatic” or “experimentalist.” The first looked to the past and sought reform through a model of liberal education derived from classical European sources. In most of its versions, this model placed supreme importance on the “exposure” of American students to a selection of “great books,” that, at a minimum, included samplings from Greek philosophy and literature as well as Christian scripture and theology (though the latter were usually treated as if they were secular documents). These texts, so the argument ran, projected “the imaginative visions of supreme genius” that all should revere and, as such, also reflected “permanent standards of excellence” that could serve as a basis for discriminating between better and worse, high and low, lasting and transient. Taken collectively, they were said to constitute a binding “Western tradition” or “heritage” that all Americans shared in common and should embrace as their own. Beginning in the 1930s, the most publicly visible advocate of this position was Hutchins, but ultimately the most influential within the academy may have been Conant.

In contrast, the second, or “pragmatic,” approach looked to the “living present” for its orientation and advocated an experimental search for distinctively American models to guide the future practice of liberal education. John Dewey and other supporters of this point of view were critical of any educational stance that encouraged reverence toward “ideas and ideals . . . inherited from older and unlike cultures” and argued that, instead, the locus of liberal education must be found within “the dominant interests and activities of the great body of the American people.” In effect, viable models for liberal education could not be “borrowed” from across the Atlantic or recalled from the past, but must be newly imagined, made, and tested on American ground. An ally of Dewey’s, Horace Kallen, later said of the derivative “restorationist” model that it sought to make of the United States “nothing else than a spiritual colony of Europe, dependent upon the mother-continent for all the meanings that dignify man and ennoble his works.”

In the restorationist model, the function of liberal education was the transmission of culture from the past to the present, from Europe to America. For pragmatists, however, the liberal college above all needed to overcome this disposition toward reproducing European culture in an American setting. Pragmatists argued that the aim must be to “make the college count in developing a culture which is more truly indigenous.” This could not be accomplished if colleges understood that the work of liberal education should be practiced through a reclaimed, or “equivalent,” model of the kind that was previously dominant in the era of the classical curriculum. Such a classical model, the pragmatist George Herbert Mead wrote, was based on a belief that Americans should accept and follow “the forms and standards of European culture.” As such, it was “frankly imitative” in intent; neither creative nor productive, “inferior, not different.” In consequence, the result was an academic culture that in its intellectual workings could not produce “an interpretation of American life” or organize a learning environment that was other than “sterile in the development of the larger American community.” The model of liberal education that some wanted to resurrect, Mead advised, could produce only a “cultivated American [who] was a tourist even if he never left American shores.”

From the pragmatic point of view, the sources from the past most useful to the liberal educator were not ancient Athenians or medieval Scholastic schoolmen but rather the likes of Emerson, Whitman, and the problem-solving American pioneer. In Dewey’s intellectualized vision, the last especially was an exemplar of one who demonstrated how ordinary people could develop the capacity “to experiment and improvise” when faced with the need to resolve difficulties under “unprecedented conditions.” The “creative effort” involved in these tasks did not display the Scholastic “correctness in thinking” admired by Hutchins, but it did evidence intellectual virtues of a sort perhaps even more essential given the pervasive flux of modern conditions. On this score, Dewey wrote of the pioneer experience: “Versatility and
inventiveness, ready adaptation to new conditions, minds of courage and fertility in facing obstacles, were the result.” For the pragmatist, such were the desired educative outcomes and dispositions that a modern liberal educator had to nurture among students. This was the task that Dewey had in mind when, in the 1930s, he spoke of education as “one of the great opportunities for present day pioneering.”

In contrast, the “restorationist” model looked East to the aristocratic “high civilization” of Europe for inspiration rather than West to the American frontier. Even so, this school of thought included both avowed elitists and professed democrats. Many of the former were followers of Matthew Arnold who, in a lecture tour of the United States in 1883, had brought both the philosopher Plato and the prophet Isaiah to bear in warning American democrats against the inescapable “unsoundness” of the majority of their fellow citizens. The only defense against “ruin” in democratic times, he argued, was the continuance of a kind of classical liberal education that, by focusing attention only on a few, could produce a “saving remnant” capable of upholding “true elevation” in the midst of prevailing low practices. Borrowing largely from German sources, Arnold applied the term “culture” to the “holy seed” sewn by this “remnant”; and for some American educators, both then and now, this cultivation of an intellectual elite through close attention to “the best that has been thought and said” has provided the defining function of a liberal education. Early in this century, the democratic experimentalist Dewey had disparagingly described this camp’s stance within the American college ranks:

