EDUCATION IN AMERICA TODAY

A Chapter in a Cooperative Book

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Chapter 1. EDUCATION IN AMERICA TODAY

1. The Contemporary Scene in Perspective

Any discussion of the liberal arts should lay its primary emphasis upon perspective; to fail to do so would betray them. Yet for many years perspective has been difficult to achieve. The present war makes it still more difficult in one sense but easier in another.

The war makes perspective more difficult because the day’s news is so tragically dramatic that it tends to swallow up one’s sense of proportion. The tragedy is grim enough in itself, but the drama is heightened artificially by the moment-to-moment insistence of the radio, the immediate telephoned pictures, and the proximately released newsreels.

From another point of view the war makes achievement of perspective much easier. The nation was born in a fight for freedom—and so this war is described. Dramatic coincidence also heightens the effect. Immediately after the declaration of war we celebrated the sesquicentennial of the Bill of Rights. All who asserted that it held the essence of the present struggle thus recognized the continuity of fundamental ideas and issues. This recognition signalized a sharp change from a mood which would tolerate nothing but a “new deal,” a “new order,” a revolution, either Marxist or Fascist. The discontinuity of history had furnished the theme for so long that the current realization of its unbroken thread comes with something of a shock.

When one considers education in America today, the first question to answer is: American education from what point of view? Its scale is so vast that no snapshot is possible. Currents of opinion and action are so varied, so intricate, in some places so complementary and elsewhere so contradictory, that they seem to defy accurate observation.

Attempts at generalization are bound to be controlled not
merely by the available objective data but by the values most prized by the individual observer. To one whose mind is analytical and whose predilections are for harmony of design, regularity of pattern, or uniformity of action, the American educational scene seems completely chaotic. He is eager for a “plan,” a “method,” a “system,” for “standardization,” for equalization of opportunities and facilities, for organization.

To one whose mind revels in variety, who likes contrast and the interplay of diverse forces, the current situation appears as a manifestation of enormous vitality, of great forces producing immense power and often brilliant light. Far from objecting to diversity, he is distressed at the degree to which education has borrowed the concept of standardized interchangeable parts from industry. To such a mind, “15 units” as a measure of “preparation” for college, or “120 hours” as a measure for attaining a degree are evidences of unwise regimentation, indeed of a misconception of the inner nature of the whole process. He takes comfort, however, in the realization that the standardized elements are not real; within those falsely labeled packages the contents vary so greatly that the labels are confusing only to the hopelessly naïve.

Such a mind interprets American education not as an organization which can be plotted upon a chart, but as something living and growing. It is not entirely, or even predominantly, logical, since growth is not governed by logic alone; all growth is unique, even within the classifications of genus and species. It is never in perfect balance, and could not be put, much less kept, in perfect balance. It represents the constant battle between growth and decay—life and death in perpetual struggle. Its dominant characteristic is vitality, which is the best evidence of growth.

In the United States, particularly, differences rather than uniformity will be regarded by such a mind as natural. Because its extent is so vast, the conditions of life arising from climate, soil, racial stocks, and many other factors are bound to produce enormous and healthy variations. These are revealed in the tone of voice, in the accent of speech, in the very rhythm of
life. They necessarily affect the educational process. Only a powerfully supported and ruthlessly executed “plan” could possibly overcome them.

Looking at this matter objectively, it is obvious that there is some validity in both points of view. Even growth is not wholly beyond control—the tree is pruned, fertilized, sprayed, and otherwise cared for, and may even be adapted by espalier methods to a form quite unlike its natural shape, and yet bear good fruit. Growth need not be without stimulation. Organization can leave room for vitality and freedom.

Historically, the variety of chaos (depending upon the observer’s point of view) has been stimulated by local control of education. Until recently the federal government has done almost nothing in the field of education. Modest subsidies of general and special programs, statistics, and information constitute its traditional contributions. Even state governments have done relatively little, either by money or by regulation; and what has been done has differed in each of the forty-eight states. The major initiative and the principal control have been local or “private.” When men fasten their eyes upon small nations, or upon nations with centralized governments or a different philosophy of political control, the inactivity of the federal government and the modest activity of the states appear as “neglect.” But by men devoted to the American tradition of individualism, the lack of centralized control is described as “wisdom.”

