

Inquiring Minds topic – 24 August 2018

John Moore, Moderator

What About College Education Content?

These articles present contrasting views of what the content of a college education should be. The first, by Jeffrey Selingo, represents an extension of the view that higher education's purpose is to prepare students for work – a vocational emphasis that dates back at least to the Morrill Act of 1862. The second, by Russell Kirk, argues that the role of higher education "...is the cultivation of the person's own intellect and imagination, for the person's own sake." In so doing, it has the side benefit that students so prepared will be better citizens. Some questions for discussion:

- Selingo claims that replacing the traditional college major with cross-disciplinary programs organized to address specific problems is better suited to 21st century requirements than the traditional program organized around disciplinary majors. Do you agree? What's wrong with existing cross-disciplinary programs that would be cured with this new approach?
- Selingo acknowledges the need to have a deep understanding of one specific subject but wants the curriculum to be broader than that (his "T" analogy). How is this different from practice today?
- Kirk's article articulates one vision of the liberal education. How important is this in the 21st century? Is it important for all college students?
- Can a four-year college program effectively meet both objectives? How?

It's Time to End College Majors as We Know Them

By Jeffrey J. Selingo

CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, MAY 20, 2018

At the dawn of the 20th century, the emerging industrial economy demanded that American colleges evolve from a curriculum that had focused almost solely on preparation for a handful of professions, such as law and the clergy, to one that was more vocational in nature.

Entirely new higher-education institutions — including the land-grant universities founded a few decades earlier — were started with the intention that disciplines like engineering, education, and architecture were subjects and majors that students should pursue in college. In 1908, even Harvard's president, Charles W. Eliot, endorsed the idea of electives in the curriculum, a clear indication that no longer could any one person really know everything worth knowing through a single major.

Now, more than a century later, higher-education institutions find themselves in a similar situation. This time, however, it's the digital economy instead of the industrial economy demanding a new set of skills. The problem is that the taxonomy of academic majors that broadened significantly over the past hundred years can no longer keep pace with the churn of knowledge needed to compete in nearly every profession.

As the work-force analytics firm Burning Glass Technologies showed in a 2015 report, so-called [hybrid jobs](#) — which require a set of skills that aren't as neatly packaged as a major in college — are growing quickly. For example, the report said employers' demand for skills in digital marketing and mobile development had doubled over five years, and demand for data-science skills had tripled. Even colleges known for reforming their curriculum are often unable to move fast enough, nor is it worthwhile for them to do so, given the speed of change in many industries.

The future of work calls for something more radical: the elimination of academic majors as we have come to know them.

While cross-disciplinary research has long been a focus of many scholars, majors for the most part continue to be controlled by departments that are cut off from one another. The current collection of majors is how faculty members are organized on many campuses, and how budgets are allocated between schools and departments.

One urgent need is to make what students study in college truly span all academic disciplines. Right now, in choosing a major, undergraduates automatically narrow their focus at a time when they need both breadth and depth. The learning that is called for has been referred to as T-shaped: The vertical bar of the T represents deep understanding of one subject (the current conception of the major). But just as critical is the horizontal stroke, which allows people to work across a variety of complex subject areas with ease and confidence.

Joseph Aoun, president of Northeastern University, in his book *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (MIT Press, 2017), has suggested a complementary learning model that he calls "humanics." It blends technical, social, and data skills, and, in the process, develops "higher-order mental skills" like critical thinking, systems thinking, entrepreneurship, and cultural agility, enabling people to easily toggle among various jobs and tasks.

In such a scenario, we can imagine clusters of study designed around the knottiest problems facing the world — supplies of food, water, and energy; climate change; digital literacy; the future of work itself.

Dispensing with the historical array of majors might also ensure that colleges don't simply copy one another's lineups of programs, but rather create collections of subjects that play to institutional strengths.

Take, for example, Arizona State University, where I'm a special adviser to the president. It has created entirely new schools and colleges, where students can earn bachelor's degrees in innovation in society and the science of health-care delivery. As the university's president, Michael Crow, [has asked](#), Why does every institution need a political-science department? A chemistry department? "We should be offering students various pathways for learning while retaining the grounding knowledge," he says.

Another key reform is to put an expiration date on these new pathways of learning. Colleges are adept at starting majors but almost incapable of stopping them. Each new cluster of knowledge should be reviewed every year for necessary changes and every five years to determine if it should be dissolved or extended.

