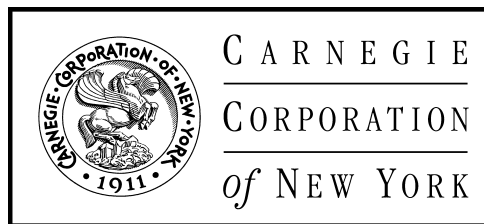


Liberal Arts Education for a Global Society

by Carol M. Barker



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In the last third of the twentieth century, the United States produced a new model of higher education, one that was more dynamic, inclusive and productive than ever before. Scholars have advanced specialized knowledge on all fronts while such innovations as community colleges, standardized testing, affirmative action, and financial aid have made higher education accessible to most who seek it.

These developments have taken place against a widely held expectation that the goal of an undergraduate liberal arts education is to provide students with knowledge, values and skills that will prepare them for active and effective participation in society. Drawing on this prototype, undergraduate colleges in the U.S. have sought, with varying degrees of commitment and success, to endow students with the capacity to learn, to reason, and to communicate with proficiency. This ideal of liberal arts education, tracing its history to ancient Greece, historically responded to the challenge of creating a self-governing nation from many peoples living on a vast continent that cradled a vital, multi-leveled and ever-changing civilization.

But is that challenge being met successfully today? At a November 10, 1999 meeting of educators convened by Carnegie Corporation of New York to consider the state of American liberal arts education the answer in most cases, was no. But meeting participants did identify a number of questions that can spark further national discussion of how

to strengthen the liberal arts to better serve students in the new century.

Participants at the Carnegie meeting were asked to consider a fundamental question: is it even possible to conceive a coherent framework for what educated people should know and be able to do in a world in which knowledge doubles every seven years? How do you create teaching methods and materials responsive enough to adapt to the information explosion of today and tomorrow and to meet the ever-increasing need to understand, even master, the new technologies that now affect almost every aspect of our lives?

Meeting participants wrestled with other key issues, including how to meet the needs and challenge the minds of today's undergraduate student body—diverse not only in age, national origin, socioeconomic status and cultural background, but also in their preparation for higher education and in their aims in seeking advanced study. Is the mission of advancing knowledge through research and scholarship compatible with the goal of actively engaging students in learning that prepares them for real life and real work?

Fortunately, the need to act and the opportunity to act creatively are converging today. Believing that the central teaching and learning mission of higher education must and can be strengthened, Carnegie Corporation is presenting its first “Challenge 2000” paper to launch a conversation on this sub-

ject. This essay shares the themes and directions proposed at the November 10 meeting in order to broaden that discussion.

The Context for Change¹. The first American colleges, before and after the revolution, drew on ancient and medieval sources and the tradition of Oxford and Cambridge to offer a substantially prescribed curriculum of ancient classics, rhetoric, mathematics, Christian ethics and philosophy to develop leaders for the church and the learned professions and citizens for the new nation. The preservation of learning and its transmission through teaching to the next generation were the main purposes of these small institutions.

By the last third of the nineteenth century, higher education in the United States was responding to the industrial revolution and the demands of a developing nation and economy by expanding its purposes and creating new structures. Two new structures emerged. The research university, based on a German model, had as its purpose the advancement of knowledge through graduate study and research. The land-grant university, a uniquely American institution, had as its purpose service to the developing nation through practical research and instruction in agriculture and engineering. Though undergraduate colleges survived, either independently or as part of universities, the traditional liberal arts curriculum was supplanted by the modern disciplines of the arts and sciences. In place of a largely required and common set of courses, students were now expected to progress

from introductory to more advanced study through electives and a major in the discipline of their choice.

Following World War I, as the nation withdrew from the world and sought to restore order at home, educators turned their attention again to the civic and social purposes of education. Some proposed implementing a curriculum based in the classic European tradition of the liberal arts, with emphasis on close and critical study of great texts. The opposing view was rooted in American pragmatism, and argued for an empirical and experimental approach to education, engaging students and teachers actively in the problems of a democratic society.

