

Liberal Schooling in the Twentieth Century

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In "Liberal Schooling in the Twentieth Century," Adler deals with the substance of a liberal education. Having demonstrated the necessity of making general, liberal education available to all and of making it have the same quality for all, he turns his attention here to the content of a liberal education. Here, however, he comes directly into conflict with prevailing opinion. He argues that the liberal arts are the skills of learning and as such their acquisition is a necessity and not a luxury. They are the preparation for all further learning. Without them education cannot prosper, and neither can a free and responsible people. They are in fact indispensable. There is no room for compromise in his argument for a liberal arts curriculum. Never published before, this article is taken from a lecture that was part of a series on Modern Education and Human Values sponsored by the Pitcairn-Crabbe Foundation in November 1962.

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THE PROBLEMS of education are many and various. They include such things as the proper organization of a university, the nature and aims of professional or vocational training, the pre-school training of the child, the continued learning of adults after they have completed school, the preparation of teachers, not to mention all the political and economic problems which have to do with the support and regulation of educational institutions by public or private agencies.

I shall not deal with any of these but shall limit myself to the

consideration of liberal schooling, especially at the college level. What, ideally, should a liberal arts college try to do? What should be its educational objectives, and the means or methods of achieving them? Or, to put the same questions in a slightly different form, what should the bachelor of arts degree signify—what sort of intellectual competence, what kind of learning, should it certify?

Putting the question in this last way enables me to say immediately that the worst mistake we can possibly make—yet one that is nevertheless generally made—is to suppose that the bachelor of arts degree, honestly earned, signifies that its possessor is an educated man or woman. Nothing could be further from the truth, even if we allow ourselves to imagine the best possible student who has spent four years most conscientiously and industriously at a college which was as perfect in faculty and curriculum as any college could be. The reason is simply that youth itself—immaturity of mind, character, and experience—is the insuperable obstacle to becoming educated. We cannot educate the young; the best we can do for them is to school them in such a way that they have a good chance to become educated in the course of their adult life.

The discussion is, therefore, not about liberal education as a whole, which involves much more than can ever be accomplished in school. It is narrowly concerned with liberal schooling—with what can be done in high school and college to help a person become liberally educated later on. And it is concerned with that problem under the conditions of life and learning in the twentieth century. Perhaps I should be even more specific and say: conditions of life and learning today in a technologically advanced industrial democracy such as the United States.

An industrial democracy, of the kind we now have in America, is a brand new kind of society. It is, perhaps, the first affluent society which has ever existed on earth. From the point of view of the circumstances and opportunities of terrestrial existence, it represents far and away the most radical transformation of human life that has happened in the West. Hence it would not be unreasonable to expect that our educational institutions should also undergo a transformation to meet these altered conditions. Nevertheless, it is my judgment, which I shall try to defend, that in essence the objectives of liberal schooling must remain precisely what they were in earlier ages under quite different conditions. Whatever was the best schooling for the few should now become the schooling for all.

It may be objected, however, that I have not considered the radically altered conditions of learning which now prevail. Industrial democracy may not necessitate an essential change in the objectives of liberal schooling, but only require us to make it as universal as democratic suffrage and the opportunities for leisure. But other changes in our culture, which directly affect the content and processes of learning, may call for a change in the very substance of what should be accomplished in the course of liberal schooling.

What do those who might raise this objection have in mind? They would call our attention, I think, to the fact that we live in the age of science fully matured, an age of specialized research, dominated by the centrality of the scientific method, and by the fruits and promises of technology. They would also call our attention to the fact that the number of learned professions, or of technically specialized vocations requiring specialized schooling, has multiplied many times over and is still on the increase. They would most of all stress the occurrence of what is sometimes called the "knowledge explosion," and which, if it is not really that, certainly deserves to be called the "research explosion," or at least the "publication explosion."

Whatever it should be called, it must be admitted that, in all specialized fields of inquiry, in all those areas where knowledge can be advanced or applied, rapidity of change is positively accelerated to a degree that has become alarming to both teacher and student—or anyone who is concerned with acquiring a reasonable measure of proficiency and competence in some chosen sphere of learning. Does this fact affect the objectives of liberal schooling—its content and methods? Must we not adjust or adapt the process of learning in school to the radically altered way in which learning is itself advanced through ever-increasing specialization and at an ever-increasing rate?

My answer to these questions is negative. The two theses I will try to defend are: first, that all students should be given a general liberal schooling, devoid of any specialized study, before they engage, at the university level, in the pursuit of professional or technical competence in some special field; and second, that this general liberal schooling should be the same for all, without regard to their individual differences, their future interests, or their professional inclinations.