To very many this idea of culture covers adequately and completely that for which the college stands. Even to suggest that the college should do what the people want is to lay unholy hands on the sanctity of the college ideal. The people, the mob, the majority, want anything but culture. The college stands for the remnant. It is the fortress of the few who are capable of upholding high ideals against the utilitarian clamor of the many.

By the middle decades of the twentieth century, however, many “restorationists” had adopted a considerably more democratic stance—even if they continued to regard anything remotely “utilitarian” with the utmost horror. Usually, they held to Arnold’s view that the content of liberal education should be organized around “the best that has been thought and said” as drawn from Western European literature; but this was advocated along with the stated belief that the ideas gathered together under this rubric were the “common inheritance” of all Americans and the intent was that as many students as possible should have access to them in some measure. The educational issue for the pragmatist, in contrast, was not how to place examples of “rare genius” before students, but rather how to invent an education that would serve to bring forth the creative power that was in each and every individual. Democracy, for the pragmatist, was a fact of nature, not a product of books. So, too, was creativity. The social purpose of a genuinely democratic and liberal education, then, was not to convey that “genius” is exceptional and far above the common lot, but rather it was to bring to full realization the natural fact that resourcefulness and intelligence are widespread. If varied in their outward appearance, these human capacities nonetheless are possessions owned by all and are endowments from which each can contribute to the betterment of associated living and common enterprise. Echoing Emerson and William James, Dewey said about creativity:

We are given to associating creative mind with persons regarded as rare and unique, like geniuses. But every individual is in his own way unique. Each one experiences life from a different angle than anybody else, and consequently has something distinctive to give others if he can turn his experiences into ideas and pass them on to others.

Each individual that comes into the world is a new beginning; the universe is, as it were, taking a fresh start in him and trying to do something, even if on a small scale, that has never been done before.

The debate between restorationist and experimentalist positions was most explicitly joined and intensely argued during the middle decades of this century. From the early 1930s to the late 1950s, there were few attempts to project a unifying model and rationale for American liberal education that did not take their bearings from these two positions. Some took sides, but others tried to have it both ways and broker an accommodation between the two. The most well-known
and influential of the latter attempts was the Conant-initiated Harvard Report of 1945. Colloquially known as the Red Book, this report was the result of a three-year effort undertaken by a Harvard faculty committee to develop a guiding “concept” for liberal education that would do no less than serve to unify the whole of the American educational enterprise. One of the authors described the venture in the following way:

Today, educational theory may be broadly distinguished into two types, the one theological (or quasi-theological), the other naturalistic in outlook. The first stresses architectonic unity and planned control of reason; the second, the spontaneous pattern of growth. The first is rationalistic, concerned to establish fixed premises and to make deductions from them; the second is empirically-minded, inductive, hospitable to innovation. The latter is associated with John Dewey, pragmatism and the scientific temper; the former, arising as a reaction to it, is associated with the names of Hutchins and the St. John’s group. The Harvard Report envisages the problem of educational philosophy largely in terms of these two conflicting types; the solution which it offers may be regarded as resulting from the effort to reconcile them.20

Reaction to the Red Book, however, indicated that Harvard’s attempt at reaching an accommodation had largely failed. Traditionalists for the most part were quietly positive, sensing correctly that the report’s advocacy of “compulsory” study of the “Western heritage” and “great texts” placed Harvard solidly in the restorationist camp. Experimentalists, though, fired back with lengthy critiques arguing that the report, in fact, was no synthesis but rather a “Bourbon” document authored by “soldiers of . . . tradition” inescapably committed to a “quasi-theological” version of “neo-classical humanism.” 21 Other readers committed to neither position, such as Columbia’s Irwin Edman, observed that the attempt of the Harvard committee to appeal to both contending parties had resulted in a report largely made up of “vanilla-flavored homiletics” and “bland abstract double-talk.” 22 After all the returns were in, the one thing certain was that American liberal education remained a house divided.

