

Liberal Education: Initiating the Conversation

by Diana Glycer and David L. Weeks

What are the liberal arts? What is liberal education? Basic questions—yet they have perplexed, challenged, and confounded educators for nearly twenty-five hundred years. Efforts to clarify the contours of the liberal arts and liberal education have long been animated by disagreements between philosophers and rhetoricians, pagans and Christians, ancients and moderns. These creative tensions still exist and are compounded by new developments: the advent of modern science, the effects of classical and contemporary liberalism, the influence of pragmatism, the predominance of the German research university model, the explosion of professional education, the emergence of postmodernism, the challenge of multiculturalism, and the rising tide of political conservatism.

Nonetheless, liberal education, the chief educational aim since the time of Socrates, has survived, even thrived, and has retained respect and admiration. Educators invoke the phrase for virtually every heartfelt

DIANA GLYER is an associate professor of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Azusa Pacific University. She is a graduate of Bowling Green State University (B.A., B.S.), Northern Illinois University (M.S.), and University of Illinois at Chicago (Ph.D.). **DAVID L. WEEKS** is professor of political science and dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Azusa Pacific University. He is a graduate of Indiana Wesleyan University (B.S.), Indiana State University (M.A.), and Loyola University of Chicago (Ph.D.).

educational objective. Such widespread usage of the term liberal education becomes problematic when incompatible aims are identified with it. Does liberal education foster independence or interdependence, look to the past or the future, develop national identity or global citizenship, promote unity or diversity, cultivate moral or intellectual virtue, address urgent social problems or timeless human dilemmas, help students understand the world or motivate them to change it, inculcate respect for eternal verities or nurture a spirit of skepticism, lead to personal introspection or promote social action? Is liberal education concerned with the transmission of knowledge or with the advancement of knowledge? Is it elitist and aristocratic or egalitarian and democratic? Is it preparatory or an end in itself, an introduction to different disciplines or interdisciplinary, preparation for specialization or a counterbalance to specialization?

The literature suggests liberal education does all of these things and more. On closer examination, however, these educational aims, each one valid in its own right, are not easily reconciled. Perhaps such tensions are part and parcel of liberal education, paradoxes that keep the debate from degenerating into meaningless oversimplification. But it is also possible that these broad goals are antithetical, competitive, and irreconcilable. For example, is liberal education's penchant for liberty compatible with respect and toleration of frankly non-democratic views? If liberal education is primarily the cultivation of intellectual capacity, is it not inherently elitist, since only a few possess superior genius? Does encouraging students to "think for themselves" lead to a conscious, self-assertive resistance to authority that undermines cooperation and community? Do calls to redress urgent social ills reorient the focus of liberal education from ends to means, thus inviting the idolatry of ideology?¹ Why study the humanities if the goal is sharpening the critical intellect, which one might argue is best done by mathematical and natural sciences? Does fostering a radical spirit of questioning undermine the establishment of moral principle?

¹According to Eva Brann, "An ideology is a rational theory that is no longer in the state of inquiry; it is rather an accepted teaching to which the totality of actions and opinions is expected to conform, a theory 'intended to change the world, not interpret it.'" *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 39.

These questions are particularly germane at our institution, Azusa Pacific University, a coeducational, Christian, comprehensive university located in Southern California. Founded in 1899 as the Training School for Christian Workers, the school has gone through several metamorphoses and now serves more than 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Entrepreneurial and innovative, APU has enjoyed substantial growth, financial stability, and widening recognition. These developments were applauded by Ernest L. Boyer who served on a Carnegie Foundation visitation team and later wrote: "Azusa Pacific University is becoming a leader among colleges and universities willing to combine an unapologetic commitment to Christianity with an uncompromising commitment to educational excellence."²

This does not mean that difficulties do not remain. Explosive growth prompts introspection. Who are we? What are we doing? Why? What educational purpose(s) do we serve? One of APU's most interesting challenges is shared with hundreds of other colleges and universities: the challenge of carving out an identity as a comprehensive university that offers both professional preparation and a liberal education.³ This dual mission requires a clear understanding of both enterprises, and a manner of pursuing each that is not indifferent or antithetical to the other. Our constituencies, as well as our mission statement, require no less.