While the altered conditions of learning in the twentieth century do not call for any change in the objectives of such general liberal schooling, they do most emphatically intensify and extend the need for

it. As specialized learning becomes more and more fragmented, as the demands for greater and greater technical competence in more and more limited areas of knowledge increase, the greater is everyone's need for the skills of learning itself, which are acquired through a mastery of the liberal arts, and the greater is everyone's need for some elementary appreciation of the common humanities, the things that are not only common to all fields of learning, but also remain relatively constant across the centuries, because man himself—our common human nature—remains the same. Everything else in our cultural environment can change, and at any rate; but so long as human nature remains unchanged, the task of liberal schooling is the same in the twentieth century as it always was.

These propositions are, in our day, not popular with educators, parents, or the general public. The general practice of our educational institutions runs counter to them. They are regarded as opposed to the general trend of the times. If earning a living and getting ahead in the world are the ends of life, why waste too much time, or any at all, in the liberal arts or the humanities?

I must, therefore, make some effort to explain and defend these unpopular propositions. I must begin by reiterating the two, quite limited objectives of liberal schooling. They are, first, to give the young a measure of competence in the liberal arts, which are nothing but the skills of learning itself—the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, calculating, and measuring. I do not mention thinking, because the ability to think, clearly and well, is implicit in all the other more specific skills of learning. In addition to competence in the skills of learning, a liberal school should give the young a preliminary and necessarily superficial acquaintance with certain general and common features of the world of learning itself. Instead of giving them a false sense of being learned, this should give them a deep awareness of how much remains for them to learn during the remainder of their lives. If a liberal college succeeds in doing these two things well—if it provides the young with both the means and the incentives to go on learning—it will have accomplished all that it should or can do for the young in order to prepare them for the life of learning in which they must engage after they leave school if they are ever to become educated men and women.

Training in the liberal arts is indispensable to making free men out of children. It prepares them for the uses of freedom—the proper em-

ployment of free time and the exercise of political power. It prepares them for leisure and for citizenship. And acquaintance with the traditions of our culture prepares them for citizenship in the republic of learning as well as for participation in the affairs of the state.

These are the only two parts of basic education which are indispensable for men as men. They are not only a necessary preparation for all further specialized schooling, but also for the pursuit of truth and the performance of one's social and political duties.

The reason for this is simply that to be human is to have the power and the need to exercise the liberal arts. There is no other part of intellectual learning that is necessarily common to all men. All men do not need to be engineers, lawyers, physicians, priests, businessmen, or scientists. But all men are obliged to conduct their affairs by rational communication with their fellowmen. All are obliged to think. These things can be done well or poorly. The only choice for a man, then, is not whether he will or will not be a liberal artist. He cannot be human without being one. His only choice is being a good or bad liberal artist, and the purpose of liberal schooling is to make him a good one.

Even at the risk of some repetition, let me quote here a statement on this point by Robert Maynard Hutchins, in a recently published book:

The liberal artist learns to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. He learns to reckon, measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange. As we live in the tradition, whether we know it or not, so we are all liberal artists, whether we know it or not. We all practice the liberal arts, well or badly, all the time every day. As we should understand the tradition as well as we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.

The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable. Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one, or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one.

The single most impressive fact about this proposition concerning the primacy and indispensability of training in the liberal arts is the fact that it has been affirmed throughout the whole tradition of Western education. The neglect of this truth or its denial did not appear until

the last century. It is only during the last hundred years that parents, teachers, and students themselves are content with shoddy substitutes for the liberal arts or are willing to dispense with training in them entirely. As Hutchins says: "The tradition of the West in education is the tradition of the liberal arts. Until very recently nobody took seriously the suggestion that there could be any other ideal."

If we contemplate this fact, or the larger fact that all of the traditional principles of education, including this one about the primacy of training in the liberal arts, have been seriously controverted only in the last hundred years, we may be able to gain some insight into the educational controversies of our own day; and with it, some understanding of the prevalent tendency to substitute vocational training or specialized learning for general liberal training at the level of basic schooling, which should come to its completion with the awarding of the bachelor's degree.

Let us suppose that a college were to be guided solely by traditional principles in its effort to provide basic liberal schooling for the young. What steps would it have to take to achieve the appointed goals? How should it be organized? What should its program of studies be like? What should be the character and competence of its teachers? There is probably no single set of positive answers to these questions which would elicit the agreement of all educators. There are undoubtedly many different and equally effective ways of providing the young with training in the liberal arts and acquainting them with the traditions of our culture and the broad outlines of the world of learning. I am reluctant, therefore, to propose, in positive terms, anything that would pretend to be the one right or ideal curriculum for a liberal arts college. But I do have the temerity to lay down a series of negative injunctions, proscribing the things which a college must not do if it is sincerely devoted to the ends which basic liberal schooling should achieve. Let me state them for you.

