THE LIBERAL ARTS AT MID-CENTURY

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The liberal arts have a long history. In modern times, they are taught in two quite different types of institutions—liberal arts colleges and universities. In his recent report to the alumni, President A. Whitney Griswold of Yale began by saying, "If we were looking for a title for the history of American institutions of higher education, an appropriate one would be 'How the Liberal Arts College Became a University.'" He then proceeded to point out that universities had become so engrossed in so many problems that there had been a strong tendency for the liberal arts to be swallowed up. He wondered also whether as appropriate a title for the next fifty years might not prove to be "How the University Strengthened Its Liberal Arts College," repaying, thus, an ancient debt.

Perhaps the situation has never been defined so explicitly in such brief terms. There can be no doubt whatever that the idea of the modern university, in the American sense, is not much over 75 years old; a century would cover it surely, though there had been earlier previsions of what might ultimately happen. Certainly, too, the college of arts, letters, and sciences in some of the great public institutions is often a kind of service agency for the rest of the university and is not in fact, as it is regarded in theory, the heart and center of its program.

If one were to set a date when this trend toward the engulfment of the arts was established, he might select the turn of the century. It was then that the elder Robert La Follette as governor of Wisconsin promoted the "Wisconsin idea," a phrase which became a kind of trade-mark. His central thought was that it was not task enough for the university to train youth; in addition, it had the obligation to perform direct services to the state which gave it support. The program of the university was to be developed in such a manner that no urgent demand of the state should go unanswered by the university.

The Wisconsin idea, although widely discussed at the time, did not pervade the university world until the First World War. Aside from the agricultural colleges, there was relatively little tendency for educational institutions to be utilized for purposes of commerce or government or national defense. Institutions of higher education pursued their own way of life; they were as
separate from government and business as were the churches. Indeed, the “life of the mind” was far closer to the “life of the spirit” than to “practical affairs.”

In my youth the adequacy of the liberal arts went unchallenged, even when universities took on other responsibilities (like “agriculture and the mechanic arts” as the Morrill Act so quaintly called them). Indeed the Morrill Act itself not only recognized, it explicitly protected the position of “scientific and classical studies.” In those days I never heard colleges criticized for their distinctive position in our society; no one expected them to perform otherwise than they did. The teacher, like the preacher, was judged by standards different from those applicable to the business man.

The First World War brought great changes. It led to emergency employment of previously unexploited utilitarian capacities. Professors were drawn into new governmental administrative agencies; research projects on poison gas, on other weapons, and a variety of such activities were launched; military training to supply officers in haste absorbed many institutions; business, cut off from German dyes and other essentials, set up research departments staffed in part by professors.

When one looks back upon those activities, there comes a keen remembrance of how temporary they were supposed to be. The thin edge of a new wedge had been inserted, however, and its ultimate effect proved to be profound indeed.

At the close of the war there ensued a rash of endowment campaigns; on leave from my teaching, I operated one, and was in touch with many others. The tone of these appeals marked a turning point in the history of American higher education. They were keyed to a more adequate salary scale for professors. The new argument was that these men were deserving not alone because of their traditional services in educating youth and in seeking truth; they deserved better salaries, also, because of their practical skills in morale building, in the economics of the war, and their useful research both for weapons and for industry. It was now implied for the first time that the colleges must compete with industry for men learned in science, economics, and other fields. The professor was suddenly valued on a new scale which had nothing to do with the liberal arts. The new estimate was superimposed upon the old
one and tended to obscure it. Money poured in during the 'twenties in unprecedented amounts.

What had been uniquely the Wisconsin idea now became generalized; it expanded far beyond any expectations of Governor La Follette. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the idea was carried so far after the war that some institutions came to be regarded as a kind of one-stop service station which would perform a myriad of tasks in the public interest. Those whose learned skills had an active market in industry, and those who could serve the state directly came to have higher salaries than those who taught the liberal studies whose basic aim was the preparation of youth to use, and enjoy—and protect—liberty.

