

Notes on the History of General Education

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by

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“Anything worth doing is . . . impossible.”

—Jacqueline DiSalvo

This essay constitutes (1) a lamentation for the widespread abandonment or betrayal of the traditional aims of general education in contemporary American universities and (2) a suggestion for re-conceiving those aims through a historical inquiry into their provenience in classical antiquity, medieval scholasticism, and Renaissance humanism.

1

The term “general education” became a prominent signpost in the active vocabulary of American academic discourse with the publication, in 1945, of the Harvard Report *General Education in a Free Society*. Initially the term designated a type of intellectual formation that was both broader than that which is acquired through specialized training in any single discipline and deemed to be useful, even vital, to every sojourner on the path of post-secondary education. In the Harvard conception it consisted of an education befitting every person in a democratic republic. Its roots are found in a definite set of objectives that have evolved in Western civilization over the past 2,500 years.

But it is a poor, inexact, and misleading term, for to many people—and even to some professors—it connotes a broad, undefined educational activity wanting in specificity—vague, scattered, unfocused, undisciplined, diffuse, a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Glib tags like “well-rounded” or “educating the whole person” have been bandied about in college catalogues and student recruitment brochures. Ever since the late nineteenth century, when American higher education, led by the Johns Hopkins University, began to emulate the German university model with its exclusive emphasis on specialized research, the “really serious” business of higher education has been commonly thought to consist of mastering a specific discipline in order to be able to engage in specialized research or prepare for a profession. General education, by contrast, is usually thought to consist in a smattering of sundry, inconsequential arts and sciences whose supposed value is to enhance one’s leisurely pleasures, like gew-gaws decorating a waiting room. Taste, refinement, broad knowledge (whatever that is): these are the benefits supposedly conferred by a general education. You don’t really need it (is the subtext). But the American public has come to expect it, universities need the revenue, so students must put up with it. The prevailing strategy among most undergraduates is to get those gen. ed. requirements out of the way as quickly as possible in order to get on with serious pre-professional course work.

Yet, as Daniel Bell writes in his book *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experiment in Its National Setting* (1966),¹ the general education

¹ New York: Doubleday, 1968. Citations are from this edition.

movement in the United States, beginning with Columbia's Contemporary Civilization course, has had a powerful impact on undergraduate education. Following Columbia, the College of the University of Chicago and Harvard College developed their own sets of philosophical underpinnings and program elements. Together, these three universities have influenced the aims and nature of liberal education in virtually every college and university in America since the middle of the twentieth century. A more or less coherent notion of those aims can be gleaned from Bell's book, the Harvard Report, and *The Higher Learning in America* (1936), written by Robert M. Hutchins when he was president of the University of Chicago.

The terms "liberal education" and "general education" are loosely interchangeable. The former is more ancient; the latter was devised in an age of specialization to indicate that mastering a specialized field of study is only one part, and not the most essential part, of liberal education. The distinction between them is based on the premise that there is a kind of intellectual formation that every specialist needs and that cannot be reduced to the principles of any single discipline in isolation. Hence, general education is an integral part of liberal education, an education that liberates the mind. As Daniel Bell notes,

The general education programs at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard have been the chief instrumentalities for the realization of the liberal arts intentions of these colleges: to free a student from provincialism and to lead him to self-discovery through an awareness of tradition, to confront him with the persistent issues of morals and politics, and to give him an understanding of the interconnectedness of knowledge. (p. 51)

He goes on to urge that during their college years, students

should get a sense of the relatedness of fields, of the relatedness of problems, the dependencies of subjects upon one another, and the common procedures of inquiry and verification that underlie the disciplined acquisition of knowledge. (p. 68)

Bell puts it even more concretely in the last chapter of his book:

The ends of [a liberating, or general] education are many: to instill an awareness of the diversity of human societies and desires; to be responsive to great philosophers and imaginative writers who have given thought to the predicaments that have tried and tested men; to acquaint a student with the limits of ambition and the reaches of humility; to realize that no general principle or moral absolute, however strongly it may be rooted in a philosophical tradition, can give an infallible answer to any particular dilemma. (pp. 295f.)