This book is intended to spark a conversation about liberal education on our campus. In this respect, the book has a specific addressee, the Azusa Pacific University community. Nonetheless, we share its contents with the hope that it might serve a similar purpose elsewhere.

In order for such a conversation to be both substantive and constructive, we believe that it must be preceded by three things: (1) clarity about key terminology; (2) reflection upon the often unarticulated presuppositions behind various paradigms of liberal education; and (3) a clear statement of the perennial debates about the content of liberal education. Those are

²"A Community of Teaching and Learning: Striking the Balance," report to Azusa Pacific University (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, December 1988), 3.

³Comprehensive universities often lack the clear identity of liberal arts colleges, major research universities, and local community colleges.

the goals of this introduction. This volume continues the conversation by offering four essays that explore various aspects of this issue, and a series of critical reviews of some of the most quoted literature on the topic.

The Challenge of Defining Liberal Education

Why is it so difficult to clearly define the idea of a liberal education? The short answer, we believe, is because of decades of fuzzy thinking on the topic. Confusion has resulted from competing paradigms, ambiguous language, and a desire to co-opt the concept of liberal education in support of various educational visions. As a result, nearly every institution of higher education invokes the idea of liberal education but few institutions define it with precision. Those who have received acclaim for defining it do so differently—contrast, for example, St. John's effort to sharpen the mind through study of great books to Alverno's intent to strengthen measurable competencies.

This state of affairs is not new. The ambiguity has persisted for so long in so many quarters that we are reluctant to confront the issue. But the need for clear definition gains new urgency during a time when higher education is increasingly called upon to give an account of itself. The implicit challenge is that only those components of higher education which readily demonstrate their intrinsic worth or utility will survive. It is difficult to demonstrate the worth and, perhaps, utility of liberal education if one cannot clearly delineate what it is. A muddled mission makes it more difficult to justify the expenditure of scarce resources, more difficult to summon commitment on the part of faculty and students, and more difficult to assess the success or failure of the endeavor.

This lack of clarity has been noted in virtually every decade of the 1900s. Near the turn of the century, a college president lamented, "The college is without clear-cut notions of what a liberal education is and how it is to be secured, . . . and the pity of it is that this is not a local or special disability, but a paralysis affecting every college of arts in America." Approaching mid-century, scholars were saying, "there is

little agreement about what liberal education should be," the "theory and practice [of liberal education] are confused and contradictory," and "the most striking thing about the higher learning in America is the confusion that besets it." One observer noted that "liberal arts faculties seldom state clearly what they mean by liberal or general education" and surmised "perhaps they do not know." Twenty years ago, a commentator noted that "liberal education has become splintered, specialized, and, to some extent, eroded," that it lacked coherence, and defied clear definition. More recently, a prominent student of higher education concluded that "we do not really understand what we mean when we invoke (as we often do) the phrase 'liberal education.'"⁴ It simply means whatever we want it to mean at the moment we utter the phrase or, worse yet, it means everything and nothing.

For purposes of this discussion, we offer the following working definitions of key terms:

- **Liberal Arts:** although the notion of academic disciplines is a recent development, seven fields of study have historically been identified as liberal arts: logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy. Any number of other subjects have been dubbed modern spin-offs of those seven fields, but there is no consensus about other fields claiming such status.
- **Liberal Education:** an education grounded in the liberal arts which extends to an investigation into the central human questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my responsibility to God, to other individuals, to the community?

⁴Quotations can be found in Abraham Flexner, *The American College: A Criticism* (New York, NY: Century, 1908), 7; Thomas Woody, *Liberal Education for Free Men* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), 222; Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936; reprint, with an introduction by Harry S. Ashmore, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 1; Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, expanded edition (New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995), 196; Earl F. Cheit, *The Useful Arts and the Liberal Tradition* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 136; and Joseph L. Featherstone, "Foreword," to Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, xvii.

What is true? What is good? What is beautiful? It is also helpful to explain what liberal education is not. The following three views may be part of liberal education but should not be mistaken for liberal education itself: (1) the development of transferable intellectual capacities (critical thinking, higher-order reasoning, intellectual virtue) and the sharpening of basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening);⁵ (2) a survey of the "cultural heritage of Western civilization" to establish cultural literacy, inculcate Western values, and cultivate aesthetic taste;⁶ and (3) general education (see below).⁷

- **Trivium:** those disciplines generally referred to as the literary arts, the verbal arts, the humane letters, the arts of eloquence—grammar, logic, and rhetoric. These protean arts were always understood more broadly than contemporary formulations; the trivium generally included but was never restricted to linguistics, critical thinking, and persuasive communication, the arts of composing, delivering, and analyzing written and oral communication, or even reading, writing, and thinking.