Students who entered college after the First World War began to bring a new kind of motivation to college. I cannot remember a classmate of mine who came to college to gain a vocational advantage. After the war, however, many, if not most, had that idea uppermost in their minds. Indeed, many tended to be suspicious of the liberal arts; the ivory tower had come into disrepute. There was an insistent demand for practical skills; young people resisted the classical disciplines; they even preferred technology to science; they wanted business in place of economics. By and large the universities obliged, and curricula were not only enormously expanded, but the balance was tipped toward what were believed to be immediately marketable skills.

What one war began, the next accelerated and expanded beyond belief. Only in the universities were scientists available for atomic research; the first chain reaction was achieved in an unused university football stadium. That was symbolic. Institutions were drawn into the main stream of defense, of administration, of training. The whole rhythm of their lives was altered.

Though the war was over nearly a decade ago, universities have not yet recovered their own way of life. So vast, so diverse, so intimately tied with business and government are programs of both teaching and research that there is danger that the function of teaching the liberal arts will become an adjunct, while what should be the universities' incidental service becomes the principal occupation. Institutional costs have mounted so rapidly, new resources have accumulated so
relatively slowly, that dependence upon "earned income" from research and direct services has mounted to well over half the total institutional income in some conspicuous instances. Today no physics department in any great university could carry forward its current program without government money, and something like the same statement could be made about a number of other departments.

I was trained as a historian; therefore I know that the historical process is irreversible. In what I have been recounting there is no trace of nostalgia for "the good old days." I would not wish the colleges and universities to return to the status of 1914. If I am tempted, sometimes, to feel that today they are being carried along in swift currents away from the liberal arts, I am sure they were then in a backwater—and one that was always in danger of becoming stagnant. Better the dangers associated with vital relationships with public affairs than the decay inherent in worship of tradition.

Moreover, the introduction of many subjects quite irrelevant to the main task has helped break down barriers that had excluded things of infinite value. The ancient college considered itself the chief exponent of the liberal arts; yet it omitted one of the principal elements of the quadrivium—music. Not even its history was noted. Enjoyment of its great works had no part in the program of the college; participation in making music was confined largely to glee and mandolin clubs—extracurricular singing of second-rate songs and playing trivial music, at about the level of singing commercials.

There may still be places so obscurantist in spirit as to argue whether singing or playing an instrument is sufficiently "intellectual" to be properly part of a college curriculum, but none is so backward it would exclude the history of music, the principles of harmony, and appreciation. Students today hear more good music and make more good music than ever before. When given the choice of what to sing, they almost uniformly choose the best.

The curriculum of the pre-World War traditional college not only by-passed music; it knew nothing whatever of art. In this respect, also, reform has been swift and sweeping. Of course, one of the great universities is still inquiring whether drawing, painting, sculpture are sufficiently intellectual to justify "credit," but in most institutions the decision has long
been made. "Intellectual" can no longer be so narrowly defined as to exclude all creative effort except the verbal. The history of art, the analysis and appreciation of art (including architecture) are firmly embedded in the modern curriculum. Students see more pictures, see better pictures, and make better pictures than ever before.

Drama, like music and art, has come into its own. In many traditional colleges no one ever thought a student play important. The number of college theaters early in the century was insignificant. Today nearly every institution has a reasonably well-equipped theater, and college productions often have finish and style. A student who enlarges his understanding of a play by acting in it is no longer considered a mere mummer or mime, or puppet; to learn meaning by entering into the accompanying action is at last legitimate. Teachers no longer concentrate wholly on the origin of plot, the techniques, the linguistics, the influence of others upon the author—on everything, in short, save the writing itself.

Culture is less on the defensive in this generation than ever before. Listening rooms in libraries and dormitories are thronged with students who want to hear recordings made by poets, actors, musicians. They live among better pictures—they are more alert to quality—than ever before. The humanities are emerging into a better perspective and, without discounting scholarship, are once more stressing writing as a work of art.