Clearly, these are worthy goals that no single academic department can achieve by itself. It follows also that if a college succeeds in its general education program, its students will desire to go on learning for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, however, the internal political economies of most universities have sapped the vitality of the foregoing conception of general education. The prevailing tenure, promotion, and salary system motivates faculty members to devote as much time as possible to specialized research and publication within their fields, rather than engage in coherent, interdisciplinary programs for undergraduates. Furthermore, departmental budgets are often based on the number of credit hours generated by a department's courses. Department heads negotiate and bargain for required courses that will generate more income. As a result, general education at many large universities has often been shaped, not by a coherent philosophy of education, but by compromise between competing parties, a compromise called "distribution requirements," which a student may satisfy by choosing the required number of courses—usually two, sometimes three—from each of three or four different categories, such as humanities, social science, life science, and physical science. The courses available in these categories are usually surveys or introductory courses to a specific discipline. And the instruction is usually given in large lecture rooms with little opportunity or incentive for discussion. No wonder that students typically want to "get these requirements out of the way."

The only universities that avoid such deplorable arrangements for delivering general education are ones that have a deep philosophical and institutional commitment to such aims as those delineated by Daniel Bell. Universities like Columbia, Chicago, Notre Dame, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and Harvard have established long-standing traditions of liberal education over many decades. Their large endowments enable them to honor their respective traditions without subservience to the practice of measuring the worth of course offerings by cost-per-credit-hour and potential for producing revenue. In other American universities, battles over turf by narrow-minded professors have too often precluded rational discussion of what their students actually need in addition to specialized knowledge.

In order to overcome such obstacles, university faculties and administrators need to discover a new, fresh, philosophically sound foundation for liberal education. If we look much farther back in the history of education in the West, we can behold an evolving conception of human nature that has generated the endeavors proper to liberal education, endeavors that have been obscured or distorted in modern times. What follows in this essay is an attempt to uncover those lost ideas, dust them off, and advocate for their restoration in contemporary thinking about the aims and strategies of general education in our time.

2

Our story begins in the halcyon days of Athenian democracy, when a group of professional educators called sophists earned their living by teaching citizens how to

argue. The most notable sophist—the term was not pejorative then— was Isocrates, whom the philosopher Socrates singled out for special praise because he combined eloquence with wisdom. But most of the other sophists Socrates seems to have deplored for what he perceived to be their unjustified pretention to knowledge. (In fact, Isocrates himself wrote a speech *Against the Sophists*.) According to Plato, Socrates practiced a method of education consisting of *irony* (to expose and confound the arrogance and smugness of men who pretended to know it all), *maieutic* (or intellectual midwifery to enable disputants to discover within themselves some kernel of value buried in their mostly mistaken ideas), and, once adherence to petrified opinion (which Mark Twain says “never broke a chain or freed a human soul”) had been demolished, the third step was *dialectic* (reasoning together in an effort to get at the truth of things). Socrates’ aim was not to defeat an opponent in debate; that was a skill purportedly taught by the sophists; but to help himself and others gain insight into the ideas that underlie the visible world. The Socratic method is evident in the philosophical dialogues of Plato, many of its results in the discourses of his student Aristotle.

Like Plato, Aristotle was himself a teacher, and their city, Athens, became the most celebrated center of intellectual culture in the ancient world down through the heyday of the Roman Empire. Through his treatises on logic, physics, biology, zoology, astronomy, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, politics, rhetoric, and poetry, Aristotle became the foremost authority in most of the fields of knowledge throughout the Mediterranean world, and remained so in Europe for over 2,000 years. His most famous pupil was a youth from Macedonia named Alexander. The boy studied in Athens until he could shift for himself, then went out and conquered the world.

