# W(h)ither Liberal Education?
# A Modest Defense of Humanistic Schooling in the Twenty-first Century

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## Introduction

The traditional liberal arts have been losing their voice over the last 20 years among the reform elites who shape public discourse and policy making about education. Liberal arts advocates have literally been dying off and their successors are few and marginal. Education professionals have always defined themselves explicitly against traditional models of learning as part of their effort to be recognized as scientific and innovative. But the waning of the liberal arts also reflects a broader triumph of instrumentalism, of schooling conceived primarily as a service commodity whose priority is to serve the economic interests of students and those they'll one day work for.

The situation is more complicated than that, however. Although liberal education has taken a back seat among advocates who look to schools to address perceived crises in economic development and social mobility, many educators and reformers do espouse ideas about the proper form and content of general education for American children. These advocates reject more traditional conceptions of the liberal arts, but they do aspire to provide all students with a K–12 education that goes beyond basic skills and workforce development to what's variously called *paideia*, *bildung*, or *humanitas*—that is, the forging of *good persons* through an education that is humanistic in both content and spirit. I believe the continued relevance and vitality of the traditional view have been unfairly denied in recent years. But I'm not looking for a fight. I think it is important to forge alliances among the various advocates for liberal learning that is grounded in some plausible conception of *paideia*. The pluralism among educators and reformers could be a good thing, provided that all reasonable approaches can be accommodated and nurtured so that all children have access to some form of liberal general education. Therefore, in my "modest" defense of traditional liberal arts education—which I define as sustained engagement with ideas, artifacts, persons, and events said to constitute a "Western tradi-

tion" or shared cultural heritage—I don't assert that this traditional view is superior to its rivals. Rather, I argue that people who are educated in the way I describe acquire important skills and knowledge, enjoy a legitimate form of the good life, and make distinctive contributions as thinkers and citizens in a pluralistic society.

In that spirit, I propose a new kind of liberal arts advocacy and weigh in on some of the policy questions raised by my analysis in light of the growing bipartisan discontent with the curricular narrowing attributed to state and federal policies that focus on reading and mathematics. I urge advocates and policy makers to broaden the reform agenda to adopt a more liberal vision and to develop a policy framework that holds schools accountable for teaching beyond the basics. I also urge innovations in policy that more effectively accommodate, channel, and support *all* educators who bring divergent, yet legitimate, convictions about the substance and form of liberal learning to their work. Finally, I close with some ideas about how to rejuvenate the beleaguered traditional view.

## Wither Liberal Education?

In its most general application, the liberal arts—that is, formal academic studies that are intended to provide general skills and knowledge, as opposed to more specialized vocational skills—have dominated K–12 reform advocacy for the last quarter century and shows no sign of losing ground. If anything, the post–*Nation at Risk* era has witnessed an increase in the number of traditional academic subjects that students are required to take to graduate from high school.[1] "College for all" is now the rallying cry among reformers of virtually all stripes. And nearly everyone concurs that the twenty-first-century economy requires all students to possess the kind of intellectual acumen that the liberal arts are supposed to develop. These trends reflect a certain consensus about the importance of a broad and rigorous education for all. This is an enormous improvement over the mid-twentieth-century reform efforts that gave us Life Adjustment education, back to basics, and a Sputnik-era quality push focused exclusively on the most intellectually gifted.

Yet, at its heart, the college-for-all consensus lacks that spirit of *paideia.* Two dominant preoccupations drive the current wave: national economic prosperity (excellence or competitiveness) and individual economic opportunity (equity or social justice). The dawn of the new knowledge economy, the argument goes, requires workers who are intellectually equipped to innovate, adapt, and solve complex problems in a rapidly changing and globally competitive world. National eco-

nomic preeminence therefore requires that all young people be educated to higher standards than ever before. These conditions likewise require that young adults acquire these skills to earn a decent living, because high-wage, low-skill manufacturing jobs are being outsourced to lower-wage competitors overseas. This trend is said to be illustrated by widening income gaps between those who earn a bachelor's degree and those who don't. By the turn of the century, these pressures were thought to be so acute that President George W. Bush declared education "the great civil rights issue of our time." The emphasis on national economic interests and individual opportunity reflects a powerful convergence among the concerns of business leaders, child and minority group advocates, and education professionals who dominate the education reform agenda.

