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# THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION & THE HEGEMONY OF MARKET VALUES

GLOBALIZATION, rapidly growing information and communications technologies, and the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology introduce new dimensions to the perennial challenge of having to justify liberal education as a rational, responsible undertaking in a democratic society. Private institutions are forced to market their wares to an increasingly consumerist public unwilling to pay a very high price for something whose "value" is not tightly linked to a high-paying job upon graduation, while public institutions are increasingly controlled by legislatures primarily concerned with tax cuts and demonstrable efficiency in public spending.

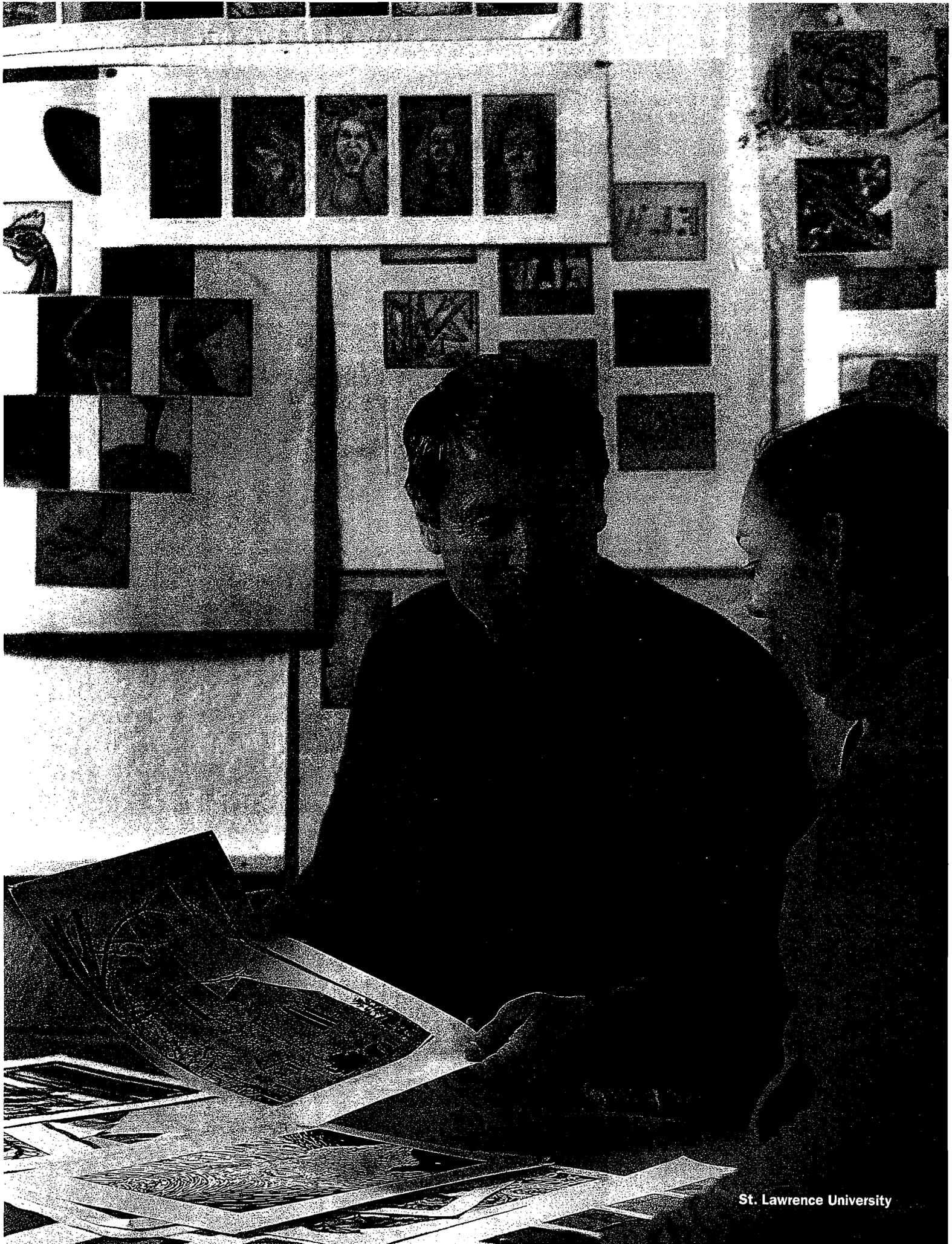
## **Liberal Education: New Formulations of Traditional Conflicts**

