

Complacency and Its Consequences

• • •

Chester E. Finn, Jr. & Diane Ravitch

Chester E. Finn, Jr. is a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Diane Ravitch is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and at the Hoover Institution, and is a research professor at New York University.

Most such volumes end with a stirring summation of their key arguments, a recapitulation of the authors' major recommendations, and a clarion call for action. Yet if you've made it this far, you know what we and our fellow contributors believe: Liberal education is the best education for all children. We hope to see it reinvigorated and made available in all our schools. In the preceding pages, you've encountered scores of specific proposals, big and small, for its revival. These recommended actions are collected in Appendix A. In short, they come down to a few key steps: recruiting talented teachers who themselves enjoyed a rigorous liberal education; arming them with a solid, content-rich, common curriculum; and holding them and their schools to account for preparing students broadly, not just in "basic skills."

If this doesn't sound revolutionary, that's because it's not. After all, liberal education is by its very nature traditional. It has been around for thousands of years. And it seeks to conserve and transmit the best wisdom and noblest ideals of the past, while preparing young people for a future that cannot be mapped in advance and that will therefore reward breadth more than hyper-specialization. We fundamentally believe that good education is good education is good education—and good for everyone, not just the elites who have long found ways to procure it for their kids. Nor are our proposals path-breaking. They represent a vision of standards-based reform that the two of us have pressed for a quarter-century.

So rather than bombard you with more of the same, let us conclude this collection of essays in a non-traditional manner. You know what we *hope* will happen vis-à-vis liberal learning in this country. Let us now consider what is *most likely* to happen, and contemplate the consequences.

Four Disconcerting Trends

In order for liberal education to be reborn—at least for Everyman and Everywoman—its advocates must overturn four trends that point in the opposite direction:

1. **The gradual death of liberal learning in higher education.** David Steiner’s essay points out that career preparation and professional training have replaced liberal education as the primary objective of most U.S. colleges and universities. Unabated, this trend bodes ill for our K-12 system. First, like all bad (and some good) ideas in higher education, it trickles down into the high schools and signals to students and teachers that a broad education is not valued. This encourages courses such as Advanced Placement to be narrowed to specialty topics rather than broad surveys. Even more perniciously, this trend makes it less likely that future K-12 teachers will themselves receive a proper liberal education. As E. D. Hirsch and Dana Gioia note, it’s impossible for teachers to impart a liberal education to their students if they never obtained one themselves. Despite Sandra Stotsky’s excellent ideas, no amount of “professional development” can fully compensate.
2. **A standards-and-accountability movement increasingly focused only on “basic skills.”** We’ve learned from Martin West that schools are responding predictably, if disappointingly, to the incentives created by NCLB and kindred state accountability systems, which obsess about reading and math skills but generally ignore the acquisition of knowledge. West’s analysis shows that a different kind of accountability system—one that includes testing in science and history, too—can foster a broader curriculum. Yet we know from experience that politicians and their supporters in business and industry would rather duck the hard questions of what history or science or literature students must learn, which causes them to end up slighting these subjects altogether. Yet we reap what we sow—and we teach what we test—and narrow accountability systems foster narrow schooling, not only for the high-poverty, high-minority students most at risk of not making “adequate yearly progress,” but in almost all public schools.
3. **Growing support for math and science at the expense of the rest of the curriculum.** Matt Gandal, Michael Cohen, and John Kraman confirm that industry leaders are worried about America’s supply of scientists, engineers, and technicians. They have therefore organized a shrewd campaign to press Congress and state legislatures to take strong action to reverse the decline of “STEM” students by creating all sorts of special schools, programs, funding

streams, and rules. That approach is half-right, but without a broader vision for education—such as the one eloquently expressed by Dana Gioia—we are apt to produce technicians instead of innovators. We certainly won't produce leaders with the vision to steer the nation and its communities (or its business firms) toward a bright future.

- 4. Widening gaps.** Combine these education trends with the dominant socio-economic story of our age—the accelerating advantage of the have-a-lots over the have-littles—and we see a worsening achievement gap, not its opposite. For the well-to-do may be the only ones in a position to purchase a liberal education for their young. A few top private schools will remain committed to liberal learning, as will elite private colleges. Ample after-school and summer school programs, “virtual” offerings and computer software, will supplement the skimpy offerings of conventional schools. Wealthy kids will have the luxury to study philosophy and art, music and history, while their less-fortunate peers fill in bubbles. Some of these affluent graduates may drift but others will become the next generation of corporate titans, political leaders, hedge fund managers, and dot-com entrepreneurs. The less advantaged will see narrower opportunities due to their narrower educations. Some will find no opportunities at all, which frustration will tempt them to prey upon the fortunate, who in turn will retreat into gated communities, exclusive clubs, and private this-and-thats, thereby widening the rifts in our society and worsening its prospects for cohesion, civility, and social progress.

What will be the ultimate result of these four trends? Unless they are halted and reversed, we will gradually enter our own Dark Ages in which liberal education is restricted to the fortunate few while the masses consume the economy's crumbs and the sugary temptations of pop culture. Sure, history “buffs” and literature “fanatics” and art “patrons” will survive. Our increasingly fractured media will respond to their niche interests, just as they serve others who like NASCAR or poker. But notions of a common culture—beyond the lowest-common denominator—will recede.

Newspapers will lose more readers and will either dumb down their content or disappear. Voters will become even less informed, less engaged, and less apt to cast their ballots. (In time, more will vote for “survivors” and winners and beauties on TV shows.) And if this dire scenario plays out, the American vision of a democratic education system nourishing a democratic society will perish.

Too gloomy? Perhaps. But as David Ferrero argues, those of us who care deeply about liberal education seem to be a dying (or at least aging and retiring) breed. It will soon be time to pass the torch to a new generation of advocates and intellectuals who can stand up for the virtues of a virtuous education. We are currently working—with many of this volume’s contributors—to catalyze an organization that can lead this charge for years to come, that can pursue the policy proposals listed in the appendix, and that can communicate the vision and arguments of this book to key opinion leaders, policymakers, and the public. We earnestly hope that it succeeds.

It may already be too late. There may already be too few Americans left who appreciate the soul-nourishing benefits of a liberal education, the “pleasure, beauty, and wonder,” as Dana Gioia says. The worrisome trends described above may have gained too much ground to recover.

We hope not. We’ll keep pushing as long as we have strength and breath. But this cause needs many more allies, advocates, and partisans. Can we count you among them?