Strictly speaking, liberal education has always existed in a certain tension with the economic development imperative. The emphasis on public schools as instruments of workforce development is legitimate and important, and all who are involved in schools or child welfare should support it. Nonetheless, the exclusive focus on the instrumental has occluded other dimensions of human development that liberal education strives to cultivate, such as citizen identity and competence, and individual capacity to live personally meaningful lives. From Aristotle through Mortimer Adler, liberal education has often been defined in explicit opposition to vocational education. The rhetorical move of claiming that the new knowledge economy has erased the distinction between college preparation, work preparation, and civics doesn't resolve the tension. It merely redefines college preparation as another species of vocational education. It is assuredly more enlightened than the vocational education of years past, insofar as it aims high for all young people, and it is more inclusive than the Sputnik-era focus on identifying and training the best and brightest. But, still, it is not a liberal vision for K–12 education.

For one thing, the current wave all but ignores the arts, humanities, history, and, literature. Like the mid-century reformers who after Sputnik looked anxiously to the Soviet Union as a national security threat, today's business reformers see China and India as threats to U.S. economic competitiveness. And so the race is on to outproduce these nations in the creation of scientists and engineers. Child and minority advocates are largely complicit in this, in part because of studies that have found that high school students who take more high-level math and science courses attend and complete college at substantially higher rates than those who don't.[2] And because these advocates' primary aim is to increase the number of racial minorities and low-

income students who earn higher education credentials, they lend politically progressive cachet to the math-science push. For both groups, arts and humanities can seem like a distraction from the real business of schools (except for those advocates who view them as a way to shore up the ethnic or racial identities of nonwhite students).

Equally prevalent is the allied groups' eschewal of general knowledge in favor of generic cognitive abilities such as literacy, higher-order thinking, creativity, and problem solving, and affective dispositions such as cooperativeness, enthusiasm for racial diversity, adaptability, and entrepreneurialism. For decades, traditionalist critics have mocked the education establishment for this. Less often noted by such critics is the degree to which this orientation reflects the articulated needs of modern business, where general cognitive and social skills are considered desirable irrespective of the particular goods or services a particular firm produces.[3] In fact, today's professional and managerial elites pride themselves on their ability to apply process skills and tools broadly across industries in a rapidly changing competitive marketplace. Hence, their shared enthusiasm with education professionals for cooperative project-based learning, in which teams of students are thought to develop valuable skills and attitudes in the context of projects that focus on real-world problems. The actual content of these problems is irrelevant, as long as it furnishes the right level of cognitive and cooperative challenge.

So the problem isn't simply the alleged anti-intellectualism of the education establishment and its espousal of education progressivism. Professional educators align broadly with business leaders and child and minority group advocates, forming a powerful triumvirate. These leaders enjoy tacit assent from the general public who, according to surveys, rank the humanities and advanced subject matter knowledge low when questioned about their priorities for public schools, even while endorsing higher standards.[4] And it practically goes without saying that today's popular culture discourages anything arduous or intellectually rigorous that doesn't ensure a near-term material payoff. In short, if a liberal arts education comprises both general intellectual skills *and* general knowledge, and espouses humanizing aspirations beyond workplace competence and material prosperity, its outlook is bleak.

## Whither Liberal Education?

I believe instrumentalism, vocationalism, and credentialism in the mainstream reform discourse are real and dominant. The more thoughtful among those I've labeled "business reformers," "child and minority advocates," and "education profes-

sionals," however, would object to my implication that they advocate a lesser form of schooling for young people. The content-neutral meta-skills they espouse are intended to benefit children in all aspects of their lives, not just work. Thus, as they see it, they don't so much eschew liberal learning as espouse another conception of it. They also regard their conceptions as improvements over traditional notions—that is, as more up to date, more forward looking, and more attuned to social and economic realities. Theirs is a liberal education that embraces general skills and dispositions while rejecting general knowledge.