Amidst current lamentations over the decline of the liberal arts we should take heart because the program has been greatly enriched. We have broken away from Puritan inhibitions; the aesthetic values of music and art and drama and poetry are recognized to a degree quite novel in American history.

Moreover, competition from newer subjects has been a boon to teaching in the older disciplines. Monopoly has the same debilitating effect upon instruction as upon enterprise. Competition is the life of teaching, as of trade. The monopoly long enjoyed by mathematics, the classics, and foreign language has been broken. Into some places that had become stodgy, have come again energy, originality, zest.

I do not mean to imply that everything is perfect "in this best of all possible worlds." There is need for much more than these changes in substance which have been so heartening. If the liberal arts are to exercise the vital influence which their
tradition and their values justify, there must also be changes in method and in curricular structure.

It may be argued that in disciplines as old as the liberal arts there is not much opportunity for new ideas which can be applied to teaching. Nonetheless, those who have responsibility for administration must stimulate a veritable fountain of ideas. Not all the ideas will be new, but the fountain should contain some new ones to take the place of those that evaporate in the air or spill over into the gutter. Educational progress is, of course, not wholly dependent upon new ideas. Such a situation would be hopeless.

The fountain, therefore, should be like some of the most beautiful I have ever seen, recirculating what has many times been cast up and fallen back. Thus, even if the ideas in the fountain are, for the most part, the same ideas, constant flowing will keep them aerated, so they do not become stagnant. Ideas can be fresh without being new; however, they can remain fresh only if kept in lively circulation. An old idea, so treated, will be continuously refreshed with oxygen so that even after rejection for many years, it may at last be accepted on its merits.

We should not mourn ideas lost through evaporation before acceptance. For the most part such thoughts had too low an order of stability. They are like some of those evanescent chemical elements, never found in a pure state, which, when produced artificially, disappear with startling rapidity. But when an idea proves stable in structure and has been accepted by the academic community, the administrative officers must see that it is not then destroyed by evaporation. This is an all too common occurrence.

I have known instances where a well-conceived graduation requirement was destroyed, not by action of the faculty nor by action of a governing board, but by a series of almost unnoticed “interpretations” by a registrar. The end product was a practice without logic or coherence. In short, the idea behind the original legislation had evaporated, leaving only a bureaucratic practice. I recall a piece of timber once taken from the Brown University library; its surface was intact, but termites had eaten the substance away until only a paper-thin shell was left. Such a situation is rare with termite-infested wood; it is common enough in academic administration.
Officers also have a profound responsibility to see that instruction is not eroded. This requires the most extraordinary perception and the employment of methods similar to those of an intelligence agency. I ought not to have to say that intelligence work does not consist in spying, though governments do employ spies. We all know that most intelligence work needs no such secret aid; it consists in the alert and perceptive observation of data which pass for the most part unnoticed but are available to anyone who takes the trouble to look.

Good intelligence work about teaching, for example, involves listening to the overtones and the undertones of what students say in the course of normal conferences about their instruction. What the student says in response to direct questioning must be heavily discounted; the number of distortions of all sorts, under such circumstances, is ordinarily so large as to vitiate the information. What he says when he does not know he is saying it—what flows from his stream of consciousness—is of greatest value. Of course, such data require interpretation in the light of what is known about the student. Of course, too, they must be compared and correlated with what other students have revealed. But by acuity of hearing, which takes account of frequency vibrations not usually noticed, the most valuable information about teaching is acquired.

A fair and useful evaluation of this information regarding the quality and standards of teaching is made by accretion, not by inspiration. A competent administrative officer can accumulate many scraps of information from many sources over a considerable period of time, and by correlating and synthesizing them skillfully he can form a responsible judgment.