⁵A wonderful early expression of this view is found in the Yale Report of 1828. "The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture are the *discipline* and *furniture* of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge. The former of these is, perhaps, the more important of the two. A commanding object, therefore, in a collegiate course, should be, to call into daily and vigorous exercise the faculties of the student. Those branches of study should be prescribed, and those modes of instruction adopted, which are best calculated to teach the art of fixing the attention, directing the train of thought, analyzing a subject proposed for investigation; following, with accurate discrimination, the course of the argument; balancing nicely the evidence presented to the judgment; awakening, elevating, and controlling the imagination; arranging, with skill, the treasures which memory gathers; rousing and guiding the powers of genius." Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, eds., *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 1:278.

⁶Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Missions of the College Curriculum* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1978), 3, 9.

⁷Synonymous use of liberal education and general education has probably contributed more confusion to recent discussion than any other development. Bell, Hutchins, Meiklejohn, Thomas, and the Harvard Report equate the terms. Van Doren, Miller, and Boyer maintain a distinction.

It was not accidental that one studied the arts of eloquence by reading classical literature, often histories, not only in one's native language, but in a foreign language (usually Latin and Greek) because the classics were the consummate guide to moral philosophy (ethics and politics). Therefore, a contemporary formulation of the trivium probably includes the study of language, literature, foreign language, communication, logic, history, ethics, and politics.

- **Quadrivium:** those disciplines often referred to as the mathematical arts, the arts of wisdom and understanding—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. These arts revolve around the study of things, of quantities, and of abstractions, symbolic representations of things such as numbers. One scholar describes the quadrivium as consisting "of the mathematical or 'learnable' arts, so called because they concern intelligible objects, which are traditionally ordered according to increasing corporeality, from dimensionless arithmetic through plane and solid geometry, to astronomy (the application of mathematics to moving bodies) and music (the study of bodies executing harmonious motions, that is, physics)."⁸ Geography was often a part of the study of geometry. A contemporary formulation of the quadrivium probably includes mathematics, the natural sciences (physics, astronomy, geology, biology, and chemistry) and, perhaps, geography.

- **Liberalism:** those modern social and political movements ranging from democratic socialists to libertarians which are identified with the ideals of liberty, equality, progress, and individual rights. Although both classical and contemporary liberals advance particular and influential understandings of

⁸Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 119.

liberal education, liberalism and liberal education are not essentially related. Political liberals are not the end product of liberal education.

- **General Education:** an utterly amorphous notion that is used to describe either (a) an educational experience that prepares all students for life in general, a common denominator approach;⁹ or (b) a basic level of study in most major fields of inquiry, that is to say, a required "taste" of many different fields; or (c) a comprehensive term used to describe the combination of academic and co-curricular experiences that constitute a student's complete college experience.

These working definitions, which reveal our viewpoint, serve as a basis for a campuswide conversation. The theoretical origins and practical implications of these definitions become clearer when discussed in conjunction with the broader and more fundamental topic of educational paradigms.

Liberal Education Paradigms

Clarifying definitions requires, in part, study of the etymological origins and historical development of terms. It also requires investigation into how the terms are used within various paradigms of liberal education and reflection upon their often unarticulated presuppositions. A fair explication of the ideas, assumptions, and arguments of major educational traditions is a tremendous aid to understanding liberal education. It helps

⁹This typically means life in contemporary society. "General education undertakes to redefine liberal education in terms of life's problems as men face them, to give it human orientation and social direction, to invest it with content that is directly relevant to the demands of contemporary society. General education is liberal education with its matter and method shifted from its original aristocratic intent to the service of democracy. General education seeks to extend to all men the benefits of an education that liberates." "The President's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy, 1947," in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, 2:990.

us appreciate the intellectual coherence of various paradigms and grapple with the inherent contradictions among them.

It seems to us that such a study would, at least, focus on the four major paradigms which are the sources of many claims and platitudes frequently reiterated in contemporary discussions of liberal education. Although no one person, institution, or document fully embodies any single paradigm, each represents the position of many people.