Finally, don't force students to choose one of these knowledge pathways before they set foot on campus, as many colleges do now with majors. Give them an opportunity in their first year — or preferably starting through online exploration the summer before — to find the appropriate fit for their interests.

Over the past year, several national [surveys](#) conducted by Gallup and Strada Education Network have shown a disconnect between what students learn in college, their majors, and their ability to find a fulfilling life and career. More than half of 90,000 people surveyed, for example, said they would change their major, institution, or degree if they had to do it all over again. The more relevant their college courses were in their work and lives, adults said, the more likely they were to feel that their education was worth the cost.

Just as at the turn of the last century, higher education must respond with new educational pathways to match the complexity of society and the economy of tomorrow.

Jeffrey J. Selingo is founding director of the Academy for Innovative Higher Education Leadership, a partnership between Arizona State University and Georgetown University, and author of There Is Life After College: What Parents and Students Should Know About Navigating School to Prepare for the Jobs of Tomorrow (William Morrow, 2016).

What's the Point of Getting a Liberal Arts Education?

Russell Kirk

[Intercollegiate Review Online](#), Spring 2018

[This article was first published many years ago, so the language doesn't always conform to current conventions.]

Our term "liberal education" is far older than the use of the word "liberal" as a term of politics. What we now call "liberal studies" go back to classical times; while political liberalism commences only in the first decade of the nineteenth century. By "liberal education" we mean an ordering and integrating of knowledge for the benefit of the free person—as contrasted with technical or professional schooling, now somewhat vaingloriously called "career education."

The idea of a liberal education is suggested by two passages I am about to quote to you. The first of these is extracted from Sir William Hamilton's *Metaphysics*:

Now the perfection of man as an end and the perfection of man as a mean or instrument are not only not the same, they are in reality generally opposed. And as these two perfections are different, so the training requisite for their acquisition is not identical, and has accordingly been distinguished by different names. The one is styled liberal, the other professional education—the branches of knowledge cultivated for these purposes being called respectively liberal and professional, or liberal and lucrative, sciences.

Hamilton, you will observe, informs us that one must not expect to make money out of proficiency in the liberal arts. The higher aim of "man as an end," he tells us, is the object of liberal learning. This is a salutary admonition in our time, when more and more parents fondly thrust their offspring, male and female, into schools of business administration. What did Sir William Hamilton mean by "man as an end"? Why, to put the matter another way, he meant that the function of liberal learning is to order the human soul.

Now for my second quotation, which I take from James Russell Lowell. The study of the classics, Lowell writes, "is fitly called a liberal education, because it emancipates the mind from every narrow provincialism, whether of egoism or tradition, and is the apprenticeship that everyone must serve before becoming a free brother of the guild which passes the torch of life from age to age."

To put this truth after another fashion, Lowell tells us that a liberal education is intended to free us from captivity to time and place: to enable us to take long views, to understand what it is to be fully human—and to be able to pass on to generations yet unborn our common patrimony of culture. T. S. Eliot, in his lectures on "The Aims of Education" and elsewhere, made the same argument not many years ago. Neither Lowell nor Eliot labored under the illusion that the liberal discipline of the intellect would open the way to affluence.

So you will perceive that when I speak of the "conservative purpose" of liberal education, I do not mean that such a schooling is intended to be a prop somehow to business, industry, and established material interests. Neither, on the other hand, is a liberal education supposed to be a means for pulling down the economy and the state itself. No, liberal education goes about its work of conservation in a different fashion.

I mean that liberal education is conservative in this way: it defends order against disorder. In its practical effects, liberal education works for order in the soul, and order in the republic. Liberal learning enables those who benefit from its discipline to achieve some degree of harmony within themselves. As John Henry Newman put it, in Discourse V of his *Idea of a University*, by a liberal intellectual discipline, "a habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; of what...I have ventured to call the philosophical habit of mind."