Further complicating things is an array of activist academicians, minority and multicultural advocates, and education professionals who *do* take seriously the idea of general knowledge, but who seek to redefine its content and scope. These advocates enjoy less influence among policy elites but wield considerable influence in schools and colleges. The rival conceptions of liberal learning generated by all these constituencies can be roughly classified under three headings: process inquiry, activist academic, and cosmopolitan. Although these diverse conceptions of liberal learning actively seek to supplant the conception of liberal learning I term traditional humanism, they nonetheless nurture visions of humanistic education in the spirit of *paideia,* which is otherwise absent in the mainstream reform discourse.

*Process Inquiry*. Consider again the basic agenda of the business leaders and educational professionals: promoting the skills of productive workers in a dynamic, knowledge-based economy—such skills as problem solving, creativity, cooperativeness, and adaptability. Although usually promoted as economic survival tools for the twenty-first century, they are nonetheless general qualities of mind and heart deemed broadly applicable to life as a citizen and private person—hence, the averred convergence of college, work, and citizenship skills. Although education professionals give more weight to social and civic interactions over workplace interactions, while putting more emphasis on cultural issues and each child's unique talents and dispositions, they basically share the business advocates' worldview and preferred pedagogies. Both groups place great importance on problem solving, real-world applications, and project-based learning, sometimes under the general heading of inquiry.

The focus on inquiry elevates disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) methods over content. The purest example of this view might be provided by Howard Gardner, who argues that students should study small representative topics in exhaustive depth to gain firsthand experience with disciplinary methods of inquiry. He proposes, for example, that a history class spend an entire term exhaustively studying a single historical event such as

the Holocaust, sifting through primary and secondary sources, and then learning to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and interpret them the way a working historian would. What's important from this perspective isn't that students study the Holocaust. They could as easily study the Treaty of Westphalia, the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, or a fabled murder trial in a school's community. What is important is that students acquire the tools and habits of a historian.[5] Likewise, proponents of interdisciplinary project-based curricula consider traditional academic content and subject matter to be an impediment to helping young people acquire broadly applicable intellectual skills and social virtues. Thus, while proponents of process inquiry eschew general knowledge, their more sophisticated enthusiasts can hardly be said to be anti-intellectual or narrowly vocational.

*Activist Academicism.* Activist academicians often invoke trends in the practice of disciplinary research itself as another reason for displacing traditional liberal arts. For example, labor history, ethnic studies, women's studies, media studies, postcolonial studies, ethnomathematics, critical theory, microhistory, and so on are said to represent cutting-edge developments in their respective fields and should therefore be incorporated into K–12 curricula to keep those curricula up to date, as one would do in the physical sciences. Activist academicism often comes wrapped in a mantle of social justice and social democracy because of its emphasis on people, events, cultures, and viewpoints generally sidelined in curricula that focus on great accomplishments in culture, science, war, or statecraft. Although the latter argument sometimes smacks of a self-righteous moralizing at odds with the spirit of liberal learning, a lot of important and high-quality work has been done in these fields that merits curricular inclusion, even if the extent and terms of that inclusion are subject to intense debate.[6]

*Cosmopolitanism.* The cosmopolitan view, as articulated by thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah, is that students should be exposed to as full a range of different civilizations, cultures, and artistic and intellectual traditions as possible to help students expand cognitive horizons, recognize both the diversity of human communities and our shared essential humanness, and better navigate a world increasingly diasporic and interconnected—that is, to become "citizens of the world."[7] The movement known as Big History or New World History—history that examines broad global megatrends over time in areas such as war, migrations, economic exchange, disease, and technology—represents one type of cosmopolitan education, as do area studies and certain kinds of multicultural education.[8] Of

the positions I've described thus far, cosmopolitanism comes closest to embracing the broad liberal arts ideal, because it most explicitly speaks to the humanizing function of education while acknowledging the role that general knowledge, rightly taught, plays in it. Cosmopolitanism enjoys favor among certain business leaders, as well, who view cultural and linguistic knowledge of emerging economies in the Eastern and Southern hemispheres as advantageous for American companies who employ graduates of U.S. schools and colleges.[9] For these reasons, I find cosmopolitanism the most formidable rival to traditional humanism.