First, a liberal arts college should not allow any form of special training for specific jobs, vocations, or even learned professions to intrude itself into the curriculum. This is not to say that liberal schooling has no relation to earning a living. The point is rather that the method and content of liberal schooling should be the same without regard to how the young to whom it is given have to earn a living after graduation. Liberal schooling will, in fact, prepare them to earn a living in the one way that it should. A person well trained in the liberal arts is able to

learn anything more readily than a person not so trained. Hence he is better prepared for whatever specialized learning may be a necessary condition of earning a living, whether that further learning takes place on the job or in the course of further schooling.

Second, a liberal arts college should not provide any elective courses in its curriculum, nor should it afford any opportunities for specialization in particular subject matters. Whatever subject matters are chosen for study, they should be chosen because they are the materials best suited for disciplining the young in the liberal skills, and not because it is supposed that the young should master these subject matters and become learned in them. The liberal arts are the same for all men, and so is the need of all men to be trained in these arts. All the facts about individual differences in talent, interest, inclination, or future occupation are irrelevant to the purposes of liberal schooling. Just as at the earliest stage of education, there is no question that every infant should be taught to walk and talk, so at the college stage of education, there is no question that every boy and girl should be taught to talk well, read well, write well, listen well, and, of course, think well.

Third, the faculty of a liberal arts college should not be divided into departmental groups, each representing special competence in some particular subject matter, and narrow interest in some limited field of learning. This does not mean that the members of a college faculty must eschew all special scholarly interests, or that they should be chosen for their general incompetence and lack of all scholarly attainments. It means only that as college teachers, engaged in administering a program of liberal schooling, they should be willing to submit themselves to the whole course of study which the college is prescribing for its students. Only in this way can they themselves develop the general competence which they should possess as teachers of the liberal arts. Furthermore, as college teachers they should not be expected to carry on specialized research. They should win the honors and emoluments appropriate to their careers by their excellence as teachers, not by their contributions to the advancement of knowledge. Their achievement of a high degree of excellence as teachers will, of course, depend on their deepening and broadening their own general and liberal education, which the college should encourage by forming study groups for its teachers and by allowing them sufficient periods of time free from the burdens of teaching, just as a university allows its professors free time for research.

Fourth, no textbooks should be used in a liberal arts college; there

should be no lectures in courses; and formal lectures should be kept to the minimum and should, wherever possible, be of such generality that they can be given to the whole student body. Each of these related negatives rests on the same fundamental reason. Since liberal schooling is concerned with the discipline of the intellect, not the short-term cultivation of the verbal memory, the materials and methods of teaching should avoid anything that permits students to memorize formulaic answers just long enough to hand them back on examination papers. Textbooks are largely devices for enabling students to memorize answers without learning to read or think in the process. Lectures in course are often, too often, nothing more than oral recitations of, or commentaries on, textbook materials. Neither textbooks nor lectures in courses require much activity on the part of the student's mind as opposed to his memory. To elicit intellectual activity on the part of the student, whatever the student is asked to read should be sufficiently over his head to require a genuine effort at understanding; and instead of lecturing hour after hour, the liberal arts teacher should teach mainly by asking, not by telling, and in classes that are small enough for the purposes of effective discussion. An occasional formal lecture out of course may supplement the Socratic method of teaching, which should be the model emulated by all teachers in a liberal arts college.

Fifth, written examinations, especially of the objective or true-false type, should be eliminated in favor of oral examinations. The reason for this is closely related to what has just been said about memory and mind. Only an oral examination can succeed in separating the facile verbalizers and memorizers from those in whom genuine intellectual skills are beginning to develop and whose minds have become hospitable to ideas. Written examinations, even term papers or senior essays, are inadequate for this purpose. Where serious written work is undertaken by the students, it should not only be examined for its excellence in writing, but it should also be made the basis for examining the student orally to see if he can defend his thesis with some depth of understanding that goes below the surface of his written document.

These five negative recommendations, if adopted, would still allow for a variety of different positive programs, differently organized and differently administered. The negatives, if enforced, merely create the right sort of vacuum, so that whatever positive content then rushes in to fill the void has some chance of being right. If all these negative injunctions were to be accepted by a faculty which understood that the

basic objectives of liberal schooling were the liberal skills and a broad acquaintance with the humanities, I would be confident that any curriculum which they devised would make bachelors, that is, initiates in the liberal arts of those upon whom the college conferred that ancient and honorable degree.

Perhaps I ought to add a word of explanation about my use of that much abused term "humanities." When I say that the course of study in a liberal arts college should be exclusively humanistic, I do not mean to exclude the study of mathematics or of the natural sciences. When these subjects are approached in a certain way, they are as much a part of the humanities as are philosophy, history, and the social sciences, or the fine arts of poetry, music, painting, and sculpture.