Nearly all observers would agree that American education for the last twenty-five years has been dominated by a critical spirit. The important word is “dominated,” for there has never been an age when there were not active and vocal discontents. The names of Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, Francis Wayland, and Charles William Eliot—to enumerate only a few—have been associated with demands for “reform.” Indeed, the urge to reform is a characteristic American trait. It was noted by every foreign commentator from de Tocqueville to Bryce. The notion that there was ever a period of calm and peace in the educational world is simply bad history.
LIBERAL EDUCATION RE-EXAMINED

Nonetheless, there have been surges of discontent, and in the last quarter century the demand for reform, or at least for change, has mounted to a tidal wave. That is not surprising. The industrial and the agricultural revolutions enormously increased the wealth of the world during the nineteenth century. The potentialities for the abolition of poverty seemed about to come to fruition in the twentieth. The peace movement, the quarantine of war, and international law had the active endorsement of statesmen; the two Hague Conferences dramatized the hope of "permanent" peace.

Then the cataclysm of the World War swallowed up both peace and prosperity. Men were butchered on a scale never before known; enough wealth was destroyed to have banished the specter of want from the world. While fighting continued, the collapse of men's hopes was postponed by the spiritual quality of their sacrifice; the world was buoyed up by the thought that it was a war to end war. Men believed it was the last great struggle on the pilgrimage toward peace. They trusted that when swords should again be beaten into plowshares, poverty could actually be conquered.

The war was won, but the peace was lost. That proved even more tragic than the war itself. With that failure man lost faith in his kinship to divinity and became obsessed with his own bestiality. Art and literature, education and religion, politics and business alike laid a heavy accent upon failure and frustration. Beauty in art was damned as pretty; stark "realism" turned to powerful ugliness, or went mad in surrealism, or precipitated escape into abstractionism. Serious music revealed in dissonance, popular music abandoned itself to jungle rhythms and the moaning frustrations of the "torch song." Babbitt, An American Tragedy, Desire Under the Elms, Journey's End, Tobacco Road set the dreary stage of realism in literature and the theater. The politicians smeared the businessman as a profiteer, and business blamed politics for its failures; both misapprehended spiritual weaknesses as mere economic or political dislocations. Deep underlying skepticism withered loyalties to all institutions alike—democratic, economic, and Christian. Anyone
who insisted upon regarding history as a record of human progress was considered a fool. Unless a man stood and proclaimed, "Behold, I make all things new," he was denied a hearing.

This setting was perfect for the revolutionary spirit, which is as ruthless in destroying discredited institutions as it is vigorous in building new ones. Fascism was distressingly liberal with castor oil, but it cleaned up Italy, made trains run on time (both reforms especially appealing to Americans), and awakened a new spirit of hope and confidence in a jaded nation. There was even some grudging admiration for Hitler's restoration of German discipline and morale. The Russian revolution lost, after a time, the terror which was an incident of its destructive phase and acquired the substitute terror of success. Discontented people were impressed by "plans" which were transforming the society of Russia and its economy, while disheartened democrats became afraid of its political expansion through the process of infiltration.

The revolutionary emphasis upon the discontinuity of history, and the promise of a better pattern of life written upon fresh paper, seemed to many more appealing than further scribblings upon the palimpsest of experience, already confused by much superimposed writing. The illusion of a "new" world appeared in many forms in America, as elsewhere. Here its political manifestations were relatively mild in substance, despite verbal insistence upon historical discontinuity. But perspective was impaired by the habit of fixing attention upon change rather than continuity. The distortions occasioned by the emphasis on change were aggravated by neglect of all that had remained the same. The pace of change was speeded up by the simple device of failing to take cognizance of intermediate stages. Seldom was any period mentioned between the "horse and buggy" days and those of the airplane.