The effective use of such information may easily be regarded as a threat to academic freedom. It is one of the tragedies of our situation that academic freedom seldom protects only the able, the conscientious, the inspired; too often it shields the incompetent and, far more often, the inept. To deal with a teacher who has a passion for lecturing but no skill at it, or one who thinks he can conduct a lively discussion, but talks all the time himself (he is a discussant and not a discussee), to meet these and many other situations requires a subtlety and a suppleness of approach which are difficult to achieve without falling into deviousness and cognate sins of which administrative officers are almost automatically adjudged guilty.
Nevertheless, the problem must be dealt with if the growth of the student is our objective, if he is the one whose interests we are obligated to serve. It must be faced by resolute and courageous, if tactful and courteous, means—and it may not safely be shirked. Colleges have been made intellectually bankrupt by tactical retreats, by timidity in personnel management, by using "public relations" as an alibi, by every sort of evasion to escape a plain duty because it is difficult.

Another arduous duty, from which there is no escape, lies within the province of liberal arts officers. They must fight, in season and out of season, and never yield though they die in the attempt, all endeavors to "save money" on instruction. I have seen it argued, indeed I have seen it "proved," that students can "learn" more science by demonstration lectures than by attendance upon laboratories. That particular "experiment" was a typical instance of economic determinism. The object of the "experiment" was to prove what the officers of the institution felt its finances required to be proved. There is no question that by shaping a certain kind of examination you can show that a student learns more by a given method than by some other. This is particularly true if the other instruction is in over-crowded laboratories, supervised by graduate students with no instructional interest, who go through the motions in order to get money for survival.

By adapting the examination you can prove that students "learn" more in a lecture than they do in a discussion. You can prove that students will "learn" more if a series of specialists deliver lectures that the students are expected to correlate by a process in which you do not trust the faculty member to succeed. When you begin with the premise that the students must learn what no faculty member is competent to teach, you start with an assumption which begs the question.

If colleges are not interested in stuffing the students in order to measure on an examination paper their retention of the stuffing, if they are trying to draw out the students and stimulate their growth, all "economy" devices are bound to be revealed for what they are—an effort to shortchange the students for economic, rather than educational, reasons.

In too many American colleges too many courses consist of a series of lectures, with readings in a textbook, and an occasional test. It is inherently absurd to suppose that a student
will learn best from a man he does not know and who does not know him, from a lecturer whose voice he hears, whose not too attractive facial characteristics are dimly familiar, and whose name he does not learn until the middle of the semester.

Common sense, backed by all experience, makes it evident that the student will develop more rapidly and more fully with someone he meets face to face, who tests his mind, and with whom he has some intelligent familiarity. Yet faculties have been known to condone measures which deprive the student of educational experience in order to give fiscal satisfaction to presidents, business officers, and governing boards.

Among my catalogue of obligations one of the principal ones is to stand at Armageddon and fight continuously, bitterly, and skillfully to keep the students in contact with books, and preferably with good books. An astonishing statistic in the average American college is the relatively small number of different books withdrawn from the library. An alarming percentage even of those are secondary or mere textbooks. Sometimes the library figures seem much larger than I have indicated. This is easily accomplished; circulation can appear heavy if, in a class of reasonable size, enough duplicates are acquired and pages are assigned once or twice a week. In this meretricious fashion a very small number of books attain a very large statistical circulation with an infinitesimal intellectual result.

By reason of certain historical episodes which have marked the last twenty years (to which I make only an oblique reference), one is almost afraid to speak of great books. In using such a phrase one may be thought either to be accepting as final the list revealed to a bright young man near the shores of Lake Michigan or, even worse, one may seem to be trespassing upon his copyright. Both risks I must run, for the fact remains that the better the book the better the teaching and the better the learning.

Faculty members who find ways to insinuate good books into the hands of good students have performed a service beyond price. Many an undergraduate reaches his junior year and several their senior year and a few graduate without having touched a single book of the first order of excellence or significance in the intellectual development of mankind. The International Business Machines Corporation has a sign on every desk and on nearly every wall, “Think.” It would be well if
every teacher has a sign on his desk, and perhaps tattooed on his brow, “Books, books, books.”

A correlative obligation is to harp insistently and persistently upon another string—that is, to have the students write and, even more difficult, to have what they write, read; and, bordering upon the impossible, have it read by people who assume responsibility for its grammar, unity, coherence, and substance.