A. The Classical Greek Philosophic Tradition. The dominant paradigm in liberal education is the classical Greek model. Beginning with the assumption that truth is both universal and accessible, this model emphasizes the pursuit of truth for its own sake. A sense of awe or wonder about the nature of things inspires the quest for understanding wholly apart from utility. Speculative, contemplative, reflective, teleological, the Greek tradition emphasizes wisdom, understanding, first principles, ends rather than means. Because reason is the unique human capacity which enables one to know the truth and emancipates humanity from mere opinion, the cultivation of reason is the aim of education. The educational enterprise culminates in philosophy, the dialectic. Plato's powerful image of escape from the darkness of a cave to the splendor of light is an apt metaphor; the light of reason dispenses darkness and enables the inquiring mind to see the good, the true, the beautiful.

B. The Humanistic Tradition. The humanistic tradition greatly admires the accomplishments of the classical Greek mind. Recognizing, however, the impracticality and contingency of an unsettling and endless quest for knowledge, humanists place less emphasis on freeing the mind and more emphasis on making people fit for freedom. Moral virtue and civic virtue become the aim of education. Education entails the transmission of knowledge and culminates, not in philosophy, but in literature. In literature, one finds the greatest expression of human understanding, human experience, and human achievement. From a careful reading of great works, one collects pearls of wisdom which enable one

to be a good person—cultivated, civilized, and courteous—and, more importantly, a good citizen.¹⁰

C. Modernity's Scientific Paradigm. Sharing antiquity's faith in the capacity of human reason, modern thinkers turn their attention from the heavens to the earth, from the eternal to the temporal, from the soul to the body. The aim of modern inquiry was progress, defined as the "relief of man's estate."¹¹ The means to that end is the scientific method which promised to liberate humanity from enslaving impersonal forces by ferreting out those laws of nature which govern the material universe and turning them to our advantage. Education plays a key role in this revolution by training the specialist, the researcher, the scientist. Understanding "liberal" to mean "liberating from constraint," liberal educators turn attention away from the transmission of knowledge to the discovery of knowledge. The humanities are shunned as subjective expressions of personal opinion, and the experimental sciences become pre-eminent because of their allegedly neutral, objective methodology. Study of the sciences, it is claimed, hones the intellect and requires mastery of modes of inquiry, thus preparing students for the specialization that is required in the quest to master the forces of nature. Moreover, the sciences are founded upon an optimism that progress will result from human inquiry, and they foster a healthy spirit of tolerance and skepticism, for all discoveries are susceptible to revision.

D. The Twentieth-Century Pragmatic Vision. Inflating the inherited epistemological skepticism of modernity, twentieth-century thinkers

¹⁰In *Essay on Modern Education*, Jonathan Swift writes, "The books read at school and college are full of incitements to virtue, and discouragements from vice, drawn from the wisest reasons, the strongest motives, and the most influencing examples. Thus young minds are filled with an inclination to good and an abhorrence of evil, both of which increase in them, according to the advances they make in literature." Quoted in Martin L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain, 1500-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 169.

¹¹Francis Bacon in *Advancement of Learning and Novum Organum* (New York, NY: Willey, 1900), bk. 1, c. 5, sect. 11.

become increasingly dubious about any truth claim, especially metaphysical claims.¹² Metaphysical agnosticism results: if truth is elusive, contingent, and subjective, then value judgments depend wholly on context and perspective. Because the human perspective is ultimately derived from social context, human affairs and the needs of the community become the abiding concern. Practical reason, problem solving, and social progress become the foci of liberal education, understood as a liberalizing force. Increasingly defined as general education, liberal education becomes preparation for the demands of contemporary society. The goal is not to understand the world but to change it, to actualize human potential, to free all peoples from oppressive, inherited traditions, ideas, and practices based on spurious truth claims. As such, liberal education no longer culminates in philosophical speculation, scientific inquiry, or humanistic reflection, but in social studies. The social sciences illuminate individual behavior, provide insight into social relations, and help devise a better world. The future shall be better than the past if we address the needs of existing community life, finding common values and a sense of community in an increasingly pluralistic, multicultural society.