Although Aristotle’s worldview diverged from that of his master, he did carry forward several of Plato’s teachings, which formed the contours of *paideia*, the distinctively Athenian educational program on which the political, intellectual, and aesthetic life of the *polis* was built and bequeathed to subsequent generations.² Among these ideas was the distinction between *techné* (skill in making things) and *hexis* (virtue, that is, deeply ingrained strength of soul enabling one to live honorably, do what is right and fitting—and thus be happy). What are these virtues, and how can they be acquired? Can they be taught?

Roman thinking about these questions led to the appropriation of Greek educational ideas and practices. Typically, a patrician in the Roman Republic would study in Athens before assuming civic responsibilities in governance or the military. That is why, for example, the many speeches and dialogues of the most learned and eloquent Roman senator, Marcus Tullius Cicero, bear the unmistakable marks of Greek *paideia*. Not to deny the Romans their own originality, particularly in the fields

² The classic work on this subject is by Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939-1944). See also his work *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961).

of technology and administration, it has become commonplace to recognize the Romans as great imitators of things Greek in nearly every field of art and learning. Indeed the Romans elevated imitation to an art, which, if enacted properly, would produce extremely valuable insights and the ability to set forth one's ideas persuasively, whether in writing, speaking, or the plastic arts. Not slavish but creative imitation became the dominant pedagogical method in Roman schools.

The method of learning through imitation was set forth by Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, who taught rhetoric at Rome in the first century C.E. In his long, comprehensive treatise *Institutio oratoria* ("Education [or Formation] in Oratory") Quintilian describes how famous Latin authors studied, analyzed, and absorbed the thought, style, and feeling of specific Greek authors in the fields of history, moral philosophy, oratory, epic poetry, lyric poetry, tragedy, and comedy. In Book X, Quintilian names the best Greek authors in each genre, discriminating carefully among their felicities and occasional defects and pointing out how Roman authors have benefited from using such models for their own purposes.

Quintilian says that the student should begin with Homer, "the source of every stream and river—a model and an inspiration for every department of eloquence." Homer should be compared with Virgil in Latin. Hesiod is valuable for moral philosophy and as an example of a tempered style, avoiding bombast on the one hand and monotony on the other. Pindar is the greatest lyric poet; one should compare him with Horace, the best satirist and the only Roman lyricist worth reading. Euripides is the most useful of all the tragedians to the forensic orator; Menander imitates him well. Of the historians, Thucydides and Herodotus are best, but neither is perfect: one has what the other lacks. They may be compared profitably with Sallust and Livy respectively. Demosthenes and Cicero, of course, are the greatest orators, and Plato the greatest philosopher. But it is especially Cicero whom one should study: "Cicero, who devoted himself heart and soul to the imitation of the Greeks, succeeded in reproducing the force of Demosthenes, the copious flow of Plato, and the charm of Isocrates" (X,i.108). Quintilian explains that Cicero made the best qualities of his models his own; he assimilated them so well that his listeners were not aware of "mere imitations" but of Cicero's unique genius. Quintilian speaks further of the value of creative imitation:

It is from these and other authors worthy of our study that we must draw our stock of words, the variety of our figures and our methods of composition, while we must form our minds on the model of every excellence. For there can be no doubt that in art no small portion of our task lies in imitation, since, although invention [*i.e.*, discovery] came first and is all-important, it is expedient to imitate whatever has been invented with success. And it is a universal rule of life that we should wish to copy what we approve in others. (X,ii,1-2)

But, says he, it takes more than imitation to achieve excellence. We must also strike out on our own and make discoveries, for there is no progress without discovery,

since every imitation is necessarily inferior to its model. Authentic imitation is not a parody of stylistic mannerisms. Rather it consists in appropriating the habits of critical thinking and careful expression of one's chosen model—learning to *think* like a master.