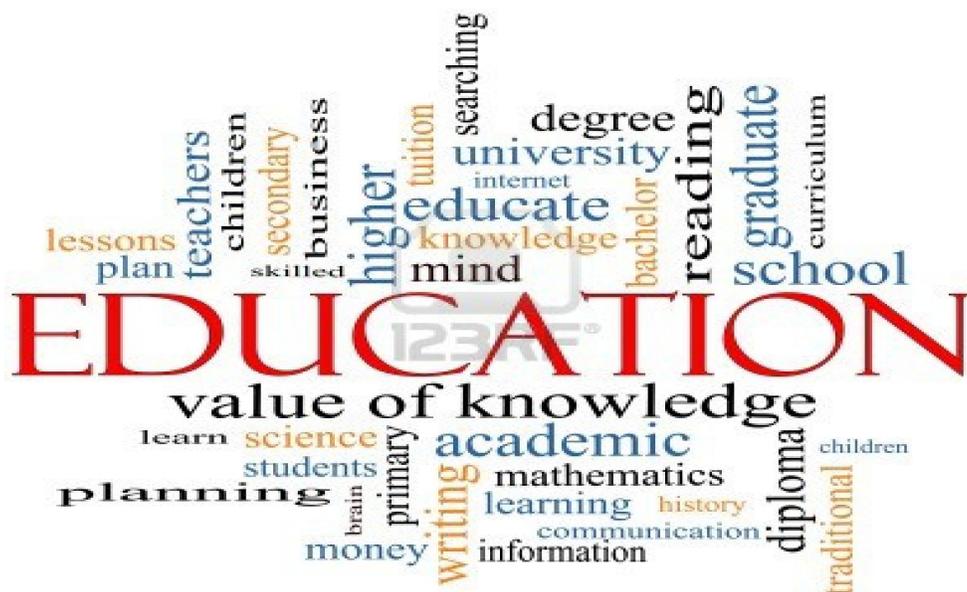
The primary purpose of a liberal education, then, is the cultivation of the person's own intellect and imagination, for the person's own sake. It ought not to be forgotten, in this mass-age when the state aspires to be all in all, that genuine education is something higher than an instrument of public policy. True education is meant to develop the individual human being, the person, rather than to serve the state. In all our talk about "serving national goals" and "citizenship education"—phrases that originated with John Dewey and his disciples—we tend to ignore the fact that schooling was not originated by the

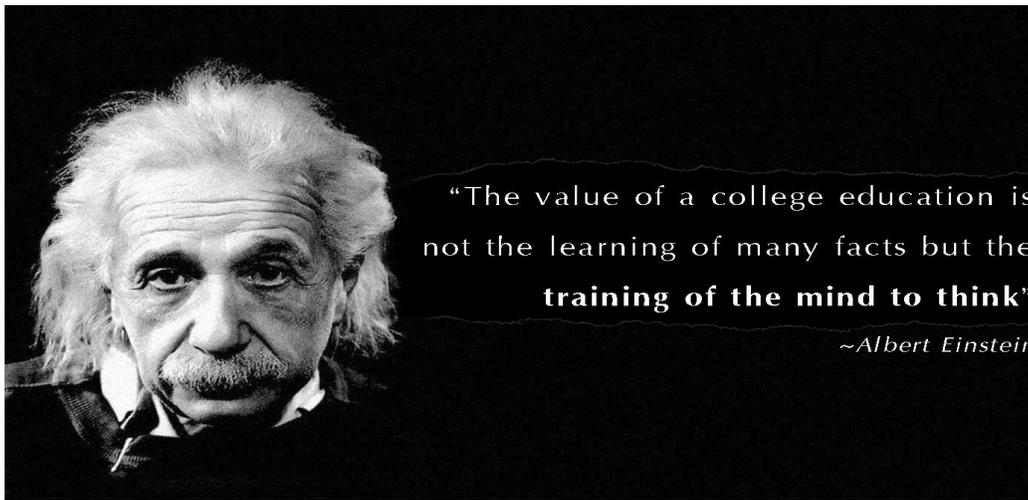
modern nation-state. Formal schooling actually commenced as an endeavor to acquaint the rising generation with religious knowledge: with awareness of the transcendent and with moral truths. Its purpose was not to indoctrinate a young person in civics, but rather to teach what it is to be a true human being, living within a moral order. The person has primacy in liberal education.

Yet a system of liberal education has a social purpose, or at least a social result, as well. It helps to provide a society with a body of people who become leaders in many walks of life, on a large scale or a small. It was the expectation of the founders of the early American colleges that there would be graduated from those little institutions young men, soundly schooled in old intellectual disciplines, who would nurture in the New World the intellectual and moral patrimony received from the Old World. And for generation upon generation, the American liberal-arts colleges (peculiar to North America) and later the liberal-arts schools and programs of American universities, did graduate young men and women who leavened the lump of the rough expanding nation, having acquired some degree of a philosophical habit of mind.