The pragmatic vision offers, as do the other three paradigms, a comprehensive and intellectually coherent understanding of the educational

¹²We use the label "pragmatic" for lack of a better term. Bruce Kimball insists that the "resurgent intellectual tradition of pragmatism" is the dominant, if unnoticed, force in higher education today. Kimball summarizes his understanding of this movement, which some observers describe as postmodernism, with six themes. "These themes are (1) that belief and meaning, even truth itself, are fallible and revisable; (2) that an experimental method of inquiry obtains in all science and reflective thought; (3) that belief, meaning, and truth depend on the context and the intersubjective judgment of the community in which they are formed; (4) that experience is the dynamic interaction of organism and environment, resulting in a close interrelationship between thought and action; (5) that the purpose of resolving doubts or solving problems is intrinsic to all thought and inquiry; and (6) that all inquiry and thought are evaluative, and judgments about fact are not different from judgments about value." Bruce Kimball, "Toward Pragmatic Liberal Education," in *The Condition of American Liberal Education*, ed., Robert Orrill (New York, NY: College Board Publications, 1995), 83. He argues convincingly that virtually every major recent development in liberal education (multiculturalism, service learning, pluralism, interdisciplinary studies, learner-centered teaching, assessment) can be logically explained by this resurgent pragmatism.

enterprise. Learning more about all of these paradigms should enrich debate about liberal education.

Perennial Debates

The aforementioned paradigms provide background and insight into many contemporary debates about liberal education. At APU, we are concerned, among other things, with a Christian perspective on liberal education. There is no single Christian perspective because Christian thinkers have borrowed extensively from the other traditions, especially the classical Greek and humanistic traditions, although vestiges of the modern scientific and pragmatic can be found in current formulations. Historically, Christians sought to foster both moral and intellectual virtue—intellectual virtue to understand God's truth; moral virtue to abide by God's will—by reading texts from the Church Fathers. Wary of pagan teaching, Christians also gingerly selected those pagan texts which appeared to have escaped the taint of sin and offered insight into truth and virtue. The study of the liberal arts always culminated in the study of Scripture. For in Scripture, we find the truth that sets us free.

Concern for a Christian perspective may be unique to Christian colleges and universities, but we face other issues that exist on every college campus. Five of these issues seem particularly important. We briefly review those perennial debates, not to resolve the issues but to bring them to the forefront of conversation.

A. Moral v. Intellectual Virtue. Does a liberal education contribute to both intellectual and moral virtue? It is commonplace to assert that a liberal education sharpens the critical intellect. But will it strengthen moral virtue? The humanistic tradition thought so. The study of classical literature with its portrayal of heroic figures struggling with moral choices was seen as central to a moral education. If one understands the choices with all their personal and social ramifications, then one is more likely to choose well. However, some thinkers sharply distinguish the mind from the will, and therefore, assert that sharpening the mind, their idea of

liberal education's aim, has little to do with making good moral choices.¹³ Others argue that "any radical disjunction of moral education and intellectual education is perilous."¹⁴

Is liberal education a moral enterprise? Should it "develop the reasoning faculties of our youth" as well as "instill into them the precepts of virtue and order?"¹⁵ If so, how do we shape the moral character of students? Whose morals do we choose to inculcate, and when moral imperatives conflict, what mechanism do we use to choose between them? Is intellectual virtue possible without moral virtue? Each institution which stakes a claim to liberal education should be prepared to provide answers.

B. Science v. the Humanities. What are the disciplinary emphases of a liberal arts education? Historically, the relative peace that has been achieved about the curriculum has been rife with differences. Some educators adopt an "oratorical vision of liberal education," emphasizing the arts of language and literature. Other thinkers dismiss this as imprecise and incapable of discerning truth. "These 'philosophers' search for a precise, rational method of pursuing knowledge" and regard the arts of wisdom, the mathematical arts, as the key to a liberal arts education.¹⁶

Today, this often heated debate continues under the guise of "the battle of the books." Which grouping of disciplines, the humanities or the sciences, are most likely to foster liberal education? This debate was fought with great finesse in the late 1800s by two friends: Matthew

¹³For example, Mortimer Adler claims, "The contribution that can be made by higher education is mainly limited to the sphere of the intellectual virtues." "Education and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1990), 87.

¹⁴Mark Van Doren, *Liberal Education* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1943, reprint, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959), 63.