While we ourselves attended and teach at private liberal arts colleges and strongly support a reconfigured version of their traditional mission, we recognize and value the proliferation of multiple types of institutions that serve the needs of different kinds of students and of life-long learning. There is a continuum of insti-

## PRIVILEGE, PRACTICALITY, AND CITIZENSHIP

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tutions in America, with undergraduate liberal arts colleges at one extreme and technological institutes at the other. Between them is a great diversity of undergraduate emphases on the liberal arts. Liberal arts colleges themselves serve only 2 percent of the nation's undergraduates, but they play a key role in articulating and preserving and inventing new pedagogies and curricular innovations precisely because that is their central mission. They can be seen as a laboratory for liberal arts methods that can influence what's being done at the other types of universities whose missions may be more strongly tied to professional education or research. Hence our concern in this essay is with the "liberal" element of *any* U.S. bachelor's degree program, that part of the degree that aims to expose students to broader forms of knowledge, reasoning, and critical inquiry, and ideally to developing the skills needed for civic participation.

While the space-time compression symptomatic of globalization in an information age means that fluctuations in the economy are marked by daily changes in global financial averages, liberal education has always been about long term benefits, about learning to learn in ways that may not become clear for years or decades after a student graduates. Universities are asked to show learning outcomes for courses and degree programs that are incompatible with educating students for a

lifetime of personal and professional development. Liberal education is precisely the part of an education that is less tangible, less utilitarian in any narrow sense, the part that feeds the soul and nurtures interconnectedness among disciplines, across cultures, across time. Ironically, the same legislatures that worry about guns in schools and crime and corruption seem indifferent, if not hostile, to supporting a form of education that promotes critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and civic responsibility rather than clear professional certifications.

#### Market Values

Although the public shift toward apparently practical education may just be another historical swing in the pendulum, it appears to be part of a remarkable global triumph of market values, the same movement that helped topple the Soviet Union, that has driven increasing privatization of the social welfare states of Europe, created the World Trade Organization, and mandated restructuring of the economies of the developing world. For example, Arthur E. Levine, president of Teachers College of Columbia University, wrote an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 27, 2000: B10) called "The Future of Colleges: 9 Inevitable Changes." Most of these predicted changes are premised on the complete commodification and consumerization of educa-

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tion, so that "Dollars will follow the students more than the educators," and "Degrees will wither in importance." Students will take courses from "a plethora of different educational providers," but the leading pattern will be a mix of "brick and click." Faculty members will become more independent of institutions: "It is only a matter of time before we see the equivalent of an academic William Morris Agency." As in the economy at large we are already seeing the emergence of a faculty class division with a few world class, highly paid stars, a significant middle-class of tenured or tenure-track professors, and masses of minimally paid adjuncts who cannot make a respectable living though they are teaching more courses in many cases than a full load for tenure track faculty.

Our argument in this essay is that the rhetorical opposition between "practical" and "liberal" educations is a false one based on exaggerated images of liberal arts as detached from the real world and on practical education as strictly technical. U.S. higher education has always been distinguished from its European and global counterparts by its liberal component, meant to ensure that all students are prepared to communicate well, to understand something about history and cultures, to think critically, and to take their places as participants in a democratic society. Today, even the purest liberal arts education is grounded in experiential learning, in technological literacy, and skills needed for living and working in a globalized social context. One promising new vision on the horizon today is that of the Associated New American Colleges, hybrid institutions which emphasize liberal education at the same time that they have strong professional programs. This organization has adopted a both-and ethos in the oppositional discourse of liberal versus vocational education.