The influence of Cicero and Quintilian has been profound in Western Europe, particularly in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, when Renaissance humanists rediscovered, studied, edited, translated, and creatively imitated classical texts in every genre. In the early sixteenth century Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam gave the call *ad fontes!*—"to the fountains" of wisdom and eloquence, which are to be found in the ancient world of Greece, Rome, and Israel: in pagan Greek and Latin classics, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Greek New Testament, and the early commentaries on Sacred Scripture. Erasmus and his circle, which included Sir Thomas More, Sir Thomas Elyot, and Roger Ascham in England, and Juan Luis Vives in Spain, were themselves influenced by Francesco Petrarca, Vittorino da Feltre, and Baldessare Castiglione (among others) in Italy. What united these and other scholars was a common and passionate interest in restoring the vitality of a decadent civilization through a reform of education from grammar school through university. They hoped to reincarnate the best of the classical tradition in their own milieu. Nothing less than a rebirth of the "best that had been known and thought in the world" (Matthew Arnold's phrase) would do.

What they undertook was not just academic. It was practical. They wanted to raise up good, wise, effective leaders for the highest positions of government throughout Europe. They advocated a way of life that would secure peace and justice in every realm. Many humanists felt that medieval scholasticism had become arid, rigidly intellectual and dogmatic, incapable of reaching the hearts of people. Without abandoning the seven liberal arts (the *trivium* of the language arts: grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the *quadrivium* of the mathematical arts: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), the humanists were intent on enabling their students to cultivate the *ars bene vivendi* 'the art of living well'—not an acquisitive life, spent for the sake of money, power, and self-aggrandizement, but an honest, just, and generous life for the sake of the common good. Hence, there was a moral spirit of reform in the educational movement they espoused. This is clear from such early sixteenth-century writings as Castiglione's long "courtesy book" in the form of a dialogue, *The Book of the Courtier*, Erasmus's treatise *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Thomas More's satire *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia*, Juan Luis Vives's *On the Causes of the Corruption of the Arts* and his revolutionary treatise *On the Education of a Christian Woman* (an apologia for Thomas More's school for his own children and those of his household servants, boys and girls alike), and Sir Thomas Elyot's exhaustive manual of education *The Book Named the Governor*.

The goal of humanistic education was expressed in the Latin phrase *vir bonum atque dicendi peritus* 'the man who is not only good but also skilled in speaking.' Hence, wisdom and eloquence, *prudentia et eloquentia*, was the twofold objective of their program. The program consisted of five specific subjects of instruction that

comprised the *studia humanitatis* ‘studies proper to humanity as such’—that is, those studies that do most to make people wise, good, and able to communicate effectively, namely

Grammar, the mastery of Greek and Latin;
Rhetoric, the art of choosing among the available means of persuasion;
Poetry, the study of epic, lyric, and dramatic literature;
History, the study of the Greek and Roman historians;
Moral Philosophy, principles of ethical behavior based on an understanding of the human person and the human community.

These were not the only subjects studied in grammar schools and universities, but they were the ones that humanist reformers emphasized. (The word *humanism*, by the way, was not coined until a German scholar in the nineteenth century came up with *Humanismus* to designate this group of subjects. The word *humanist* derives from the Italian *umanista*, fifteenth-century Italian student slang for a professor of the *studia humanitatis*. Compare the student slang *jurista* for a professor of law.)³

In each of these five fields, Latin authors were juxtaposed with Greek authors, and the tutor employed Quintilian’s methods of comparing and contrasting authors in the same genre. After careful analysis of two comparable works, a typical student exercise would be to write an original composition in his native tongue in imitation of the way in which, say, Virgil imitates Homer in epic poetry, or Sallust imitates Thucydides in history, or Cicero imitates Plato in moral philosophy, and so forth. The idea is to become as learned and eloquent in one’s vernacular as the best writers in Latin and Greek, so that English, for example, would eventually become as flexible, precise, and elegant an instrument of thought and speech as those pristine tongues.