¹⁵Thomas Jefferson, "Report of the Rockfish Gap Commission on the Proposed University of Virginia, 1818," in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, 1:195. Noah Webster emphasizes the point: "The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities, and for this reason the heart should be cultivated with more assiduity than the head." "On the Education of Youth in America," in *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 67.

¹⁶Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, xi.

Arnold and Thomas Huxley. Arnold, a Victorian humanist, said we should aim "to know ourselves and the world" by studying "the best that has been thought and said."¹⁷ Huxley, a Darwinian scientist, saw literary works as subjective expressions of emotion, incapable of discerning truth, and proclaimed that "the free employment of reason, in accordance with the scientific method, is the sole method of reaching truth."¹⁸ The gulf between the two exclusivist positions leads to "two cultures," divided by a "gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding."¹⁹

C. Professional Education v. Liberal Education. Professional education as it exists today is different from the mechanical, vocational training that Aristotle used to distinguish liberal education. For one thing, responsible professional education is imbued with moral purpose (typically service to humanity) and emphasizes moral means, that is, adherence to a professional code of ethics. This is especially true in Christian circles where "a vocation or calling is a certain kind of life ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good."²⁰ Furthermore, professional education can be intellectually rigorous and thereby sharpens the critical capacities of its students (for example becoming a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer is quite rigorous). Therefore, professional education has much in common with many definitions of liberal education. But are they synonymous? If not, what are the differences?

In spite of Aristotle's effort to distinguish liberal education by contrasting it with technical training, many modern educators minimize the distinction by arguing that the dichotomy is "fallacious," "no longer useful," "a gossamer of self-deception" because technical training has

¹⁷Matthew Arnold, "Literature and Science," in *Discourses in America* (London: Macmillan, 1885), 82.

¹⁸Thomas Huxley, "Science and Culture," in *Science and Education* (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1964), 135.

¹⁹C. P. Snow, "The Two Cultures," in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 4.

²⁰Puritan William Perkins as quoted in Paul Marshall, *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 41.

evolved into professional education.²¹ It is not uncommon, however, to hear arguments that liberal and professional education are "incomensurably at variance" and that the latter has a "corrupting effect" on higher education.²² Others are more charitable. Arguing that professional studies are useful, beneficial, even essential ("life could not go on without them"), some observers maintain a distinction between professional studies which "afford scope for the highest and most diversified powers of mind," but for a specific purpose, and those liberal studies which aim at the cultivation of the mind for its own sake.²³ This camp emphasizes that the two "are naturally compatible—but they are emphatically not coincident . . . and both are better served by crisp delimitations."²⁴

D. The Utility and Worth of Liberal Education. A debate that immediately follows the preceding one questions the utility of a liberal education. Does liberal education serve any useful purpose? What is its utility? Why would a parent spend \$100,000 on a liberal education for a son or daughter? Why should a community expend scarce resources ensuring liberal education for succeeding generations? It is quite common to hear parents, even faculty members, say students should get required courses "out of the way" so they can move on to important things, a major that prepares one for a career, a job, a profession. Assuming "education should be useful, whatever your aim in life," students and parents alike label liberal education a necessary evil.²⁵ They prefer that students focus on what is useful rather than stuffing their heads "with a deal of trash, a great part whereof they usually never . . . think on again

²¹Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1929), 74; Earl J. McGrath, *Liberal Education in the Professions* (New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1959), vi; and Thomas Woody, *Liberal Education for Free Men*, 259.

²²Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1968), 19-20, 23.

²³John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner (London: Longman, Green, 1899; reprint, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 81, 84.

²⁴Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 37-38.
²⁵Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, 2.

as long as they live; and so much of it as does stick by them they are only the worse for."²⁶

The other side contends that "knowledge is capable of being its own end."²⁷ We study theology and Scripture because of a desire to know God, not merely to fill a pulpit; we study astronomy because of curiosity about the nature of the universe, not to be an astronaut; we study politics because we seek justice, not to be a politician. This does not mean that liberal studies are not useful, but that their study emphasizes ends (What is good?) and shuns means (How will I use this?). Liberal education in this form, not surprisingly, turns out to be quite useful for further learning, for oneself, for serving others, and for professional practice. These commentators argue that "a cultivated intellect, because it is a good in itself, brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which . . . enables us to be more useful," as well as better friends, companions, and citizens.²⁸

E. The Postmodern Challenge. Without providing a full-fledged definition of the phenomenon we call postmodernism, we can agree that a central question raised by the postmodern enterprise is whether or not there is objective truth. Some observers insist postmodernism is not the latest phase in the evolution of liberal education but a rejection of the very notion. Others contend that a postmodern liberal education will finally free us from the shackles of ill-founded, oppressive, inherited traditions, ideas, and practices. As such, is postmodernism inherently destructive of liberal education? Is all of education inherently political?

