

Education and Democracy

*Re-imagining Liberal Learning
in America*

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College Entrance Examination Board
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Editor's Prologue

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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."¹

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.²