At the close of the twentieth century, have we arrived at a different place? Do we now agree about what function we want liberal edu-

cation to perform in the United States? Should it be an education, as the Harvard Report proposed, that aims to convey to students an appreciation of a shared “Western heritage” and thereby bestow upon them the “received ideals” needed to achieve a “settled outlook” about who Americans are and what they hold important? Or is it, as John Dewey said, one that views the protagonist of a liberal education as a “perplexed wayfarer” in a new land who requires the skill, energy, and courage to map unknown territories and chart future directions? Is it, the pragmatist would ask, an education that assumes the world is mostly given and already largely made; or is it one that regards ourselves and our surroundings as unfinished and open to both the opportunities and hazards of remaking? And what kind of curriculum models follow from our answers to these questions? Are they ones that should be constructed, as restorationists have argued, with the aim of attempting to reproduce a kind of education presumed to have been practiced in ancient Greece or nineteenth-century Oxford? Or should they be ones developed, as pragmatists urge, through an experimental search for a distinctively American approach to liberal education directly aimed at addressing issues arising from late-twentieth-century realities?

Such questions are not likely to be easily resolved or ever permanently retired. Doubtless, we can expect to hear from both restorationists and pragmatists so long as the debate about the future course of American liberal education continues. It is important to note, however, that many restorationists themselves no longer appear to share the belief of Hutchins and Conant that the model of liberal education they advocate can be practiced on a large scale in the United States. Allan Bloom, for example, acknowledged that the “great books” approach to education is “almost universally rejected” in these times; and he could detect no enthusiasm among faculty in any part of the contemporary university to adopt any such model. Moreover, the kind of education that Bloom eloquently defends can be undertaken, he said, only by a “small number” of “advantaged youths” whose life circumstances are such that they are able to pursue an education free of material concerns and purposes. The relevance of this model in our American democracy, therefore, is not to be found in its capaci-
ty to touch and animate the many, but rather in its devotion to the perfection of a small number of the "greatest talents" who, so Bloom claimed, are "most likely ... to have the greatest moral and intellectual effect on the nation." In Bloom, once again, an influential voice in the restorationist camp has proclaimed Arnold's view that the function of liberal education is to nurture a saving "remnant" who, in the midst of hostile and debased circumstances, can direct attention to "the rare, the refined and the superior." 23

Among pragmatists, the outlook at present is significantly different and also a good deal more positive about the future prospects of liberal education. Whereas restorationists lament the weakening influence of European traditions on American educational thought and practice, the experimentalist Frank Wong views the same fact as helpful in eliminating long-entrenched assumptions that have "seriously inhibited the possibility of even considering an American model of liberal education." 24 The historian Bruce Kimball goes even further and argues that pragmatic assumptions, in fact, are already powerfully present in attempts to envision a future direction for American liberal education. Based on a close study of the contemporary reform literature, Kimball makes the proposal that, "at the end of the twentieth century, the liberal arts in the United States are moving toward a conception that can reasonably be called 'Pragmatic liberal education.'" If this pragmatic "turn" is fully actualized, Kimball argues, educators in this country for the first time will have "a principled rationale and legitimization" for the practice of liberal education that is "historically grounded in American culture." 25

By no means would all educators agree with Bruce Kimball that such a pragmatic "turn" is fully underway. Few, however, would dispute that we need a forceful renewal of the search for a rationale and orientation to guide American liberal education. This perhaps is made all the more pressing by the fact that there are no Hutchins, Conants, and Deweys these days to keep the fundamental importance of this matter at the forefront. However much these academic leaders disagreed among themselves, they were at one in insisting that a concept of liberal education must be the organizing center, not just of the undergraduate curriculum, but across the educational enterprise in the working interrelationships among high schools, colleges, and professional education. They were also in agreement that the answer to how higher education should serve the democratic aspirations of the nation would be realized most vitally through its understanding and practice of liberal education. In contrast, as the philosopher John Searle has pointed out, much recent dispute in the academy has been about a lot less. Often, in fact, it concerns no more than the syllabus of an introductory course in the humanities or some other very small fraction of the curriculum. Such debate may not be insignificant, but its import pales considerably, Searle says, when we consider the larger absence of "any coherent theory of what we are trying to achieve in undergraduate education." In language that would not have sounded at all unfamiliar in 1900, Searle concludes: "Faced with the well-known cafeteria of courses, and obliged to fill very few requirements, a student is more likely to be well educated as the result of chance, or of his or her determination, than as a consequence of planning by the university authorities." 26