The mark or measure of the humanistic approach to any subject matter or field of learning is the awareness that there is a permanent aspect to any subject matter, even those in which the most rapid cumulative advances take place. What is permanent in any field of study are those constant features of it which derive from the constancy of human nature itself. Another way of saying this, perhaps, is to say that the humanistic approach to any subject matter is philosophical, in the sense that it looks for the universal and abiding principles, the fundamental ideas and insights, the controlling canons of procedure or method, all of which are determined by the faculties of man as inquirer or learner.

In addition, I would like to say that when the approach to any subject matter is humanistic in the sense just indicated, the study of it will serve to cultivate the liberal skills rather than lead to a learned mastery of the subject itself. This holds true even of the great books, which certainly cannot be mastered by college students. With the exception of a few great books in mathematics, astronomy, and physics, the great books do not yield their secrets to the young. Why, then, give them to the young to read and discuss? The answer which Stringfellow Barr once gave to this question goes right to the heart of the matter. He said that the great books in the hands of a college student were like a large bone being gnawed at vigorously by a very young puppy. The puppy might not succeed in getting very much nourishment from the bone, but it certainly gives him plenty of exercise.

That is precisely the point—about the great books or any other subject matter, humanistically treated, in a liberal arts college. The materials being studied are not there for the nourishment which they provide, but for the exercise which they afford—exercise in the liberal

arts in order to develop the skills of learning. If, as a by-product, any nourishment is derived, it will tend to be of the sort that is proper at this stage of education; namely, a general and superficial acquaintance with the permanent features of the world of learning itself.

There is one more question to which I would like to address myself in closing. Since I have so severely limited the objectives of basic liberal schooling to the acquirement of proficiency in the liberal arts and to some appreciation of what I have called the humanities, it may be asked whether college is the appropriate institution for a course of study thus delimited. Is not high school the proper place for training the young in the arts of reading and writing, speaking and listening, and for giving them an initial appreciation of the humanities? Or if high school will not suffice, should we not at least try to limit basic liberal schooling to the first two years of college, leaving the upper years for specialized programs of study, elected according to the differing interests of particular students?

These are reasonable questions, and they deserve reasonable answers. Before I try to answer them, let me remind you of two facts.

On the one hand, we must face the fact that the graduates of our high schools, as they are currently operated, do not enter college with sufficient training in the liberal arts or a sufficient appreciation of the humanities. They are neither well-read nor are they able to read well. Their proficiency in writing, speaking, and listening is as poor, if not poorer. Their general intellectual orientation, if they have any at all, is likely to be fuzzy and foggy. They are hardly disciplined initiates into the world of learning, equipped with the skills of learning to a degree which warrants their pursuing specialized studies at the college level. And if a college does nothing at all to remedy their obvious deficiencies in the liberal arts, it makes a travesty out of the Bachelor of Arts degree which it will confer on some of them four years later.

On the other hand, we must also face the fact that the leading professional schools—in law, medicine, and engineering—have long complained that they must take the graduates of our colleges and teach them how to read and write before they can teach them law, medicine, or engineering. Some years ago when I was on the faculty of the Law School of the University of Chicago, a substantial portion of the law student's first year had to be devoted to tutoring in the basic skills of reading and writing. I suspect that the situation has not changed for the better. The Bachelor of Arts degree, which should certify that a

young man or woman has the liberal skills prerequisite to specialized study, no longer certifies anything of the sort; and the professional schools have come to realize with dismay that they cannot rely on it. If what should be done in high schools is not done there, and if what should be done in college is not done there, then finally it must be done where, certainly, it is most inappropriate—at the level of professional or graduate study. This means that it will be done only for a few.

If I had any hope that, in the foreseeable future, the educational system of this country could be so radically transformed that basic liberal training would be adequately accomplished in the secondary schools and that the Bachelor of Arts degree would then be awarded at the termination of such schooling, I would gladly recommend that the college be relieved of any further responsibility for training in the liberal arts. It could become, what it has of late been so desperately trying to be, the antechamber of the graduate schools—the beginning of specialized study.

I am at present without such hope. I also think that the graduate and professional schools should be relieved of a responsibility that is certainly not theirs, except by the default of all prior schooling. The colleges of the country must, therefore, provide the remedy for the deficiency of our high schools. If they are reluctant to devote all four years to training in the liberal arts, then at least the first two years of college should be given over to what Hutchins has recently called the six Rs—remedial reading, remedial writing, and remedial 'rithmetic.

This may appear to be a desperate measure, but that is what the present deplorable situation seems to require. The college represents the last chance to do what should be done for our future citizens and our future men of leisure, as well as for our future specialists, technicians, and scholars. The college is, in a sense, the point of no return. The deficiencies of schooling which are not remedied there may become, for many students, permanently irremediable. And that would be a disaster—a measureless personal as well as social disaster—which we should do everything in our power to avoid.