*Traditional Humanism.* Traditional humanism embraces an approach to liberal learning unabashedly grounded in traditions of knowledge, thought, artistic expression, argumentation, and moral reasoning as they have evolved from ancient Mediterranean civilizations through contemporary North Atlantic societies. This approach lays great stress on mastery of the subject matter disciplines conceived not only as tools of inquiry but also as repositories of accumulated knowledge, both of which it is schools' responsibility to transmit to students through knowledgeable and authoritative teachers who possess as much passion for their subjects as their students. It views the acquisition of traditional forms of knowledge as an aid, rather than an impediment, to critical inquiry and innovation, and views disciplined self-mastery and internalization of formal rules as precursors to personal autonomy and creativity. While embracing new knowledge, global perspectives, and important contributions by other world civilizations past and present, it nonetheless focuses on the history, accomplishments, and traditions of Western civilization for the simple reason that they are most relevant for helping those who live in modern Western societies understand both their society and themselves.

Which of these conceptions of liberal learning should prevail? The question is meaningless and self-defeating. Meaningless because no objective measure exists by which one can dispositively rank their merit. Self-defeating because treating curriculum policy as a zero-sum game leads to divisive rancor that undermines credibility with policy makers and the public, while driving curriculum policy to lowest-common-denominator compromises that leave everyone unhappy. So before I sketch out some ideas for how rival advocates might work together more effectively for innovative policy solutions, I would like to briefly model a form of advocacy that eschews the rancor that has characterized curriculum debates over the past 100 years in favor of a model that respects rival views without compromising one's own convictions.

## A Modest Defense of the Traditional Liberal Arts in the Twenty-first Century

From the point of view of the rival conceptions of liberal learning I've sketched above, traditional humanism has almost everything going against it. Traditional humanists regard traditions as constitutive of both present and future. They therefore look backward to look forward, and they observe continuity and preservation underneath change and innovation. They are "provincial" in their focus on the history and intellectual traditions of what has been aptly described as an Asian peninsula[10]—that is, Europe, or the continent formerly known as Christendom. Yet their preferred subject matter is often distant from students' immediate experiences, interests, or countries of origin. In this sense, it is remote, alien, and inauthentic. Furthermore, they engage their subject matter in ways that are out of favor among mainstream reformers. Much of what traditional humanists espouse educationally is, strictly speaking, useless, possessing no straightforward, immediate applicability to productive work.[11] Worse yet, it is elitist, having historically been developed, transmitted, and evolved through society's upper strata. In this respect traditional humanism is more (small *r*) republican than (small *d*) democratic, and thus carries with it a whiff of aristocratic privilege.

It is unsurprising then that the most eloquent and esteemed advocates of schooling in the traditional humanist tradition have been dying off. Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Jacques Maritain, and Paul Gagnon are all dead. Jacques Barzun is in his 90s. The generation after these advocates, which includes E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and Diane Ravitch, is nearing retirement. The Council for Basic Education (CBE), which was the last nonpartisan organization to advance the cause of the traditional liberal arts, met its demise in 2004. Although these advocates put their energies into advocating the stuff and spirit of general education in the liberal arts tradition, they had more in common with progressive critics of conventional schooling than people realize. Barzun loathed standardized multiple-choice tests, arguing that "choosing the ready-made instead of producing the fresh idea … breaks up the unity of what has been learned and isolates the pieces," thereby inhibiting students' efforts to discern and evaluate patterns in what they learn.[12] Adler and Gagnon subscribed to versions of the progressive admonition that "less is more," that fewer topics studied more deeply was better than a light dusting over many.[13] Maritain warned against an excess of "mechanical drill" that puts "the intellect of the student to sleep in ready-made formulas, which he accepts and memorizes without engaging his own self in the grasping of what they supposedly convey to him."[14] In fact, it is striking how frequently one finds in their