On the threshold of a new century, can we think more ambitiously about reform of the undergraduate curriculum? Can we, in fact, take up Dewey's challenge of re-imagining liberal education from the "ground up" in the United States? Moreover, what bearing might (or should) pragmatic thought have on this undertaking? Does the legacy of American pragmatism in all of its variety provide a moral and intellectual resource that can sustain educators in such an immense work? These are among the questions that the contributors to this book attempt to address in the context of contemporary conditions and in light of current educational issues. Taken together, the essays reflect a remarkably spirited and convergent effort to envision how a pragmatic "turn" in liberal education could be advanced and what the educational and social consequences might be if it were given full effect. At the same time, they also provide a thorough and unblinking discussion of the obstacles to change of any sort in American educational practice. Collectively, the result is as complete a picture of the interplay of trends and countertrends in the American college curriculum at the end of the twentieth century as a reader is likely to find. However, even more than this, say Lee Knefelkamp and Carol
Schneider in this book, the combined contributions constitute "from a dozen different starting points, and through . . . joining . . . apparently quite disparate standpoints and conceptions, an emerging and important new direction for U.S. higher education."

The powerful intellectual impetus that emerges from these essays is owed more than a little to the occasion at which most were first presented and discussed—a colloquy on the college curriculum held at Rollins College in February 1997. Organized by the College Board and Rollins College, the colloquy was entitled "Toward a Pragmatic Liberal Education: The Curriculum of the Twenty-First Century." Helpfully, the event was also cosponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the American Council of Learned Societies. Participants included institutional leaders from more than 50 colleges and universities and the exchanges among participants that followed the presentation of each paper were invariably intense, lengthy, and to the point. All of the essays have since been revised to take into account issues raised in these discussions, and therefore this book is, in a very real sense, a product of the kind of cooperative activity that the early pragmatists urged upon us.

Acknowledgments are always an enjoyable part of making a book. Special thanks, of course, go to President Rita Bornstein and her colleagues at Rollins College for their help in all of the work that led to the preparation of this publication. It was President Bornstein who first proposed that a national curriculum conference held at Rollins in 1981, and chaired by John Dewey, could be usefully reprised at the end of the twentieth century. Without this suggestion and the attention that she gave to planning the subsequent event, this book would never have been conceived let alone brought to completion. Thanks in addition to my College Board colleagues Dorothy Downie, Jeff Hale, and Geoffrey Kirshner who, as always, made the exceptional look routine. Their contributions to both the organization of the colloquy and the completion of this book are beyond counting. Once again, also, the expert editorial judgment of Madelyn Roesch has been a sustaining resource throughout. Most credit, of course, must go to each individual author.

Above all a collective thanks to them and thanks, too, to College Board President Donald M. Stewart, whose support and encouragement helped make work on this book a special pleasure.

Notes

2. Many of the essays in this volume add considerable detail and insight to the story of the historical developments sketched in this brief stage-setting prologue. Additionally, among secondary sources, the indispensable book on this period in higher education continues to be Laurence Veysey, The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). Veysey, however, must now be supplemented most especially by Julie Reuben, The Making of the Modern University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
3. Quoted in Flexner, American College.
6. Ibid.
12. As with all such dichotomies, this one is overly broad and omits important distinctions among individuals that I cluster together in one camp or the other. For certain, Conant would have objected strongly to being placed in the same company with Hutchins (and very probably would have rejected any suggestion that Harvard was following a course set by another institution or individual). Nonetheless, I think it is relatively easy to demonstrate that reform-oriented debate about liberal education in the middle decades of this century was largely organized around these two opposing dispositions.


25. Bruce Kimball's full argument can be found in Robert Orrill, editor, *The Condition of American Liberal Education* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995). The present volume includes Kimball's response to his critics in an essay entitled "Naming Pragmatic Liberal Education."