Interrupted by World War II, this debate was at least temporarily resolved in favor of a model of undergraduate education derived from *General Education in A Free Society²*, a report of a Harvard University faculty committee, published in 1945 and familiarly known as “The Redbook.” This report considered the problem of general education in both schools and colleges in a society in which *secondary* education had become nearly universal and needed to respond to a diverse student body. The aims of general education were to develop a capacity for critical inquiry and reflection through engagement with a shared culture based in the great ideas of Western civilization, now including science.

The authors of the Redbook assumed that, as in the past, higher education would continue to serve

perhaps no more than 20 percent of high school graduates, which narrowed their focus to the development of an undergraduate education designed to meet the needs of this leadership group. But by the fall of 1946, enrollment in higher education had nearly doubled with the influx of veterans taking advantage of the G.I. Bill. In 1947-48, the President's Commission on Higher Education issued a series of reports calling for a dramatic expansion and democratization of higher education. At the same time, the wartime investment in scientific research became a long-term postwar investment in the research capacity of higher education, emphasizing work that was defense-related and biomedical in nature.

In 1963, Clark Kerr, then president of the University of California, delivered a series of lectures later published as *The Uses of the University*³ which captured the dynamism of postwar higher education. Kerr foresaw that while the undergraduate college could co-exist with a dynamic, federally supported research enterprise and service to state and local communities, this equilibrium was a shaky one. He correctly predicted that the research enterprise would take priority over undergraduate education and that the humanities would lose out to science in the competition for resources. He also identified challenges that remain to be addressed today, including the improvement of undergraduate education, the creation of a more unified intellectual world, the reestablishment of institutional integrity, and the preservation of a margin of excellence in a populist society.

U.S. higher education today is an even larger and more diverse enterprise — diverse in terms of the student body and institutional type and purpose — than it was in 1963. Some changes need to be highlighted:

- Enrollment in all of higher education expanded by 40 percent from 1970 to 1994 with two-thirds of the enrollment growth in two-year institutions granting associate of arts degrees, primarily community colleges. In 1994, nearly 43 percent of total enrollment was in the latter category.⁴
- Education beyond high school has become the norm, with 65 percent of high school graduates aged 16-24 enrolled in college, compared to 47 percent in 1973.⁵
- As access to higher education expanded, the average level of academic preparation, as reflected in SAT and ACT scores and other measures, declined.⁶
- The percentage of students attending part time, working while attending full time, and working more than 20 hours a week all increased substantially, as did the proportion of students 25 years of age and older.⁷ Note, however, that enrollment of students under 22 has been increasing since the mid-1990s and is projected to increase significantly for the next several years.⁸
- Nearly three-quarters of freshman surveyed in 1999 reported that the ability to get a good job and to be able to make more money were very important reasons for deciding to go to college. Note also that 59 percent reported that

gaining a general education and appreciation of ideas was a very important reason. Sixty-four percent of the students surveyed expected to major in a pre-professional or technical field while 28 percent expected to major in a liberal arts field.⁹

- Pre-professional and technical education has expanded far faster than the liberal arts. In 1970, 50 percent of the baccalaureate degrees granted in the United States – 396,000 – were in a liberal arts discipline, including the sciences. By 1980, the percentage had dropped to 35 percent, and the number of degrees granted had declined to 325,000. Since 1985, this trend has reversed somewhat. In 1995, 40 percent of the degrees granted were in the liberal arts, and the number of liberal arts undergraduate degrees reached an all-time high of 466,000. Still, nearly 60 percent of the degrees granted were in a pre-professional or technical field, and the largest number of baccalaureate degrees granted in the 1990s were in business, with business majors alone representing 15 percent of the total.¹⁰
- Faculty training and rewards were based on the research model of advancing knowledge. Systemic efforts to give greater weight to excellence in teaching – such as the doctorate of arts proposed by Carnegie Corporation in the 1970s – largely failed.
- Advancement of knowledge led to evermore specialization and the creation of new fields of inquiry. The adoption of new theoretical models and the incorporation of new cultural

perspectives into the humanities, while invigorating, were also highly controversial and divisive, leading to even more fragmentation on campus. The natural and physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities inhabited separate intellectual worlds.