writings strong echoes of their progressive contemporaries with respect to the civic, ethical, and cognitive aims of schooling, and even in some respects the means of getting there.[15] Yet they saw authentic engagement with formal traditions of thought and culture as humanizing and liberating, and with the exception of Adler, they did not let their focus on European history and high culture occlude recognition of other civilizations for their achievements or their contributions to Western development.

Is the liberal arts tradition as understood by Barzun and his contemporaries dying a natural death? Are cosmopolitan multiculturalism and its more process inquiry–centered rivals the successors, the latest example of educational aims and methods evolving to meet the needs of an ever-changing society? Such is the common refrain. Needless to say, I am unconvinced. And even if I have too much respect for rival views of liberal learning to claim that the traditional humanist conception is the only legitimate conception, I believe it remains a legitimate and vibrant approach, the loss of which would deprive contemporary society of important resources for collective self-understanding and improvement, moral and political deliberation, and intellectual and aesthetic cultivation. And so, even if I can't claim that traditional humanism represents the best form of liberal education for all, I do believe it is an essential option.

I have no new arguments to make on its behalf, only old ones that I continue to find persuasive. For starters, present arrangements are partially and inescapably shaped by the past. Pretending otherwise is a form of denial that only strengthens the past's grip over us by rendering its influences invisible and inarticulate. Furthermore, although it is easy to mock Adler's and Hutchins's notion of a "Great Conversation" among thinkers and artists taking place across centuries, that is in fact how intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and social traditions are created and defined. When historians trace a genealogy of formal thought about government from ancient Greece and Rome to fifteenth-century Florence, and another from Germanic tribal governance and Magna Carta to British liberalism, and trace both to Enlightenment innovations leading to the American and French Revolutions, which, in turn, continue to evolve through Romanticism and modernism to give shape to modern conceptions of democracy, rights, and freedom, they aren't just making up these connections. The debts to past thinkers were consciously acknowledged by each innovating generation (often by way of rejection), and their manifestations in the present exert powerful and pervasive influence over people's lives today, furnishing the terms for contemporary reflections on what makes for a good society, just polity, and ethical life—including reflections leading to oppositional perspectives such as libertarianism, multicultural-

ism, fundamentalism, and feminism. To argue that students should study these traditions and their histories isn't to gainsay the value in knowing that other civilizations have exhibited, at one time or another, similar insights about government, tolerance, or the status of women. It's just that the comparative perspective does nothing to diminish the importance of knowing the history of social, philosophical, and political thought as it evolved within *this* civilization.

The same pertains to the history of cultural production in the arts and humanities. It has been demonstrated time and again by scholars that so-called canons of great works are to some degree post hoc constructions that change as times change.[16] Shakespeare was canonized by the Romantics 200 years after his death. Cicero is rarely taught any more. Herman Melville was rescued from obscurity by twentieth-century Americanists consciously seeking to identify an American character through literature. And so on. Nonetheless, over time, these historically conditioned shifts constitute the traditions that today's most ambitious and self-consciously innovative artists, intellectuals, and activists seek to transform through their own contributions. This echoes a point oft-repeated by the most sensible defenders of high cultural traditions: that, far from representing some fixed, timeless consensus about the True, the Beautiful, and the Good, they reflect ceaseless conflict and innovation over time *in pursuit of* the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. Canonical traditions are formed, not negated, by argument and innovation over time. That's what the modern traditional humanist believes is valuable for young people to know, as a means of orienting themselves in both past and present, honing their capacity for moral and critical reasoning, and cultivating their aesthetic sensibilities through engagement with models of excellence. Today's innovations in thought and culture are important to the traditional humanist, but they are important as the most recent innovations within a tradition, not as that tradition's overthrow.[17]