**Freedom, Authority, and Liberal Education:  
The Difference Technology Makes**

There is some comfort, but also some shock value, in realizing that many of the debates about higher education that we are poised to engage, just over the threshold of the twenty-first century, were rehearsed in very similar terms 150 years ago by the likes of Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas Huxley in

England. Arnold (1882) invokes Plato in his defense of a literary education against a purely technical one, and he knew himself to be making what seemed like antiquated and elitist arguments to his

American audiences for a well-rounded humanistic education. He said:

I cannot really think that humane letters are in much actual danger of being thrust out from their leading place in education, in spite of the array of authorities against them at this moment. So long as human nature is what it is, their attractions will remain irresistible ... there will be crowded into education other matters besides, far too many; there will be, perhaps, a period of unsettlement and confusion and false tendency; but letters will not in the end lose their leading place.

Thomas Huxley (1880), in contrast, notes the opposition surrounding the place of physical science in "ordinary education," on the one hand from "men of business who pride themselves on being the representatives of practicality; while, on the other hand, they have been excommunicated by the classical scholars, in their capacity of Levites in charge of the ark of culture and monopolists of liberal education." So far the arguments are familiar ones, even today. Yet while Arnold the humanist grounds his faith in humane letters in a grand narrative of Western culture as the hybrid product of Athens and Jerusalem, reason and faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Huxley the scientist finds salvation from European isolationism and the authority of the Church in contact with Moorish civilization in Spain and the Crusades. Huxley locates in scientific education a liberation from the authority of the classics. While he acknowledges the charm of a literary education and the value of some cultural instruction for everyone, he marks out what is still the perspective of many technically or professionally oriented institutions:

But for those who mean to make science their serious occupation; or who intend to follow the profession of medicine; or who have to enter early upon the business of life; for all these, in my opinion, classical education is a mistake; and it is for this reason that I am glad to see 'mere literary education and instruction' shut out from Sir Josiah Mason's College.

Huxley raises some of the important questions facing us today, questions about privilege and practicality, implying that the liberal arts are for the elite who do not need to earn a living quickly or to take up professions in the sciences.

### Challenges

One of the goals of this essay is to challenge the straw person of liberal education as an elite and elitist endeavor, a temporal sanctuary where a privileged minority can enjoy a hiatus from practical concerns. In the American context, liberal education is a democratic and democratizing endeavor, a period of intensive training in the knowledge and skills needed by all citizens in a democratic society. Chief among these skills is the ability to question authority, whether that is the medieval Church Galileo faced, the House Committee on Un-American Activities of the 1950s, the received views of gender roles, or the neo-liberal consensus of our own day. But the ability to recognize and question authority is made all the more difficult by the sheer mass, rapid movement, and unrootedness of information in this era of cyber-technologies.

Information technologies pose a central challenge to the future of liberal education. On the one hand, they extend and transform the competencies expected of liberal arts graduates. The proliferation of technologies for accessing, manipulating, communicating, and representing data is driving new pedagogies that are very exciting. Smart boards in classrooms, multimedia presentations, GIS, and other technologies allow students and faculty to collaborate in the creation and analysis of new kinds of knowledge, new cross-disciplinary forms of inquiry. Students are empowered to do primary research in ways that were heretofore out of their reach. They can read out-of-print books, delve into census data from countries around the world, establish e-mail or discussion forum dialogues with peers in Asia or Europe, read newspapers from the Caribbean or Africa on a daily basis. Yet all this is very expensive and actually very labor intensive for institutions to provide. In addition to the hardware and software, support personnel are needed to ensure that all the equipment works and that faculty development is available. This is one of the factors driving up the cost of higher education. As faculty, we have obligations to our students

and to society to offer sophisticated preparation in retrieving and analyzing information from the Internet, in using computer applications from spreadsheets to multimedia presentations, in employing current information technologies as elements of complex rhetorical strategies that used to be solely a matter of well-chosen words and careful calculations.