This sense of living in a new age, broken from the past by a kind of fatal discontinuity, gave the impression that the troubles of this age were unique. Therefore reasons without a high degree of validity were assigned for these troubles. Proposals for treatment were offered on the basis of superficial symptoms, whereas the groundwork of any clinical diagnosis is a careful review of
the case history of the patient. The shallow assumption that all the problems of the age were new made men scorn the cumulative wisdom of human experience in solving current difficulties. They forgot that, beneath the veneer of present circumstances, most important problems are old, and that every vital issue has been wrestled with by previous generations. The Dust Bowl, for example, became the hysterical symbol of rich land destroyed by wrong treatment. The commonly accepted interpretation overlooked the available and revealing history of drought; when the rains came the diagnosis was washed out. The Joad family flashed across the social scene as utterly tragic but wholly typical. Dogmas of despair went unchallenged because of failure to examine the long, continuous record.

It was assumed that we live in a new world merely because of the miracles of speed in transportation and communication. They were held to have created a new world structure, a new interdependence. These assumptions neglected the simple fact that the colonial empires of Spain and Portugal were four hundred years old, and those of the Dutch and British over three hundred. The world colonial system existed long before the acceleration of speed of communication. It was forgotten that embattled farmers over a century and a half before had fired a “shot heard round the world”—not transmitted by the radio, it is true, but by waves just as sensitive. In short, the miracles of communication were not appraised accurately, and their effect was overestimated. They were important but not so decisive as was supposed.

Another factor held responsible for creating a “new” world was the machine. It was assumed that civilization had been wholly transformed by machines, and the inference was drawn that man himself had somehow been altered. Nothing is more amazing than the forms of idolatry which have shown themselves through the ages. It seems hardly credible that men would make a golden calf and then worship the product of their own workmanship; yet something of the same fear and awe appeared in the twentieth century attitude toward the machine. Those who created the machine felt that it in turn had created a new world.

The sense of discontinuity had also, quite irrationally, been
heightened by mistaken inferences and analogies from science. The analytical method—counting, measuring, gathering data by the processes of research—was overplayed at the expense of both the historical approach and the systematic method of philosophy. All too often it was forgotten that “the elementary data of the American record should be independent of the mood of the moment.”

2. American Education in Perspective

This tragic sense of discontinuity made its inevitable impact upon educational thought. Education had been a glowing faith throughout most American history. Suddenly, because it had not prevented war or depression or hardship, it was said to have “failed.” Criticism of its institutions followed the dominant pattern of negativism, and a “new” education was the inevitable demand.

The liberal arts were the traditional heart of the “old” education; therefore, they must be abandoned. It was claimed that the characteristic studies were no longer relevant; they did not contribute directly or materially to the new social order. It was essential to substitute something new, which was given the vague name of “general” education, a spiritually neutral word, devoid of any implications of insight, perception, values.

The critics argued that the classics were merely dead languages from a bygone era which had imposed themselves upon youth through the sheer weight of tradition. They had been retained by colleges too conservative to recognize the new day. This argument totally overlooked the fact that the classics had never been “relevant,” in any direct and immediate sense, to the ages in which they were studied. The world of the Renaissance was so different from the world of classical antiquity that, even then, not much of a case could be made for the “practical utility” of classical studies. These studies were real and vital during the Renaissance because classical literature was explored with tremendous energy, with freshness of vision, with enthusiasm, and with an earnest desire to cull from it beauty and wisdom. If the classics were studied today with like enthusiasm, with like energy, and with
like determination to find in them the secrets of the greatness of ancient culture, they would possess for us a comparable value.

The criticism of the classics and other liberal studies wholly overlooked the fact that the traditional curriculum, even in its purest form, never guaranteed a liberal education. For example, the British universities in the early nineteenth century were based upon the liberal arts. Despite the fact that they were devoted to those studies, they lacked vitality and the product of their instruction was unsatisfactory. "A corrupt sleep . . . hung heavy over the English and Scottish centers of learning," and contemporaries declared there was no chance of "reform from within." George Ticknor said at the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, "Who has been taught anything at our colleges with the thoroughness that will enable him to go safely and directly onward to distinction in the department he has . . . entered without returning to lay anew the foundations for his success?"