- Approaches to general and liberal education varied. Some institutions used required courses and content to engage students in critical thinking. Other institutions focused on the major modes of inquiry, encouraging or requiring students to construct their own core curriculum from a wide array of courses. Too often, distribution and course requirements were seen as onerous by both students and faculty.

The cumulative effect of these trends is a widening chasm between what institutions offer and what students and the public expect from higher education. In the 1990s, consumers, legislators, and reformers converged in demanding more attention to undergraduate education, greater accountability, and cost control. Competition from a growing for-profit educational sector provides yet another reason for colleges and universities to refocus on undergraduate teaching and learning.

Conversation Amid Concerns. It was against this background of change and challenge that Carnegie Corporation convened educators with different perspectives but a shared commitment to liberal education to consider how the undergraduate experience should be redefined in the context of contemporary economic and social

conditions. (A list of meeting participants is attached as an Appendix.) Despite the modest revival in the number of students pursuing degrees in liberal arts fields and the vast array of course offerings, meeting participants raised a number of concerns about the purpose and direction of undergraduate education today. Some of the issues identified included the following:

- Pre-professional education, driven by student interest in acquiring credentials that lead directly to a good job, and narrowly-defined majors, driven by faculty research interests and affiliation with their disciplines rather than the educational missions of their institutions, dominate undergraduate education.
- Professional and liberal arts education exist in worlds apart, rather than as complementary parts of an integrated curriculum.
- The humanities no longer play the central, cohesive role in the curriculum that they once did.
- Efforts to build bridges between science and the humanities have largely failed.
- With the first two years of undergraduate study most often in disarray, higher education does not provide leadership for the secondary school curriculum.
- Institutional leaders are preoccupied by fundraising and responding to consumer demand.
- The kind of searching self-assessment necessary to renewed mission is a rarity in higher education.

A Case in Point. The crisis in teacher education – the urgent need to attract and retain elementary and secondary school teachers well prepared in their subjects and able to teach to new, higher standards – highlights the challenges confronting undergraduate education. Schools of education are isolated from other faculties in the university. Many education majors, especially those preparing for elementary school teaching, are trained only in pedagogy. College professors trained only in subject matter do not provide appropriate models for future teachers. The professional and intellectual isolation of teachers begins with their undergraduate education and continues into their professional lives.

The inadequacies of teacher education can be generalized, as suggested by one meeting participant in a follow-up letter. He posed the following question: Does a graduate from any good liberal arts college or university with an academic major in any common field such as history, biology, physics, literature, or government know that subject matter sufficiently well to teach at the secondary school level? “A college graduate with a history major, for example, may possess extraordinary information about particular events To be able, however, to address the plain naïve questions high school pupils often raise in a classroom about the meaning or value of historical knowledge for effective participation in contemporary society requires a comprehension of history as a discipline that few history majors acquire.”¹¹

How many college graduates today have an understanding of the meaning and value of history or science or the humanities sufficient to make sense of the forces unleashed by the combination of technological innovation, the free market, and globalization? To prepare all students for effective participation in today's society, we need a contemporary curriculum bridging the arts and sciences and the professional disciplines, connecting past to future and theory to experience, providing the basis for conversation across cultural differences and professional specialization, and developing the capacity for critical inquiry and understanding.

Nowhere is a revitalized contemporary form of liberal education needed more than in the education of teachers. The quality and content of teacher education are inexorably linked in a deep and substantive way to the learning experience that teachers provide for their students. Integrating the liberal arts and professional study for future teachers can provide a model for the rest of higher education while also bridging the gap that currently exists between the goals and methods of schools and colleges.