At the same time, the speed and profusion of information threatens to undermine essential dimensions of good critical thinking. Even with print media, it has been challenging to teach students to evaluate sources, not to receive them as authoritative and objective. Now, with so much coming on-line so fast, many students are adept at quick and superficial apprehension of a huge and random variety of information. They will use as sources for papers opinions from personal websites, student papers, and refereed journal articles with no discrimination among them. While close reading, reflection as an element of deliberation, careful attention to the logic of arguments and the quality of data are cardinal virtues of liberal inquiry, they are being overwhelmed in the scramble to cope with new technologies of knowledge. If liberal education is to fulfill its mission in the future, it will have to conserve the centrality of depth of inquiry. Again, liberal education will need to be a space to analyze and criticize the acceleration of cyber-knowledge, to keep pace while calling that pace into question.

### The Liberal Arts in a Market Economy: What is Liberal Education Worth?

Historically, technical or professional training, research, and the liberal arts have been three distinct missions in American higher education (Lisa Lattuca and Joan Stark 2001). Land Grant institutions emphasized "practical education and social improvement through economic growth and upward mobility" (4), while liberal arts colleges stressed the appreciation of knowledge, "critical thinking and the improvement of self and society" (5). Nonetheless, as we said above, it has been a distinctively U.S. feature that every bachelor's degree had some elements of the liberal arts in its "breadth" or general education requirements. Today, however, despite the widespread recognition that communications and intercultural skills and knowledge are necessary across the spectrum of careers, appreciation for liberal arts educa-

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tion is strong mainly among educators and graduates of liberal arts colleges, while others do not value it (Hersh 1997). Clifford Adelman's *The New College Course Map* (1999) suggests that liberal arts education is decreasing in prominence, overshadowed by business and technology courses and degrees. These studies do not necessarily show that students in professional degree programs are not taking liberal arts courses, simply that the public has devalued the role of a purely liberal arts education in favor of one that will produce a high paying job upon graduation.

It is also the case that for the past two decades many liberal arts institutions have added degrees in business, technology, and health sciences such as nursing or physical therapy in order to draw more students, to survive in a highly competitive "market place." Liberal arts colleges have resorted to making a case for their "product" by hiring marketing consultants who have provided ways of justifying the liberal arts as long term and ultimately more practical forms of career preparation, stressing the fact that most students will change careers an average of seven to ten times in their lives. Thus having multiple kinds of skills and knowledges is better vocational preparation than just having one.

In a context of globalized neo-liberalism, liberal education has had to adopt market discourse to describe its work and justify its results. Quite apart from how faculty may see their endeavor, public culture increasingly regards liberal education as a certain kind of product. As colleges market themselves to consumers (prospective students and their parents), they have to develop a "brand," a distinctive image. As Karl Marx pointed out a century and a half ago, in a market economy there is tendency to assess, to express, every value as a market value. In a culture where everything is a commodity, one can understand how it comes to be that students comport themselves as consumers and evaluate our products in competition with others that, on the face of it, seem to have an easier time demonstrating their market value. What is a liberal education worth? What is its market value? In a consumer culture these very different questions are seen as identical.

Further evidence of the penetration of market values can be seen in the extent to which colleges and universities have adopted corporate management models; "Total Quality Management" and other trendy fads of business management

have found their way into the discourse of deans and presidents. Measurements of faculty "efficiency" and "productivity," policies that tie faculty salary to the fiscal health of institutions, and a host of other recent administrative practices demonstrate the blurring of the distinction between business and higher education.