²⁶John Locke, quoted in Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 113.

²⁷Newman argues, "That further advantages accrue to us and redound to others by its possession, over and above what it is in itself, I am very far indeed from denying; but, independent of these, we are satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition; and, whereas our nature, unlike that of the inferior creation, does not at once reach its perfection, but depends, in order to it, on a number of external aids and appliances, Knowledge, as one of the principal of these, is valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end." Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 78-79.

²⁸Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 119.

Is the pragmatic view of education emerging out of postmodernism capable of sustaining liberal education as a vital pursuit?

The postmodern challenge has the potential to annul and supersede discussions of moral and intellectual virtue, battles between the sciences and the humanities, questions about the worth and utility of liberal education, and efforts to distinguish professional and liberal education. But postmodernism's fate is unpredictable. In the meantime, every campus contends with all five perennial debates.

The Articles

Azusa Pacific University is wrestling with these matters in a very deliberate fashion. We launch our efforts with the publication of this volume. Several faculty members have written original essays in which they offer a perspective on the meaning of liberal education, the effects of contemporary developments, the relationship between professional and liberal education, and the development of a uniquely Christian perspective. The authors do not purport to speak for the institution. These are not authoritative statements, rather they speak to their colleagues in the hope of sparking substantive dialogue about important matters.

Christopher Flannery and Rae Wineland Newstad begin with a philosophic defense of the classical liberal arts tradition. Opening with a graphic depiction of the difference between liberal and technical learning, they argue that the latter is useful but insufficient because technical training can be used for good or ill. By contrast, a liberal education seeks direction on how to use technical training by examining life's important questions, questions of truth, justice, and beauty. Starting with its Socratic origins, the authors trace the development of the liberal arts tradition, show the etymological roots of key terms, review the historical evolution of the liberal arts tradition, and reveal key revolutions within that tradition.

In the second essay, Dennis A. Sheridan outlines contemporary developments that have profoundly shaped today's colleges and universities. Emphasizing the post-Civil War period, he shows how social change—urbanization, immigration, the rise of the middle class, et cetera—altered the character of education by placing new demands upon it. He

explains the emergence of professionalism, specialization, pragmatism, postmodernism, and discusses their impact on colleges and universities. Each development has precipitated changes in both the curriculum and the structure of institutions of higher education. Today, we struggle with the effects of those changes.

Phillip V. Lewis and Rosemary Liegler address the relationship between professional and liberal education. Arguing that the historic tension between these two enterprises is unwarranted and unnecessary, they outline commonalities and issue a challenge to collaboration. Professional education, as understood today, has outgrown its merely technical, vocational, and mechanical origins. Liberal education is described as a vital complement to professional education because of its development of intellectual capacities and cultivation of moral purpose. They conclude with a series of recommendations which they hope will lessen tensions between the two camps.

Richard Slimbach offers a personal perspective on how one might re-imagine a Christian liberal arts education. Arguing that re-imagining begins with an assessment of contemporary culture and its influence on students, he proposes a model of liberal education grounded in the present, yet aimed at equipping students to be agents of change throughout their lives. Slimbach's vision requires restructuring the learning environment, revamping disciplinary content, and revising the pedagogical process. He describes a distinctively Christian liberal arts education as celebratory, visionary, communal, interdisciplinary, prophetic, integrative, and redemptive.

Suggested Readings

The provocative perspectives offered by our faculty colleagues in their articles should spark the reader's interest in further study of liberal education. A thorough review of the literature on liberal education would take several lifetimes. We suggest reading selectively in several categories. The opinions and interpretations of the individual authors often conflict, but a wide reading among the following sources will provide an overview.

Some authors and titles are marked in **boldface**; these are reviewed in the second half of this volume.