You will have gathered already that I do not believe it to be the primary function of formal schooling to "prepare boys and girls for jobs." If all schools, colleges, and universities were abolished tomorrow, still most young people would find lucrative employment, and means would exist, or would be developed, for training them for their particular types of work. Rather, I believe it to be the conservative mission of liberal learning to develop right reason among young people.

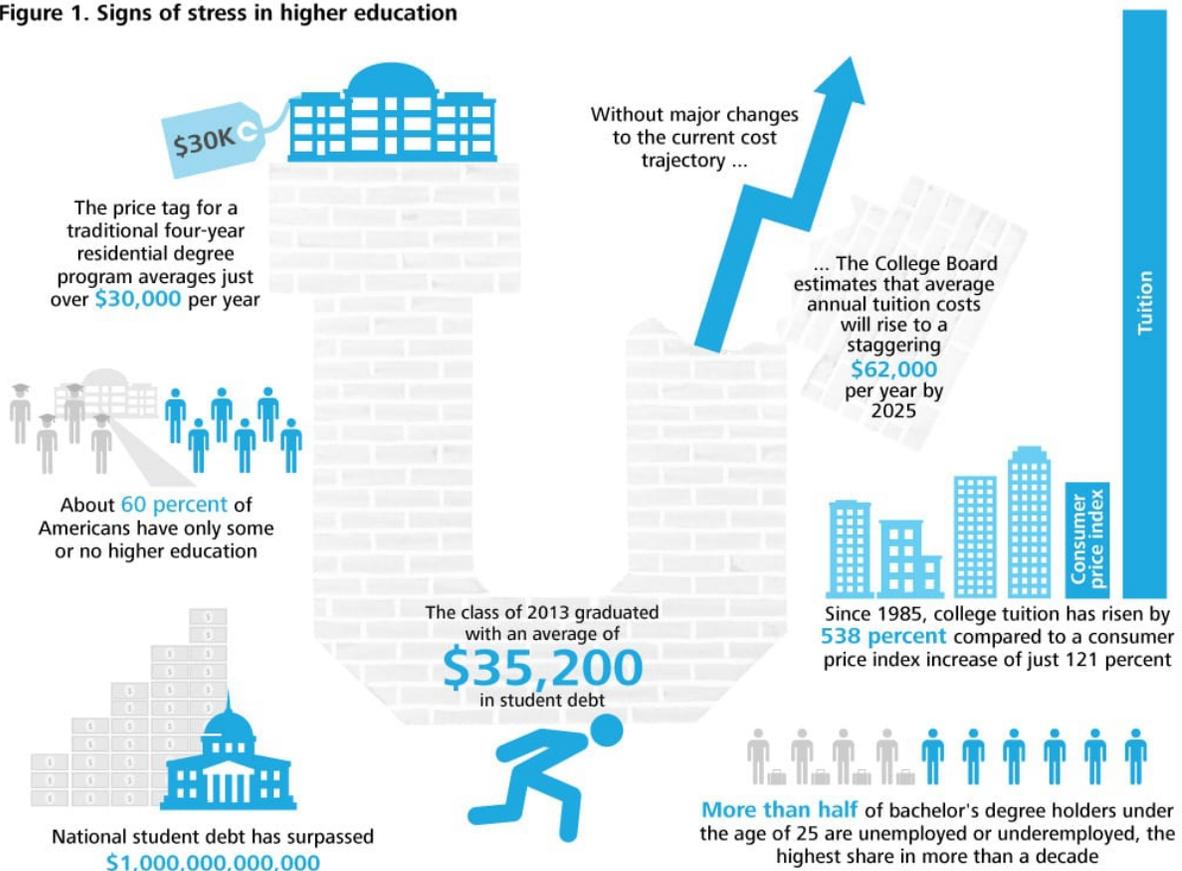
Not a few members of the staffs of liberal-arts colleges, it is true, resent being told that theirs is a conservative mission of any sort. When once I was invited to give a series of lectures on conservative thought at a long-established college, a certain professor objected indignantly, "Why, we can't have that sort of thing here: this is a *liberal* arts college!" He thought, doubtless sincerely, that the word "liberal" implied allegiance to some dim political orthodoxy, related somehow to the New Deal and its succeeding programs. Such was the extent of his liberal education. Nevertheless, whatever the private political prejudices of professors, the function of liberal education is to conserve a body of received knowledge and to impart an apprehension of order to the rising generation.





Do you agree with Einstein? How does this influence your response to the question of content?

Figure 1. Signs of stress in higher education



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