For these reasons and others I continue to believe in a traditional humanist education focused on broad and deep engagement in the historical development and high cultural traditions of what I'm not afraid to call Western Civilization, capital letters and all. Such an education equips students with ways of apprehending and being in the world that no other education can provide. I could press the argument further and talk about traditional humanism's utility as a vehicle for the intellectual skills and social virtues desired by mainstream reformers, and for getting into college. I can also point to a host of existence proofs testifying to the ongoing vitality of traditional humanist scholarship and education. Anyone who reads the *New York Review of Books*

or spends time in serious bookstores, for example, can observe that scholarship in the traditions I've been talking about is going strong, which suggests that somewhere out there are people who recognize its value. Likewise, there are schools and colleges dotted around the country that embody the traditional humanist ideal in one form or another. There are Core Knowledge elementary schools seeking to lay the foundations for later humanistic studies. International Baccalaureate programs pick up where Core Knowledge leaves off. A handful of charter high schools, such as those created by Civitas Schools in partnership with the Chicago Charter School Foundation, blend the best of traditional humanist education with innovations that keep it fresh and relevant for their urban student populations. The Clemente Course in the Humanities, founded by Earl Shorris, an adult education program for low-income high school dropouts, does an admirable job introducing its students to traditional philosophy, logic, rhetoric, literature, and history. Core Knowledge, Civitas, and Clemente prove not only that traditional humanism can be vibrant and innovative, but also that it can motivate and inspire young people from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, a few remaining college programs continue to take the idea of general learning seriously, such as St. John's College in Maryland and Shimer College in Illinois.

But similar claims are legitimately made on behalf of other models of liberal learning. I am dissatisfied with these rivals because I believe they occlude knowledge and ways of knowing that I've tried to suggest carry considerable social, civic, and personal value. But the traditional model occludes some things, too. All curricula implemented in finite time with finite resources by finite individuals will have to make decisions about what to include—and what, inevitably, to exclude—based on certain governing assumptions and priorities that render any general curriculum always and inevitably incomplete. Because there is profound disagreement about what to include, exclude, emphasize, deemphasize, and why, I recognize that not everyone will subscribe to the model of traditional humanism that I have sketched. Therefore, although I believe that all schools should be required to provide all students with a liberal K–12 education, I would be content if only some of them were traditional in the ways I describe.

Some might nonetheless wonder whether what I have described as rival views aren't actually complementary parts of a more comprehensive whole. After all, few rivals categorically deny that study of the Western tradition ought to be included in any conception of liberal education, and few traditional humanists deny the importance of critical interrogation of that tradition or the sympathetic exposure to other

traditions. One of the hallmarks of Western intellectual and artistic traditions, in fact, has been their cosmopolitan curiosity about other cultures and incorporation of their insights and accomplishments into the Great Conversation. To foreclose such cross-cultural exploration would be to deny an important aspect of the tradition, as well as an important source of its vitality. Nor would the sensible humanist of any stripe deny that mathematics and science are an indispensable part of any liberal arts education. Any sensibly conceived liberal arts curriculum will in fact include elements that everyone can applaud.

But the devil is in the details. For example, because Western history and traditions produced many of the most salient features of modern life around the globe—and gave rise to the perspectives and priorities of Western businessmen, cosmopolitans, education professionals, and activist academicians—I might argue that a liberal arts curriculum should be unabashedly Eurocentric. A cosmopolitan proponent of New World History would beg to differ, making an intuitively compelling case that a global perspective should dominate. In creating and implementing a coherent curriculum, one approach will have to serve as the anchor and set the terms of inclusion and organization. This is where the trouble starts.