Any belief in the validity of experience would instantly warn us that no body of subject matter, by itself, is liberal. The genius of man cannot be wrapped up in a neat curricular package. Only liberally minded teachers and students can achieve a liberal education; for such education depends essentially upon contact of mind with mind in dealing with significant ideas. Some studies have served vastly better than others as a medium for significant intellectual exchange. But the best tool makes a botched job in the hands of a careless or incompetent workman. On the other hand, a skilled, resourceful, and industrious craftsman can do a reasonable job with imperfect tools. This constitutes no argument for poor tools, but it is conclusive demonstration of the essential need for competent workmen.

Historically some disciplines may be regarded as much more mature than others. They have been the subjects of instruction literally for centuries. In the course of grappling with those problems again and again, the methods of attack have been refined,

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1 James B. Conant, "Academical Patronage and Superintendence," Occasional Pamphlets of the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, No. 3 (June, 1938), pp. 1, 14.

2 Remarks on Changes Lately Proposed or Adopted in Harvard University (Boston, 1825), p. 45.
fallacious techniques have been identified, ideas and insights have been reviewed, criticized, sharpened, and made more appealing and effective. That gives to these studies, which are the substance of the liberal arts, a unique quality which other disciplines can acquire only after like periods of developing maturity.

The theory that all materials of study should be directly "relevant" to current problems was never philosophically defensible. Practically it has broken down completely. After a quarter of a century of railing at mathematics beyond arithmetic as useless in a day of adding and calculating machines, of interest and rate tables, of gasoline pumps that show the cost as well as the amount of the sale, war has come. Now there is an urgent demand for all sorts of persons of whom we were said to have a "surplus" only five years ago. Engineers, physicists, fliers, deck officers, artillerymen, and hundreds of others must have the mathematics which was "needless" but yesterday. Of course the exponents of liberal education never defended mathematics on such transitory grounds alone, but on its inherent qualities. Mathematics was no more "useful" to a medieval monk or to a Renaissance painter, certainly no more opposite or appropriate, than it is to one who lives in a modern industrial society. But there always has been, and always will be, need for rigorous thinking, for thinking detached from self-interest. That is why mathematics has remained one of the fundamental disciplines. As one of the most precise and beautiful mental constructs of man it has its own intrinsic value, a value quite independent of considerations of utility.

Similarly, foreign languages were believed irrelevant in an isolated America, and their traditional grip upon schooling had to be broken. This point of view still prevailed when world-wide broadcasting was making foreign languages a daily diet of more people than ever before in history, and on the eve of a polyglot war in which Americans are fighting on five continents!

From the standpoint of a liberal education, however, much more was involved in slighting the foreign languages than the direct consequences of shallow concentration upon transitory environmental circumstances. More significant was the fact that students were deprived of an essential linguistic discipline with-
out which their intellectual development was partial and lopsided. Moreover, they lost a precious opportunity, which no substitute discipline could supply, for participating directly and richly in the insights and expressions of some of the world's great minds. A needless barrier prevented them from acquiring a broad world view.

Many other illustrations could be cited to show that a short-run educational objective is self-defeating even from the "practical," but more essentially from the liberal, point of view, and that the whole doctrine of "relevance" is anti-educational in its effects. The belief that education should, above all else, make a direct impact upon contemporary problems leads to frequent reversals of position. Five or six years ago the group who insisted upon that point of view sought to use educational facilities as a kind of glorified youth hostel, a refuge from unemployment for millions of youth for whom industry would "never" find a need. The same group is now indignant that the schools and colleges hold youth too long into adult life and waste "precious" time needed for essential productive effort. After a frantic search for some years for teaching materials relevant to the dreaded "new leisure," educators are now making an equally frantic effort quickly to provide material relevant to the present crisis. The doctrine of relevance is valid only in a perfectly stable world where the future is easily predictable—obviously an impossible condition in a "new" world, or in an "old" one either.