While we concede the strategic necessity of explaining the value of liberal education to public constituencies steeped in neo-liberal ideology and consumerist practices, advocates and practitioners of liberal education must always at the same time press the critical case for recognizing non-market values. In the current historical context, liberal education is funded through and by a market economy, and yet it is of vital importance for the future of democracy that liberal education include a critique of the very economy that makes it possible. Put in the form of a critical question, how can liberal arts colleges, or even liberal education curriculums within professional degree programs, be supported by a capitalist economy and paid for with the income from that economy yet still maintain a critical distance from it? Noam Chomsky (2000) reminds us that

Universities are economically parasitic, relying on external support. To maintain this support while serving their proper liberating function poses problems that verge on contradiction. Universities face a constant struggle to maintain their integrity, and their fundamental social role in a healthy society, in the face of external pressures. The problems are heightened with the expansion of private power in every domain, in the course of state-corporate social engineering projects of the past several decades. Those projects, designed to shift decision-making authority even further from the public sphere, with all of that sphere's serious deficiencies, to private power, which is unaccountable in principle, are often called neoliberal—a highly misleading term: they are not new and would have scandalized classical liberals.

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Given the triumph of market values and economic globalization, it is all the more important that the academy retain a space for alternative viewpoints. Advocates have to steal every moment to educate parents and legislators and employers about the deeper values and more profound outcomes of liberal education. Students, staff, faculty, all have to be advocates and spokespersons for the complexity of its value. Not everything of value can be traded on the market; not every outcome can be measured. And the challenge of commodification has to be joined in every venue.

#### **A New Ivory Tower**

We need to reconceptualize the social utility of the academy as an "Ivory Tower," a social space of free inquiry and criticism. All democratic theory, all democratic forms of governance, recognize the importance of guaranteeing the freedom of oppositional voices. Democracy is done when there is no opposition, when any one side, one ideology, one set of values stipulates the terms of public discourse. The new Ivory Tower is not a place for timeless and irrelevant musings on abstract ideas, but rather a space and time for subjecting experience and practice in the "real world" to critical analysis and questioning. Experiential learning, internships,

study abroad, plus the kind of cyber-research and experience alluded to above have dramatically changed even the purest liberal arts education. But these experiences need to be placed in conversation with creative imagination, theories, and analytical skills. However, the differences between the "real" world and the virtual one, experience and simulacrum, reality and representation are complex and confusing. When television shows are increasingly not based on scripts but on "real life" people placed in challenging situations, and real life events mimic movies, maintaining a platform for critical reflection, self-reflection, and rigorous analysis is extremely difficult. Students need to be able to "play" in these dazzling new arenas, but they also need to ground themselves in civil society, to assess the difference between media representations and lives fraught with poverty, racism, violence, hunger, and illness. Increasingly, the new Ivory Tower will be interdisciplinary and problem-based in its approach to knowledge because the blurred lines between virtuality and reality in a world crisscrossed by networks of processes cannot be captured by specialized disciplines defined by nineteenth-century realities.

There is ample evidence that liberal education does in fact prepare students for the mar-

ketplace, less for entry-level jobs than for the longterm. Good thinking and communications skills, multiple forms of problem solving, cross-cultural understanding may not get a graduate's foot in the door, but once inside, the person with these skills will have the kind of flexibility and breadth that jobs today increasingly require. While this case needs to be made to the public, we would contend that the case for the liberal arts component of any bachelor's degree also needs to be made on its own philosophical terms or the demands of specialization will swallow it up. That is to say that defending a writing course for engineers on the grounds that it will make them better engineers is a losing proposition if it can be overcome by a counterargument that another course in computer-aided design will do more than good writing to produce a more skilled mechanical engineer. The fact is that good writing skills are a valuable instrument in any career, but the reason for a liberal arts component has more to do with being an educated person in a democratic society than with being more successful in an entry level job. It is the part of a broad-based education that allows for alternative methods of problem solving, for flexibility in career choices down the line, for critical responses to media messages, for ethical choices in work and personal life, and for greater access to well-being through increased capabilities, for example aesthetic appreciation and expression.