Therein lies the problem for policy and practice in a system of public schools in a society—and the education profession—characterized by assertive pluralism: how to accommodate reasonable differences among sophisticated and well-intentioned educators without watering down everyone's model to the incoherent muddle that characterizes K–12 curriculum today. Fortunately, the introduction of charter schools and other forms of public school choice over the last 15 years has presented new possibilities. Entrepreneurial educators with strong education convictions and deep concern for students and democracy have demonstrated that there really are "multiple pathways" to becoming a reflective, productive, and empowered adult. As long as we can figure out how to craft policies that ensure that all children are schooled under some cogent and defensible conception of liberal learning, we can let a dozen flowers bloom. Done right, such policies could harness diverse commitments in pursuit of broadly shared ends.

The time is ripe for a multipartisan commitment to schooling that goes beyond the instrumentalist basics. The years 2004–07 witnessed growing disenchantment with federal and state policies that require little of schools and students beyond basic skills in math and reading, policies that exclude those humanistic dimensions of education that motivate teachers and inspire students. There seems to

be a nascent hunger for schools to do something more than help children read and compute and obtain a credential that will land them a lucrative job. That this hunger is shared by advocates across political and pedagogical continua either means we're about to witness a resurgence in the internecine wrangling that has characterized curriculum policy over the last century, or that combatants will forge a rapprochement on behalf of the greater good. I hope my gesture toward modesty here can set a tone that favors rapprochement.

## Implications for Policy and Advocacy

In the preceding sections I made three distinct claims: (1) mainstream reform advocacy and policy making seriously undervalue liberal learning and the noneconomic goals of *paideia*, *bildung*, or *humanitas* for which liberal educators strive; (2) there nonetheless exists a cacophony of competing views about the proper means and ends of schooling, many of which could be aptly characterized as "liberal" in that they share certain broad aspirations for *paideia* even as they disagree about its proper form and content; and (3) more traditional forms of liberal learning, which I termed traditional humanist, deserve more generous consideration in theory and more robust instantiation in practice. Taking all three claims seriously implies certain innovations in policy pertaining to standards, assessment, and accountability along with a new spirit of tolerance among those who find the current focus on instrumentalist basics wanting.

I suspect that convincing education's dominant voices that all children should have a liberal basic education of some kind should be easy, if done with due respect for the goals of economic prosperity and individual economic opportunity. One common strategy for doing this has been to demonstrate the value of a liberal education as the best vehicle for inculcating "21st century workplace skills." Advocates as diverse as E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and Robert J. Marzano have combined research and theory in defense of the value of general knowledge for helping children develop critical skills.[18] Advocates of arts education have pursued an aggressive research agenda designed to demonstrate the value of the arts to basic competencies like reading and math.[19] That literature is voluminous and, in fact, shades readily into the research enlisted on behalf of the college-for-all coalition described above. These arguments can be brought to the foreground.

I don't think this line of argument is sufficient on its own, however, because it cedes too much to the instrumentalist. *Paideia* is broader, comprising more ambitious aspirations for students and society. It seeks to shape civic and personal character, non-

productive habits and pleasures, civic values and social dispositions, and intellectual capacities beyond basic reading and computation. It looks beyond workplace competence toward some notion of the Good Life, which can sound squishy to the policy maker whose gaze is fixed squarely on job growth and the gross domestic product. Finding a language in which to convey the importance of these things won't be easy. But we need to try.

One good start would be to drop the oppositional posturing. Too often in recent years, pleas on behalf of humanistic public education have tended to be employed against basic skills, standards, tests, and the role they play in holding schools and students accountable to instrumentalist-economic imperatives. This is a bad idea. For one, it's bound to fail. Political leaders, business leaders, citizens, and parents demand that schools teach basic skills and desire metrics that are clear, understandable, valid, reliable, and administratively manageable. So I don't see standardized tests pegged to broad-gauge basics like math and reading going away any time soon. For another, it needs to be remembered that the work of humanists, scientists, artists, and educators all depend crucially on economic prosperity to support their pursuits. The instrumentalist-economic imperative is foundational to any system of publicly funded schools. Earlier I admitted the tensions between liberal and vocational conceptions of learning. But tensions can be managed. Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, there's no inherent opposition between basic skills and higher-order skills, public accountability and professional collegiality, or standardized tests and the joy of learning and teaching. Most children educated in a school where serious educators successfully provide a rigorous and meaningful course of study will be able to pass a standardized test of basic skills.[20]