Among the arguments for the so-called failure of liberal education was the assertion that it constituted an escapist retreat into an ivory tower. But the ivory tower argument will not stand analysis. It has a concealed major premise, hidden because it is absurd, that there are only two possible locations: either an ivory tower, remote from reality, or the market place, in the midst of the throng. It has a minor premise which is also concealed, namely, that man spends his entire life in the ivory tower and never in the market place or, per contra, always in the market place, never in the ivory tower. Both the major premise and the minor premise are incorrect.

One does not create an airplane solely in the factory amidst
the hum of machines and in a welter of materials. The distinctive idea for its design may have been a happy inspiration on a remote mountain peak. Long before it is translated into materials, there is an infinitude of calculation, some of it of the most abstruse kind; there are hundreds of blueprints, many of them extraordinarily detailed in character. Part of the operation takes place in the ivory tower, part in the market place.

If there were no ideas except those which men have on the production line, or if, on the contrary, the ideas men have on the mountaintop were never translated into actuality, this would be a different world. Not only are both sorts of experience valid, but so also are many experiences which are intermediary—which lie between the two extremes, and which neither figure of speech aptly characterizes. The home, for example, is neither an ivory tower nor a market place.

The application of this discussion to the problem of education is obvious. If the schools are concerned solely with the market place, they are the creatures of their environment; they are merely reflections of the bustling activity which there takes place; they are primarily concerned with the vocational aspects of life; they are kaleidoscopic mirrors of society and not instruments for its development or control; they may well be as confused as the traffic at the busy mart.

Men of action need occasionally to withdraw to some quiet place to reflect. Religion is remote from reality only when it is decadent; it is commercial only when it is corrupt. It has always been true in history that, though the church was near the center of activity, it did not perform its true functions when it was turned into a place of exchange and became itself the market. So it is with the school.

On the other hand, the high ideals, the noble thoughts, the righteous habits would be preserved only in a small group, and would not become a vital element in the general culture, if it were possible, as rarely in history it has been possible, to withdraw completely from the life of the world. Looking back over the history of American education, the imputation of withdrawal
to an ivory tower does not apply to the colleges of liberal arts. They have richly fertilized American life and thought.

The plain truth is that cultural value means much more than immediate contemporary relevance and that accent on practical relevance has too often masked a retreat from the ideal of genuine education. This emphasis represented one phase of an overdependence upon specific training. The essential difference between education and training is simple but basic. "Education" is designed to prepare men to do what they have never done before. Its emphasis is upon power to adapt oneself and go on alone. "Training" seeks to supply the skills and techniques to do again and again what has once been learned. Training is essentially a static concept, as education is dynamic. "Relevance" was the new "training" substitute for the old "educational" discipline. It is true that the formal discipline of the classical curriculum had, in course of time, become a mockery. But with its destruction, and the abuse of its cadaver long after its life was spent, all mental discipline became suspect. The discipline of conduct was interpreted as a form of the old tyranny which should have no place in the new freedom. The new ideal belittled the discipline of the home as well, and the discipline of tradition. All these had "failed." Thus allegiance to the notion of discontinuity precluded any profound appreciation of culture as a continuing phenomenon. It is not too much to say that culture always sells at a heavy discount in a "new" world, whether the frontier is physical or ideological.

The liberal quality of education was bound to suffer by having the darling of the new education dominate what was left of the old. Science was too triumphant to be denounced. It was assumed, therefore, that if the methods of science could be applied to older subjects, they might acquire its merits. Educational innovations furnish the perfect example. Measures, statistics, "research," "matched experiments," and a dozen other importations transformed pedagogy into pseudo-scientific education. Occasionally pedagogical contortions almost passed the boundaries of belief. In one specific instance, life activities were analyzed into ten categories—social intercommunication, physical power, practical
labor, vocation, citizenship, social relationships, leisure activities, mental efficiency, religious activity, and home duties. Further analysis revealed that there were eleven hundred and seventeen separate abilities necessary to perform those activities—not eleven hundred and sixteen or eleven hundred and eighteen. Scientific work is always precise!