In order to fashion a successful creative imitation, a student must assimilate the *way of thinking* about the Greek text exemplified by the Roman author. Roger Ascham, the tutor of Elizabeth before she became queen of England, explained in detail how to do that methodically, in his book *The Schoolmaster* (London, 1570). To the extent that this enterprise succeeded, the result would be the creation of habits of thought, feeling, and speech as learned and eloquent as the best in ancient times (which was, for the humanists, the best they’d ever known). In this way they hoped to recreate the spirit of classical civilization and renew the face of Europe. That was their high ambition: the development of practical or learned eloquence in support of the common good. Not merely the contemplation or discussion of learned eloquence, but the development and application of it. Not learning alone (which is ineffectual unless communicated well), nor eloquence without learning (which is nothing more than slick talk), but the combination of the two in such a way that style subserves the communication of truth. Studies were to serve practical ends. Not for just any end a

³ For this information I have relied principally on the findings of the distinguished Columbia professor Paul Oskar Kristeller. See, for example, his *Renaissance Thought*, vols. 1 & 2 (Harper Torchbooks, 1961, 1965).

man might arbitrarily choose, but justice, the common weal, the good of European society—a society torn apart by religious strife, wars, greed, shortages, poverty, huge gaps between the rich and the poor, and exploitation. Sound familiar?

The humanist movement was rooted in the civic spirit of the Roman Republic, as exemplified especially by Cicero. A paramount reason why English and northern European humanists in particular attached central importance to the Roman civic spirit and to Quintilian's educational program is that the humanists, motivated by strong religious commitments, read the classics of pagan antiquity in much the same way that several early church fathers had read them, perceiving that the careful training of mind, heart, and tongue would advance the Judaeo-Christian mission to build the kingdom of God on earth. (It is a mistake to assume that the humanists were anti-religious; all the evidence refutes that assumption.)

The strategy of humanistic education presupposed a definite conception of what it means to be human. Despite many humanists' fashionable denunciations of scholastic philosophers in the early modern period, certain attitudes, ideas, and traditions from the high Middle Ages persisted well into the seventeenth century.⁴ Among these was the so-called doctrine of the four cardinal virtues, which can be traced back through Cicero and Aristotle to Plato. But it was Aristotle who first gave a systematic account of the cardinal virtues and demonstrated their social and political importance. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas appropriated these views of Aristotle and elaborated on them in much greater detail.⁵ Thus, the doctrine of the virtues and the concept of civic duties became a paramount preoccupation of educators from the high Middle Ages to the early modern period, when humanists drew up their distinctive plan of studies. Humanist educators in the Renaissance laid the groundwork both for what later became the famous program of *Literae Humaniores*, or "Greats," at Oxford and for the general education movement in the United States. A closer look at this historical development may help focus our thinking more precisely and more fruitfully on the challenge of formulating a meaningful philosophy of general education for our time.

Phronesis

In the Sixth Book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁶ Aristotle draws a distinction between two kinds of wisdom: *sophia* 'intellectual wisdom, or understanding all things in their interrelatedness' and *phronesis* 'moral intelligence, or practical wisdom, the ability to decide what is to be done in a particular circumstance.' *Sophia*,

⁴ See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943).

⁵ For Thomas Aquinas's treatise on the cardinal virtues, see the *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Questions 58-61, and Part II-II, Questions 47-170.

⁶ Most useful is the translation, with introduction and notes, by Martin Ostwald, published by the Library of Liberal Arts (Bobbs-Merrill) in 1962.

which is born of a scientific understanding of humanity and the universe, is the foundation of *phronesis* in that it provides guidelines for making good decisions. As we learn from Aristotle's *Politics*, the exercise of *phronesis*, in turn, facilitates the achievement of *sophia*, now in the sense of a celebration of existence and of knowledge and the arts. In other words, the rightful exercise of *phronesis*, making practical decisions in the everyday world and thereby discharging one's economic and political responsibilities, makes possible the activities of *skolé* 'leisure,'⁷ which is the disposition of a mind unfettered to the process of work—a state in which poetry, music, the other fine arts, and the philosophical act (*theoria*), or contemplation, can flourish.