We recommend reading one or more of several educational classics. These works provide lucid, insightful, and comprehensive accounts unmitigated by secondary interpreters. No one should overlook Plato's *Republic*, especially book VII, where we read about the Socratic vision which prompts the liberal education enterprise. Many other works are worthy of attention including the following: Plato, *Meno*; Aristotle, *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*; Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*; Capella, *Marriage of Philology and Mercury*; Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*; Quintilian, *Training of an Orator*; Erasmus, *The Education of the Christian Prince*; Milton, *Of Education*; John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*; Mulcaster, *Positions*; More, *Utopia*; Bacon, *New Atlantis*; Rousseau, *Emile*; and Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.

The origins of liberal education are found in ancient Greece, and the liberal arts tradition solidified during the Roman era and the Middle Ages. The most frequently cited secondary sources on education during these eras are as follows: Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*; Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome*; Wagner, *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages*; Abelson, *The Seven Liberal Arts: A Study in Medieval Culture*; and Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World*.

During the Renaissance and early modern period, the classical liberal arts tradition was challenged. The nature of that challenge, and the consequences of it, are sketched in Woodward, *Studies in Education During the Age of the Renaissance, 1400-1600*; Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe*; Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain, 1500-1900*; and Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education*.

The American liberal arts tradition, although less established, is also worthy of careful study. For it is in America we see most presciently the conflation of liberal and professional education, the weaving of the traditional with the progressive, and the growing ambiguity about the meaning of liberal education. For the colonial period, consider Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*; Pangle and Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders*; Rudolph, *Essays*

on Education in the Early Republic; and Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*. Broad surveys tracing the contours of liberal education in America include Rudy, *The Evolving Liberal Arts Curriculum*; Schmidt, *The Liberal Arts College: A Chapter in American Cultural History*; Thomas, *The Search for a Common Learning*; and Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*.

Many important books on liberal education were published between 1850 and 1950: Van Doren, *Liberal Education*; Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*; Meiklejohn, *The Liberal College*; Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*; and Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*. It was during this period that the most frequently cited source in this discussion, Newman, *The Idea of a University*, was written.

Among books published in the last twenty years, we commend Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*; Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*; Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition*; Gaff, *New Life for the College Curriculum*; Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*; Miller, *The Meaning of General Education*; Boyer and Levine, *A Quest for Common Learning*; Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*; and Freedman, *Idealism and Liberal Education*. Recent books extolling a pragmatic approach to liberal education include Kimball, *The Condition of American Liberal Education*; Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind*; and Orrill, *Education and Democracy: Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America*.

Lastly, there are essays and documents which have profoundly impacted discussion about liberal education such as C. P. Snow's "The Two Cultures," Huxley's "Science and Culture," Arnold's "Literature and Science," and Jefferson's "Rockfish Gap Report." Three influential institutional documents are the Yale Faculty Report of 1828, the University of Chicago's *The Idea and Practice of General Education*, and Harvard College's *General Education in a Free Society*. In the last two decades, major reports influencing the discussion about liberal education include *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*, *A New Vitality in General Education*, *Strong Foundations, 50 Hours*, and *The Dissolution of General Education*.

Conclusion

We trust this introduction highlights the contours of the ongoing debate about liberal arts education. It serves no one's purposes to soft-pedal distinctions or inflate differences. But we hope to provoke dialogue about competing and compelling visions. We do our students a disservice when we pick and choose attractive ideas from the shelf, place them in a market basket, and call them a liberal arts education. We may be tempted to simply select Socrates' search for truth, Erasmus' love of classical authors, Locke's passion for liberty, and Dewey's concern for community, each valuable in its own right, but potentially incompatible with one another. Before we make our selections, we should clarify our vision.

We expect that ongoing conversations sparked by this monograph will be fruitful. Still, our idealism is tempered by reality. We tend to agree with Mark Van Doren who wrote "Liberal education can never be quite perfect, since it is ideal; but at any given time it is good in proportion to the clarity with which it is conceived and the effort which that clarity inspires."²⁹

²⁹Van Doren, *Liberal Education*, preface to Beacon Press reprint.

THE LIBERAL ARTS IN
HIGHER EDUCATION

Challenging Assumptions,
Exploring Possibilities

EDITED BY

DIANA GLYER

DAVID L. WEEKS

University Press of America, Inc.
Lanham • New York • Oxford

© 1998