Under the same "scientific" impulse, literature was dissected and picked to pieces like a beetle in a laboratory. The social sciences lost their humanity in a false scientism that tended to make them sterile. After years of substituting information for wisdom, the Regents Inquiry finally made the amazing but obvious discovery that possession of facts supplies neither the incentive nor the direction for their proper use. Facts and values belong in different realms. It would be amusing, if it were not tragic, to realize that a period which laid so much emphasis upon relevance of materials laid so little upon relevance of method in studying those materials. It has long been clear that science has a great part to play in liberal education. But it should be equally clear that it must play its role directly, not by imposing its characteristics upon other disciplines whose methods and results, equally valid, are simply different.

Obsession with a sense of failure had extraordinary consequences. A generation newly aware of psychology and psychiatry was almost morbid in its fear of the word "fear." Many school systems went so far as to abolish the grade of failure, as though refusal to recognize a common and inevitable experience would banish it from the realm of reality. Others sought to mitigate its devastating effect with the slogan: "the failure of the student is the failure of the teacher"; thus the psychological damage was transferred from resilient youth to the harried adult. Still others sought to explain this distressing and all too common human trait by insisting that it was not laziness or other personal qualities which produced failure, but "inappropriate" materials. It was broadly intimated that any normal mind would revolt from the traditional subjects and would therefore naturally "fail" when confronted with such a diet of dust and ashes. For example, a pamphlet on "What the High Schools Ought to Teach," pub-
lished by the American Council on Education, said: "Most secondary schools include in the ninth grade a course in algebra and in the tenth grade a course in demonstrative geometry, which, for want of alternatives, become required courses for most pupils. These two courses are recognized as stumbling blocks for many pupils. The failures in both of them are so high that they discourage no small number of young people from continuing in school."

Failure thus became in this new and topsy-turvy world an institutional, not a personal, matter. Any timidity in using the word to describe the shortcomings of individuals disappeared when an institution or when society at large was under discussion. The pamphlet just quoted had one section devoted to "Vicious aspects of the ninth grade." The very title is an assault upon the integrity or the intelligence of those regarded as responsible.

This accent on failure laid an extraordinary burden upon education, for it induced a common assumption that reform is impossible unless and until complete failure is admitted. Thus anyone who spoke of the great achievements of the past was instantly identified as one who sought to resist change. It was no accident that the period was marked by a "realistic" re-evaluation of American heroes. They belonged to a past which had failed. Their weaknesses and shortcomings were accented, and the debunking process was often carried to absurd extremes. Anyone who discussed the beneficial and successful aspects of education was damned as a conservative, the word acquiring the qualities of an epithet. He was considered a reactionary opponent of what was new and therefore better, for in a period which believed in discontinuity, any attempt to make the dead past live again was regarded as a hostile act. Often the situation approached the borderline of farce, so that only those who were ready to assert that all the toil and energy, all the sacrifice and skill, all the character and brains poured into the cultural and educational enterprise had resulted in failure were really progressive and ready for new developments.

Historically the precise reverse is true. Reform has proceeded best by capitalizing upon the momentum of success for further
progress. If monumental efforts have been nugatory, there is little heart or energy for new projects of reform. Of course, desperate situations arise, when revolution is the only hope, but if one looks back over the history of the world, he must admit that more progress has been made by evolution than by revolution. The triumphs of manufacture—as in the automobile—are based upon refining and improving earlier successes. The great achievements of science have been made by capitalizing success, building fresh achievements upon old conquests.

So also, if we study the matter calmly, we find that the greatest successes of education have consisted in advances from strong positions. Take one outstanding achievement, desperately discounted during the recent pessimism—higher education for women. It was founded upon the success of men's colleges. Starting slowly, then gathering momentum, it overcame opposition. The triumph has become so complete that we now tend to discount it and to forget how much boldness, how much imagination, how much wisdom were required to launch it and to surmount obstacles. In like manner, recent critics have underestimated the really great progress in the democratization of education. Carping utopians insisted that American education is a failure because it is not equally open to all classes of people. They quote the phrase from the Declaration of Independence about being born equal, as though it were already a completed achievement in 1776, rather than a bold prophecy. Our progress toward that goal of perfect equality is belittled by comparing our current status with a remote ideal—leaving out of account the realities of the world in which we live and the genuine progress which has been achieved.