Do We Really Need the Liberal Arts

Today? Why, one participant at the meeting asked, should we be grounding a curriculum in enduring ideas and values when the corporate ethos, as described by author Peter Drucker, is "abandon yesterday!?" The simplest answer may be the human need for connections. In a world of constant change, humans need to make connec-

tions between past and future, between their own experiences and the world they live in; they need a frame of reference. One participant cited Eastern Europe today as an example of spiritual disorientation, societies adrift between abandoned yesterdays and unknown tomorrows, lacking any shared system of values to provide direction. In the view of meeting participants, higher education has a responsibility to prevent such disorientation by providing graduates with the capacity to manage change and shape their own futures and that of human society consistent with enduring and shared values.

Today's graduates, over their lifetimes, will experience change at an unprecedented pace. They will have not one career but perhaps many. To cope with this kind of change, they will need self-confidence and a sense of purpose coupled with adaptability and a capacity for continuous learning. A familiarity with the body of knowledge and methods of inquiry and discovery of the arts and sciences and a capacity to integrate knowledge across experience and discipline may have far more lasting value in such a changing world than specialized techniques and training, which can quickly become outmoded.

The information revolution and economic liberalization together have unleashed productivity and spurred innovation, great benefits that create new challenges for individuals. In an information-based, technology-driven economy, all workers are expected to be problem-solvers and communica-

tors; they must be able to assess situations and make judgments on the spot. In the world of the Internet, anyone can be a publisher, and anything can be published. Users, therefore, need to learn to assess information critically; they must be able to select, and to evaluate, skills a liberal education is designed to develop.

A free market economy not only expands opportunity, it also demands individual responsibility. Individuals in the United States today are expected to manage their own careers, their health care, their retirement; they can no longer rely on lifetime employment, social safety nets, and authoritative expertise. They need to be able to acquire, assess and make judgments based on complex information, all competencies developed through liberal education.

U.S. campuses have been trying to create learning and living environments for culturally and racially diverse student populations for a generation. Today, a global economy and information technology are combining to create a world without borders. In such a world, multicultural skills — understanding one's own culture and other cultures and being able to communicate across differences of language, culture, race, and religion — will be critically important. Understood in this context, liberal arts has become the essential education for all people living in a global, technology-driven society.

Sources of Renewal and Transformation.

Given the critique developed earlier in the meet-

ing, participants identified a surprising number and range of resources for the renewal and transformation of liberal education and teaching. One participant proclaimed liberal education alive, well, vital, and generating not one transforming idea but many practical and transferable innovations.

Promising approaches included:

- **Learning by Doing**, including the use of community service, field study, internships, and research projects to integrate experience and application with academic work.
- **Learning Communities**, which bring groups of students and faculty to work together over a sustained period of time, using multiple approaches to explore and develop responses to a major topic or problem.
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches**, providing undergraduates an opportunity to engage with scholars pursuing the many new, interdisciplinary fields of inquiry.
- **Integration of the Liberal Arts and Professional Study**, for example, engaging both liberal arts and school of education faculty in providing prospective teachers with deep understanding of both subject matter and teaching methods.
- **Strengthening Academic Preparation in High Schools**, for example, the College Board's Advanced Placement Program, which offers rigorous, discipline-based (a characteristic that is of concern to those seeking more integrated approaches) introductory college-level courses to over one million students and

provides professional development in the liberal arts for 100,000 teachers.

Reasons for optimism exist. These include the increased attention being paid to the quality of undergraduate education by presidents of major research universities, faculty collaborations across professions and disciplines around major questions at the frontiers of knowledge, increasing interest among faculty at public universities in undergraduate teaching and working with public schools, community college initiatives to restructure their work to optimize student learning¹² and the potential to use technology creatively to increase learning resources and support learning communities.

Still, colleges and universities are conservative institutions. Enduring practices, even if problematical, reflect longstanding interests. Real change requires changing structures and budgets. It requires understanding and accepting that we have reached a new age with new needs, new directions and new demands. It insists that we acknowledge the revolution in technology that, if it hasn't already changed everything, soon probably will.