#### **Privilege and Practicality: Democratic Agency in a Global Civil Society**

For the world of the twenty-first century, liberal education must include critical reflection on the ethics and politics of participating in a global civil society. It needs to prepare students for responsible citizenship at the local, national, and global levels, levels which are less and less separable as the local community is conditioned by global fluctuations in populations, wages, political movements.

We have been reflecting on a century-old opposition between a "practical" education and a "liberal" education. From Aristotle through Kant, practical wisdom is understood as the knowledge of what is necessary and effi-

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cient in bringing about a certain end. For both, the real issue is apprehending the end. If the end of higher education is providing access to prosperous careers, then what is practical and efficient will mean one thing. But liberal education, as pioneered and developed in the American context, has al-

ways posited for itself a more ambitious end. Borrowing a phrase from Joseph Tussman, we could talk about the liberal arts as offering vocational education, that is, vocational education for democratic citizenship, where everyone's vocation is to participate in governing.

Plato was opposed to democracy as a form of government because he held that the masses do not have wisdom sufficient to govern; ruling is the province of an aristocratic elite because only they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and wisdom. The great American experiment has been—from the outset in theory and slowly over time in practice—to invest higher education with the responsibility of preparing all citizens to participate in democratic governance. This is the civic mission of liberal education. It represents the difference between Plato and Dewey on the fundamental assumptions of political theory. The last half-century has been an era of dramatic inclusiveness; many more and many more diverse citizens have had access to liberal education, to education for democracy, than ever before. This is the deepest sense in which liberal education is practical; it is the best means to the desired end of having a citizenry with the knowledge, skills, and wisdom necessary to participate in democratic governance, prepared to engage the problems of globalization, the environment, and social justice. The American experiment is to provide access to this preparation, not to an elite aristocracy, but to as many as possible. Again, this American notion is another aspect of the phenomenon of global Americanization; from Europe to the developing world, this understanding of the mission of higher education is catching on.

Dewey was arguing squarely from within the paradigm of American pragmatism when he made the case that colleges are far-reaching public service institutions, and that their charge is to help students develop as responsi-

ble agents in a participatory democracy. But the world has changed, and knowledge has changed, since Dewey wrote. Read now, Dewey, and Meiklejohn for that matter, seem parochial, quite blind to the difference that difference makes, as they talk sweepingly about America. 'America' is a highly contested term now, and liberal education has a major contribution to make in the preparation for democratic citizenship in the context of globalization and the recognition of diversity.

Globalization is a term that calls attention to the fact that U.S. and global realities, whether economic, cultural, political, or environmental, interpenetrate and mutually define each other now with unprecedented complexity and velocity. A liberal education is practical to the extent that its graduates are able to see, to comprehend, and to form judgments about these realities. It takes broad, interdisciplinary vision and well-honed critical discernment to perceive the invisible links behind and around the local lives we live, the foods we consume, the clothes we wear, the furniture we buy, the medicines we use, and their global reverberations.

Arjun Appadurai (1990, 328) proposes a model for studying globalization based on five "scapes": ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapes, finanscapas, and ideoscapes. He justifies his metaphor with the idea that landscapes are not objective, but perspectival and fluid. If anything is clear about the future of liberal education, it is that paradigms of knowledge and inquiry are moving in the direction of complexity. Discrete, well-bounded research problems isolated to single disciplinary investigation have given way to a terrain of interpenetrating questions and issues that can only be approached through multidisciplinary, multidimensional inquiry. Commenting on the Seattle protests against the WTO, Manning Marable (2000, 84) writes that

There is an inescapable connection between Seattle and SingSing Prison, between global inequality and the brutalization of Third World labor and what's happening to black, brown and working people here in the United States... We are challenged to build new political and information-sharing networks across the boundaries of race, gender, class and nation. We must make the connections in the fight for democracy in the 21st century.

Expertise in all domains now also includes capacity to understand how and why collaboration across disciplines is necessary. Contemporary liberal education is precisely the approach that develops capacities for this kind of analysis.