America has certainly led in the democratization of education, in making it available to people of lesser means. It is well known that not only do large numbers, but a much larger percentage of our youth go on to institutions of higher education today than ever before. The plain fact, which should be admitted by the most critical commentator, is that education at all levels, from highest to lowest, instead of being limited as time passes to persons of larger and larger incomes, has progressively been made
available to students of relatively lower and lower economic status. The whole development of American higher education, the establishment of junior colleges, of state universities, of land-grant colleges, illustrates this trend. And anyone having the slightest familiarity with the capstone of American education—graduate study—recognizes that those who receive the longest and most costly training are not the wealthy or those most able to pay. Quite the reverse. The subsidy to graduate students is great. The field of graduate work is dominated by an aristocracy of interest and capacity, not by a group characterized by economic privilege.

Such a statement does not, of course, intimate that we have reached the desirable goal outlined by Jefferson well over a century ago of opening the path to learning to all men of capacity without any reference whatever to their economic status. That any competent man should be inhibited in his educational development by lack of financial resources constitutes not only a social but an intellectual tragedy. While, therefore, we can take comfort in the enormous progress already made, there is every reason to press forward toward the attainment of the ideal.

Within the limits of achievements in that direction, however, this much can be said. If one were to search for a modern illustration of the classless society, he would find it more nearly exemplified in the educational world than anywhere else. Teachers are drawn from every economic level, every social background. Students in like manner represent extraordinary differentiation in respect to ability and economic resources and cultural heritage. They are diverse in every way in which human beings can be diverse, for the democratic classless society is in no way hostile to the idea of individualism; indeed it is essentially dependent upon individualism.

American colleges thus constitute a society within which a person of vision and energy, industry and character, can go far toward making of himself what he wishes. They are places where one finds no educational privilege or right that is not bound up with an equivalent duty or responsibility. It is the essence of education that there is no special privilege which money can buy.
There is no educational distinction which birth can achieve. There is no attainment which a student can demand of his own right without having to win it. Participation in many extracurricular activities and in most honors awards, in Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi, all depend upon ability and hard work. Rewards are not conditioned by anything but achievement, save in the rare instances where abuses have prostituted the normal functioning of the educational process. Even then the student can have only the husk of the reward without its substance.

Another great triumph of education which has sold at an unwarranted discount during this negative period is the advance in the quality, as well as in the range and inclusiveness, of its work. Two opposing factions here meet on common ground. One group, which regards itself as the exponent of reform, insists that standards have been kept so high that they discourage students. These people have dogmatically asserted that education is undemocratic because it is not geared to the intelligence of every citizen and therefore excludes from its presumed benefits those who are not able or willing to undergo the somewhat esoteric disciplines which traditionalists have fastened upon the schools.

The terrifying thing in the publications of these advocates of reform, so-called, is not the indictment they make of the educational process; it is the revelation of their lack of faith in the dignity, industry, and capacity of young people. It is a tragedy when youth falls into the hands of leaders who pity them instead of respecting them. This is the group which has sought to make young people sorry for themselves. As one of its leaders has said: "Thousands of young men and women leaving our schools each year are destined never to become self-supporting and independent in the sense that your and my generation was led to believe was our due. The supply of workers exceeds the demand. Man power is a drug on the market. The productive forces of this country are glutted with brain and brawn which they cannot use. And what can't be utilized is simply laid aside to moulder and decay."3

Though they talk of the "community centered school," these educators also taught youth to think less of others and more of themselves. They have made young people believe that they are underprivileged if they have to work hard. In an effort to prevent the exploitation of child labor, laws were passed and administrative regulations adopted which sometimes overshot their marks and effectively barred the way to giving youth economic experience. Some youth are obviously underprotected, but any objective review of the situation will offer convincing evidence that others have been overprotected. The consequences of this overprotection now lead to the denunciation of the schools because they are devoted only to intellectual tasks, rather than "useful work."