I was once involved in an experiment which showed concretely that English was the function of a department, not the college. It was agreed that the chemistry department would turn its papers over to the English department. One collateral result was that the chemistry department thereby virtually confessed that it did not know how to judge the quality of the English in the papers. The experiment broke down almost immediately because one boy was given two grades upon his chemistry paper: an A by the chemistry professor and an F by the English professor. Inasmuch as the “credit” was for chemistry, the lad did not care what the English professor thought. Inasmuch as the English professor found his activities futile, he did not pursue them further.

There is overwhelming evidence that, unless all departments in an institution care about the quality of writing, the improvement essential to a real liberal education will never be made. Unless substantial essays are demanded in every course, unless they are read critically and returned with comment, we shall not make headway against the alarming “higher illiteracy” of our times. Every teacher must be the champion of writing. As he recites his litany about “books, books, books,” he can add another line, “Write, write, write.”

This discussion draws me reluctantly to the next function of a faculty member. He must avoid confusion between meeting the requirements for a degree and acquiring an education. The root meaning of curriculum is a race course; moreover, it is an “obstacle race.” Presumably the course is not designed merely as a series of obstacles to make it difficult to get a degree; it is designed to make it more likely that the student who completes the course will also get an education. It is calculated to make the student test his various powers; its purpose is to see that he does not make an easy way around the barriers, that he does not avoid the effort and the discipline a true education requires.
Nonetheless, we must face the fact that the obstacle race is not perfectly constructed. This is partly because we do not know enough about human individuals to be able to make one design which will force every student into the exercise of his powers. It is also deficient because the average curriculum is so full of compromises among departmental and other special interests within the faculty that it is not so good as it ought to be. Indeed, it is not nearly so good as we know how to make it if we would lay aside our jealousies, prejudices, special interests, and personal idiosyncrasies.

Of course, the key weakness of a curriculum is that it has to serve as a guide for too many people whose talents, interests, capabilities, and energies vary widely. The conclusion is inescapable that numerous students can meet every requirement for a degree and still avoid an education. They can do it easily by shrewd selection of courses. The intelligence services open to them to help perform that feat greatly exceed the informational services available to the faculty—far more, their abilities to alter this situation. The student can also get a degree by use of rote memory and avoidance of efforts at original thought. He can evade the courses that require essays and theses and find enough courses that give objective tests so he never has to learn how to write. He can weave his devious way around the hurdles, over the low ones, under the high ones, and meet all the statistical requirements without much intellectual gain.

This capacity to attain a degree while escaping an education accounts for the well-known fact that many alumni never pick up a book, naturally, for recreation. This explains why so many graduates display obscurantist views about economics, politics, security, international affairs, and many other topics that should challenge and engage their interests.

The faculty, therefore, must use all the resources at their command. Among these are reason, exposition, parental influence, fraternity and social pressure, competition, pride, whatever they can mobilize; a list of all the weapons in their armory would be formidable. With them the teacher can see that the student not only meets the requirements but also performs in such a way that he enjoys going over the obstacle course as an athlete over the hurdles, the high jump, the pole vaults, or as a good football player enjoys the block, the tackle,
and carrying the ball. In other words, the faculty will make sure that the student performs in so zestful a manner that he gains an education and is never afraid that he will do better than he needs to do or that he will learn something not strictly required.

An academic officer has a special and difficult responsibility to protect the integrity of the liberal arts. He must seek to make this concept really meaningful, first to the faculty, then to students. The plain fact is that liberal studies are subject to the operation of Gresham's law: bad coin tends constantly to drive out the good. I know a place where there is no department of economics in the college of liberal arts. All instruction in that field is borrowed from the school of business administration. It is hardly necessary to point out that economics, so taught, will not be a liberal discipline; it will partake of the professional emphasis of the school from which it is drawn.

Many institutions without schools of business have rationalized the introduction of business courses into their economics departments. Being so located they are labeled as courses in liberal culture, whereas their whole tone and temper are different. This is no slander upon business administration; it has its own value and virtue. But the subject is not one properly to be classified among the liberal arts.