Revitalizing the Liberal Arts: Where Do We Go From Here? To revitalize the liberal arts, large-scale innovations are needed in education and the teaching profession from pre-kindergarten to graduate school and beyond. A fresh and compelling vision is needed to energize new reforms inside the academy and among the general public it serves. The educators who participated in

the Carnegie forum offered useful building blocks for a new vision for liberal arts education, which must address both content and delivery. These were some of the ideas that emerged:

- **Intellectual Vitality.** The search for coherence and meaning should not be purchased at the price of continuing inquiry. New knowledge and understanding starts with the questioning of old truths and assumptions, not only in science but in all fields. A new vision must include new perspectives and voices, even if they are disturbing ones.
- **Integration of Learning.** Scientific thinking and the products of science pervade our culture and are reshaping the world. Scientists are exploring the fundamental questions — the origins of the universe and our place in it, the nature and creation of life, the nature of consciousness and the relationship of mind and body — that have been central to humanistic learning, and the results they produce will demand our best ethical and political responses. Science must be an integral part of any future conception of the liberal arts and liberal learning. Ways must be found to engage a continuing conversation across the major domains of learning and knowledge and to prepare students to be informed participants in it.
- **Multicultural and Global Perspectives.** Future-oriented liberal education must prepare students to function effectively in a multicultural society and in a world where national borders may sometimes blur. The capacity to understand and communicate with people of

other cultures begins with an understanding of one's own culture and its relationship to others.

- **Accessibility.** Liberal learning must meet the needs of students who learn best through engagement with ideas in application and practice as well as those who are able to engage ideas abstractly and conceptually. Liberal learning must be integral to the curriculum of professional and technical schools as well as liberal arts colleges.
- **Affordability.** Our best models of liberal education — four-year colleges that include a residential experience — aim to create communities of learning. They are also very expensive and may send students from the world of education to the world of work significantly burdened by debt. One of the great challenges facing higher education is to explore ways of reducing these financial pressures, perhaps by delivering the essential qualities of liberal arts education through other, less expensive models.
- **A Vision That Can Be Shared.** The new vision must be presented in terms that are compelling to the beneficiaries of education — students, their families, the world of business, legislators — as well as to educators. Educators must recognize that the benefits of the liberal arts are not self-evident and that “learning for the sake of learning” may not be compelling when students and families face large commitments of time and money. Students and families need help in understanding how the liberal arts contribute to personal development and career opportunity.

Summing Up. The challenge of creating and implementing a new vision should not be underestimated, but the moment has come to try. For three decades, colleges and universities in the United States have struggled to accommodate open access with standards of excellence, new knowledge within old curricular structures, and new cultural perspectives with traditional ones. Lessons learned from these struggles can and should inform a new vision of the liberal arts that, along with American enterprise and technology, will shape a global free society.

As Vartan Gregorian, the Corporation's president, has written, Carnegie Corporation is dedicated to the idea that a solid, balanced education in the humanities, arts and sciences, aimed at developing competent, inquisitive, productive adults, should be a requirement for all students, regardless of their career objectives. The Corporation, with its history of concern for the liberal arts in America, continues to explore the most effective ways to address the questions raised in this “challenge” paper. But the foundation also calls upon others who have studied, thought about, battled for, explored and wrestled with these issues to join in a new national discussion about the future of liberal arts education.

The floor is open for debate.

Notes

1. See Diane Ravitch. *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980*. New York: Basic Books, 1983; W.B. Carnochan. *The Battleground of the Curriculum*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
2. *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945.
3. Clark Kerr. *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963
4. *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1994.
5. Edmund J. Hansen. "Essential Demographics of Today's College Students." *AAHE Bulletin*, November 1998, pages 3-5.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Digest of Education Statistics 1997*. Chapter 3, page 1 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/digest97/>.
9. "The American Freshmen: National Norms for Fall 1999." American Council on Education and University of California at Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute.
10. *Digest of Education Statistics*. 1998, pages 285-292.
11. Daniel Fallon, Letter to Donald M. Stewart, November 14, 1999
12. Terry O'Banion. *A Learning College for the 21st Century*. Phoenix: The Oryx Press, 1997.

APPENDIX—November 10, 1999 Meeting Participants

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