### **Diversity, Justice, and Liberal Education: Expanding the Scope of Preparedness**

Racialized global economic inequality is a threat to the future of liberal education. If graduates are not aware of it, do not understand the processes that produce these differences, do not take with their diplomas an understanding of the threat of gross inequality, the possibility of civil society, then they are not practically prepared. Thus, the arts and democracy now include at their center cultural skills and awareness. Like other forms of development, intercultural skills are acquired through practice. Students need space and occasion to learn to collaborate productively across differences, drawing on those differences as a pool of innovation. The challenge is to provide this space. Liberal education has a unique social potential to provide intercultural laboratories, privileged spaces where students can learn to collaborate with people from other cultures. They are like them in some ways, unlike them in others. What this means is that liberal education's faculty will need to redouble their efforts to develop intercultural skills themselves. bell hooks (1994, 187) says,

Professors cannot empower students to embrace diversities of experience, stand up to behavior, or style if our training has empowered us, socialized us to cope effectively only with a single mode of interaction based on middle-class values.

Respecting the cultural differences students bring with them into the classroom, and drawing on them in our pedagogy, calls for a kind of training most do not now receive.

We have been arguing both that advanced liberal education need to keep faith with the side of liberation that is not immediately commodifiable, that should not be defended in terms of market value. But we are also arguing that liberal education in the twenty-first century must provide necessary, practical preparation for a life of responsible and active participation in civil society, at a time when transnational fluidity and challenging communities, local and international, must retain their viability. To realize its civil

## Paradigms of knowledge and inquiry are moving in the direction of complexity

mission, liberal education needs to be available to the great and growing diversity of the public it serves. To be available in the first instance means to be affordable, and known to be affordable. Obviously this means we have to be relentless in our advocacy for public and private support to keep tuition low, to make financial aid available. Being available also means extensive and creative outreach to populations of potential students who might not think of themselves as having an interest in a liberal education. Thus, access and availability call for a stance of anti-elitism on the part of an entire institution, a strategy of hospitality that welcomes and respects differences.

These differences extend to attitudes toward and understandings of the purpose of college. For many, going to college means gaining access to livelihoods not otherwise available, it means that the next generation might live a more secure life than the present one. For many working class families, and families from all walks who have members going to college for the first time, the intrinsic dignity that comes with gaining a degree is important, but so is the extrinsic, material access that it affords. The future of liberal education will depend on its advocates being articulate about its practicality for all students, and about its deep compatibility with post-graduate prosperity.

### Conclusion

A global and comparative view reveals a compelling irony. Precisely at the moment that liberal education is coming under critique in the U.S. for being insufficiently practical, its outcomes too amorphous to measure, its delivery too abstracted from career preparation, precisely at this moment universities around the globe, both in developed countries like England, France, and Japan, and in developing nations of Africa and the Caribbean, are dramatically revamping their educational systems to be more democratic, less elitist, more inclusive. And they are doing so by replacing the European model of narrow disciplinary tracking with time-honored dimensions of American liberal education like requirements for breadth and depth, attention to writing and speaking skills across the disciplines, and greater attention to diverse pedagogies. The

prevalence of high technology, service economies means there is a need for people who are broadly and diversely educated, who know how to keep

learning and to learn in different modes, who can communicate with people from different backgrounds. These skills are the specialty of liberal arts educations; hence the "liberalization" of higher education has both an economic and an educational meaning, meanings which are not necessarily in harmony with one another.

In the best case scenario, liberal education will be, as it always has been, about education of the whole person, cultivation of multiple ways of knowing, promotion of critical and creative thinking, development of skills for lifelong learning. To retain its integrity, liberal education has to be assessed as an undertaking with civic value, rather than as a commodity with market value. Its practicality is deep; in preparing students to participate responsibly in a global civil society it is securing a sustainable foundation for all human relations, including those of markets. □

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