English composition and English literature have too often been taught by what can only be called an anti-liberal method. Courses in journalism, courses in drama with a professional or semi-professional purpose often masquerade as liberal studies. And some courses in literature are so tainted with the dregs of German "wissenschaft" as to be utterly sterile in a liberal curriculum.

Many a beginning science course is taught, not with any concept of liberal learning, but as an introduction to professional training. Similarly many pre-medical courses, which deans of medical schools denounce in words but often favor in practice, are as illiberal as any study could be.

To some extent these deviations from the liberal concept arise from readiness to adopt as the college motto "the customer is always right." They arise from fear that enrollments will not grow, or a dread lest the maintenance of the integrity of the program will have an adverse effect upon the budget. They often reflect the unwillingness of the public relations
department to promote what ought to be on the shelves; instead it exerts pressure to stock "what the public wants," without helping to give the public any real understanding of the available choices.

We know there is one way to prevent Gresham's law from operating in the field of public finance; it is to cling firmly to a policy of sound money. Such a policy vigilantly pursued never gives the law an opportunity to function. Precisely the same cure is applicable to college policy. An undiluted, Simon-pure liberal arts curriculum will probably not bring many candidates for All-American nominations; assuredly the institution will never make a concealed profit (much less an open profit) from student fees; it may well be the college will not grow in size so fast as some of its neighbors. But it will be in a position to short-circuit completely the erosive effects of an academic Gresham's law.

One of the most important duties of the college is to develop, and to challenge, the student's self-confidence. The liberal arts have suffered from lack of faith in their validity for the modern world. After all, students determine the content of their own education; of two students of equal capacity in the same course, one may enter upon it with zest and develop a deep and abiding interest; the other may go through the appropriate motions and purge himself of all knowledge as soon as the examination is over.

That mythical man, "the average student," has been damaged, I believe, not so much by the economic collapse of the 'thirties as by the resultant impairment of faith in the American system—economic, social, political—which accompanied and has perpetuated that disaster. The mere monetary and production damages have long since been compensated. But the psychological effect has been a generation defensive in its mood about the economy in general and about its own vitality in particular.

One has only to listen to the politicians at election time or to labor and industrial leaders at any time to hear the strong overtones of doubt as to the vitality of our economy. The moment there is a hint of recession, there is instant demand for make-work projects. In the course of the early part of last year there was an almost hysterical outburst of doubt that our economy could be prosperous if war contracts were cut back.
We are dealing with a generation of students who were born in depression, grew up in wartime, and who only now find the world without a major military struggle.

Through all their lives students have heard one word more often than any other, more often than "peace," more often than "strength"; the key word of this generation has been "security." Nearly all the great foundations for medical research in special fields have devoted themselves to scaring people to death, even those who did not have their assorted diseases. The morning news comes with a catalogue of ills long enough to make a hypochondriac out of a robust Christian Scientist. No one has yet written a song on the theme, "Accentuate the negative," but the practice has been assiduously followed.

That is why many students come to college afraid of the word "culture," eager for skills, the more obviously marketable the better. That is why the liberal arts have staggered, why those who should have the profoundest faith in their validity nonetheless attach labels to them to make them seem "practical."

I hope this discussion has stressed the fact that there are many trends in the liberal arts at mid-century, some moving in favorable directions and others adverse to the studies appropriate to a free man. There are currents and eddies and, if one looks at the problem too narrowly, it may all seem confusion. Nonetheless, I believe there is reason for optimism. We have emerged from depression and from war. We have made an economic readjustment without catastrophic repercussions abroad which had been so freely predicted and without desperate measures at home. There are those who are terrified by Communism, but there are more who have faith that the democratic thesis is correct, that it will be vindicated. Industry is turning its resources, for the first time, to the support of the liberal arts and the concept itself has been enlarged and refreshed. In my judgment, therefore, the dominant omens are favorable for the future.