The practical aim of *Paideia* was to enable an individual to acquire the virtue (power or strength) of *phronesis* together with a grasp of the principles that should guide the exercise of choice, namely, the ingredients of justice in its several dimensions. Also required are an experiential grasp of whatever circumstances attend the moment in which one is living and a well-informed knowledge of history, so that one can assess the various possibilities of action, imagine their probable consequences, and choose which alternative is most likely to achieve the desideratum of justice, or the common good.

Not only must the citizen of Athenian democracy do this in his individual affairs, he must also acquire practical wisdom in the affairs of the *polis*. Aristotle and his followers were intent upon forming leaders capable of persuading others to pursue the common good intelligently. It was not enough to be able to think well; one had also to speak well and to engage astutely in politics in order to get things done. But in order to participate rationally in the life of the *polis*, one had to have two other interior strengths, or virtues, namely fortitude and temperance.

Building on the doctrine of the four cardinal virtues developed by Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, Thomas Aquinas defined fortitude as a readiness to suffer pain and even death for the sake of justice. It is not to be confused with bravado or machismo. "The praise of fortitude is justice," wrote Thomas. Temperance he defined as balance and inner harmony of thinking, feeling, and willing—or what Americans call "having it all together." Each of these virtues is a mean between extremes. Fortitude (from *fortis* 'strong') is a mean between the extremes of cowardice (paralyzing fear) and reckless bravado (daring). Temperance is a mean between the extremes of unrestrained indulgence in sense appetites and rigid repression of all impulses and desires.

⁷ Ironically, this is the root of our English word 'school,' which too often consists of busy work, not leisure. *Skolé* is not just "free time"; it is an attitude of alert openness, a state of mind essential to philosophical thought, which, as Plato says, "begins in wonder." See Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (New York, 1954). See also his book *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (New York, 1965).

The Latin translation of Greek *phronesis* is *providentia*, from *pro* ‘ahead’ + *videns* ‘seeing’. (The usual English translation is ‘prudence,’ from the Latin *prudencia*, which is a diminutive of *providentia*.) Hence, the virtue of practical wisdom consists of foresight and requires understanding, memory, and imagination. These are the principal faculties that the *studia humanitatis* were set up to develop. The development of imagination is the province of poetry; the development of memory, that of history; the development of understanding, moral philosophy and training in analysis; the ability to communicate effectively, rhetoric; access to all of these, grammar, that is, languages.

Aquinas points out that all four cardinal virtues are essential for happiness; the absence or deficiency of any one of them can wreck the other three: Without a deep commitment to justice, prudence becomes cunning for private gain. Without prudential judgment, blunders result despite good will. Without temperance, one’s passions, desires, and wishes supplant reason. Without fortitude, the other three virtues are useless; nothing gets done.

So, we are back to the question: Can these virtues be taught? How may one acquire practical wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and an understanding of justice and a commitment to it? Diverse pedagogues have addressed this question. The answers are by no means clear. The humanists, however, appear to have been persuaded that, while morality cannot be instilled in anyone, the three subjects of history, poetry, and moral philosophy can stir the feelings of a student if presented properly and augmented with music and dancing (as Sir Thomas Elyot urges⁸). If a child’s inborn love of learning is fostered and encouraged, and children are not punished for making mistakes in the classroom, and if teachers themselves love and take delight in teaching, the truth and beauty of great works in these fields of study will be felt along the blood and, as it were, creep into the soul of the child. This same spirit of humanistic learning applies to every year of instruction through university studies.

Although educators often give lip service to “educating the whole person,” most liberal arts programs give priority to training the intellect to the neglect of the heart and feelings. But as Alfred North Whitehead points out, the successful introduction of any subject depends on an affective component; a “romance” with the subject needs to be generated before requiring students to undertake the demanding work of “precision,” mastering the principles and methods of a discipline.⁹ Of course, music and the fine arts also have an important role in bringing forth the integration of intellect and heart. Unfortunately, many such endeavors turn out to be shallow, boring “art appreciation” courses and the like.