On the other hand, the self-styled educational reformers are met on common ground by academic hardshells who cry that standards have been lowered. The use of the word "standards" itself is revealing. It is borrowed from industrial practice and intimates measures which are definite and rigid, though no such measures exist or can exist in an enterprise like education. It predicates something absolute which is correct; everything else falls short. In human achievement that is a false, and even pernicious, assumption. It totally overlooks the nature of man and the historical realities of his experience.

It is to be hoped that higher education will escape from measuring intellectual achievement by the number of times a class meets in the course of a week, or by the number of semester hours taken. Attention should be concentrated not upon these falsely objective standards, but upon those norms which, though not mechanical, are no less real, and grow out of a consensus of informed opinion.

Numerous colleges of one hundred years ago would not be considered equal to many modern high schools. In the preparation of teachers, both in knowledge of their fields of instruction and in pedagogical skill, there has been an enormous advance. There have been some losses occasioned by overdependence upon "education" courses, and by registrar's arithmetic. But, broadly speaking, the talk of lowered standards stems from a false and deceptive terminology, from lack of historical perspective, from
current pessimism about the present and alarm about the future, rather than from any just estimate of the actual situation.

Obviously, also, the quality of scholarship has improved in many respects in the last century. We have overcome many weaknesses. This is apparent when we remember the just criticisms of education one hundred years ago—of its overdependence on memory and its lack of emphasis on originality and creative work. Those were gross shortcomings. This is by no means to assert that present practice is beyond criticism or that it represents the ultimate in achievement. Admittedly there have been losses as well as gains; the “scientific” approach to liberal studies has sacrificed some of their humanistic qualities. The vital point to remember, however, is that emphasis on failure is not the best basis for reform. Further advance is best stimulated by realization of the successes already achieved. We can improve our work by setting our goals still further ahead, and by approaching them positively rather than by depreciating the substantial achievements of the recent past.

3. Liberal Education in Perspective

We have emerged from the period between two wars. Once again we are reminded that the great problems of mankind—peace, the pressure of population, health and prosperity, both physical and spiritual—are perpetual. They have a timeless quality. Very little written about “practical” matters even a few years ago is useful today; an account of a gas engine thirty years old would not serve our current needs. With ideas the picture is different. Plato and Aristotle are long dead, but they are still worth reading. The teachings of Jesus are very old, as we count time, yet in their essential qualities they are as fresh as yesterday. Changes in the economic structure, changes in the political order, changes in our environment—none of these impairs the wisdom which is the fruit of an intelligent mind activated by a warm heart. Liberal education seeks to bring into life greater refinement and greater intensity—to make it more sensitive, to make it more alive.

Viewed in this light, liberal education finds its full justification
in its promotion of an intrinsically valuable experience. It is “preparation” for life only in the sense that its vital influence is continuous and leads ever on from one experience to others which are even richer. It finds its complete validation in every instance of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual living upon an urbane and significant level. No boundaries of time inhibit it, and it is profoundly relevant to human life under all circumstances.

The war has precipitated a reassessment of values. The American people find themselves fighting to retain something precious. They recognize that things they took for granted, being now endangered, have greater values than those of which calloused familiarity had been aware. For years the accent has been on the failure of our institutions; now it is suddenly realized that with all their shortcomings, they are the most powerful and the most resilient in the world. Disastrous negative attitudes arose in a generation which had missed great prizes—peace and the conquest of poverty—by narrow margins, and having lost them, lost hope. Ortega y Gasset well described this epoch when he said that it was “superior to other times, [but] inferior to itself”; “strong, indeed, and at the same time uncertain of its destiny; proud of its strength and at the same time fearing it.”

From the doubts and fears of that period the war launches us upon a fresh adventure. As the reassessment of values has reversed our trend in foreign policy, so also it may reverse other trends which have heretofore seemed too powerful to stem. The accent has switched from comfort and convenience to sterner virtues and more enduring values. Historically it has been under those conditions that the liberal arts are appreciated.