⁸ *The Book Named the Governor* (London, 1531), ed. S. E. Lehmborg (Everyman’s Library, 1962), Bk. I, chs. 22-25. For the other cardinal virtues, see Bk. III.

⁹ See Whitehead’s classic essay “The Rhythm of Education” (1922), in the *Aims of Education, and Other Essays* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

One further valuable component of general education needs to be mentioned: the contribution that experiential learning can make to the development of self-knowledge and practical wisdom. Only a few colleges—most famously and successfully the old Antioch—integrate experiential learning into their general education curricula, usually through an obligatory work-study program. The advantages of such supplements to mere “book learning” are obvious.

The most enduring legacy of the humanist movement remains the program of *Literae Humaniores*, or “Greats,” at Oxford. A reading knowledge of classical Greek and Latin has always been required for admission to the program, which consists of “training in the way to read texts, in order to produce a distinctive mind.” It employs the specific methods of imitation propounded by Quintilian and adopted by Renaissance humanists. As two spokesmen for the Oxford program stated in 1962, “. . . it is said to produce men who are unrivalled as expositors and judges of any situation or set of facts placed before them. . . . It is probably true to say that no single definite curriculum or study in any one university in modern times has produced so many famous men in public life, in learning and letters.”¹⁰ Of course, this program would be utterly impracticable for most students and faculty in an American university; indeed, it’s open to only a tiny elite at Oxford. But it stands as a living demonstration of the wisdom and endurance of the humanist legacy.

A Suggestion

My argument in this essay on the history of general, or liberal, education is that many colleges and universities over the past forty years or so have not taken the task of general education seriously enough, because the majority of administrators and professors, ignorant of its history, have lost sight of its most important aims and have thus allowed extraneous factors to influence the structure of the undergraduate curriculum. My suggestion is that, if the leading aim of general education is defined as the acquisition of practical wisdom, this objective can serve as the guiding criterion for the design of general education programs. It is a criterion that all can agree to in principle. The concept of *phronesis*, or moral intelligence and practical wisdom, provides a simple yet precise criterion for measuring the varied curricular components that faculty planners may propose for general education.

Program design should begin with an identification of the generic capacities a person needs for making practical decisions in any circumstance. Increasingly, those decisions, whether in public policy, business and industry, foreign relations, health and welfare, or everyday domestic activities, require the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of technical and scientific data from more than one special discipline. Prudential judgment requires the ability of specialists in different fields to work together in groups, to communicate well, to listen and learn from one another, and to

¹⁰ Bell, pp. 292f., quoting J. L. Brierly and H. V. Hodson, “*Literae Humaniores*,” in the *Handbook to the University of Oxford*, 1962 (London: Oxford UP, 1962), pp. 149f.

reach decisions. These are among the requisite abilities of which the planners of a general education program should take cognizance. The task places an enormous burden upon the faculty, because, by and large, faculty members are specialists and no single discipline can lay claim to all the expertise needed for complex decisions.

That is why—or so it appears to me—the pressing need for a good general education is best served when professors from a wide variety of disciplines collaborate both in the planning and in the delivery of the program. There are precedents for this seemingly impossible task, one of which was the enterprise of Monteith College, in which a diverse faculty planned and taught courses together—and thereby learned from one another—in order to bring students to levels of competence that transcend departmental divisions. (Also, students learned the art of group discussion.) Clearly, sustained collaboration on the scale that is needed is impossible without a strong institutional commitment supported by faculty, administrators, boards of control, and alumni. The main challenge faced by faculty charged with designing effective liberal education on the undergraduate level is to balance specialism with interdisciplinary collaboration, to balance the pursuit of new knowledge with a commitment to general education. No easy task. Yet, without a serious commitment to, and provision for, both types of education, the notation “INCOMPLETE” should appear on every student’s transcript and on every university’s external evaluation.

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