Nonetheless, teachers will teach what they're going to be held accountable for, and they're sloughing off arts, music, and anything else not tested to ensure that they meet adequate yearly progress requirements in basic skills under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). So even if the critics are wrong in principle, they are right in practice.[21] One understandable response has been to call for more robust standards and broader accountability systems.[22] This response brings its own perils, however, because of dissension found among disciples of different pedagogical doctrines. For those unacquainted with the century-long Thirty Years' War among proponents of different education creeds, as recounted by historians such as Herbert Kliebard and Diane Ravitch,[23] the experience of the 1990s ought to serve as a cautionary tale. No one who believes passionately in the importance of a certain subject matter, pedagogy, or assessment method will stand idly by while it gets left out of a state or national policy.[24] Whatever

the flaws of an NCLB-like focus on the minimal basics, it at least has the virtue of skirting some of the rancor that more ambitious efforts ignite.

What I would like to see proposed is an accountability system for public schools that builds on NCLB's parsimony, one that ensures that schools do more than teach the basics without attempting to determine the content or format of assessments used to gauge their success. This likely will require some hybrid of the various schemes promoted by different education advocates over the years to protect reasonable diversity while ensuring that the broader and less easily measured aims of schooling don't wither. A "tight-loose" framework calibrated to balance *pluribus* and *unum* in education practice, such as the one I propose on page 131, is needed.

A system of standards, assessment, and accountability that accommodates rival visions of liberal learning while meeting the needs of policy makers, employers, and the public would require and enable a rapprochement among proponents of rival visions of liberal learning. It will require a coalition among these parties to advocate for this system with a strong collective voice. Once adopted, it ought to create conditions for peaceful coexistence and interfaith cooperation. This could be an historic opportunity, as rival pedagogues historically have spent more energy maligning each other than pursuing common aims. Such attacks have handicapped cooperative efforts on behalf of students. Perhaps this divisiveness was inevitable back when everyone was fighting to define the one best education for all, but in an era of choice, charters, and the near-universal belief in diversity and "multiple pathways," it need not be.

One thing we need, then, is a "big tent" organization—an interfaith council, if you will—of educators, academics, and advocates who are committed to some recognizable form of liberal education. Such an organization might start by drafting a statement of broad beliefs regarding the aims, means, and priorities of schooling under an inclusive definition of liberal learning. It could then map and describe more carefully and thoroughly the different forms that liberal learning can take before moving on to the hard work of hammering out a policy framework that can allow them all to thrive. This would be an appropriate mission for a revived CBE.

I would like to see a more prominent and central role in this effort for traditional humanists, however, and would like to close with some thoughts aimed specifically at them.

The demise of the original CBE in 2004 left liberal arts advocacy without a nonpartisan, nationally recognized voice for traditional humanism. We need a new one. A revived CBE might serve this purpose as well. Whatever the auspices, such an organization could do three things: (1) resuscitate and reposition traditional human-

ism in K–12 (or K–16) education, (2) seed new networks of like-minded educators to forge a new professional community, and (3) model the kind of confident composure of a movement that knows what it stands for and understands its place in the world.

Traditional liberal arts advocacy desperately needs fresh voices and a new spirit. Currently, the most prominent organizations advocating on behalf of liberal education are the National Association of Scholars, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the American Association of Liberal Education, and the Heartland Institute. In addition to being either conservative or libertarian, these groups tend to sound strident and reactionary. The appeal of traditional humanism to certain kinds of conservatives (and the appeal of some of its rivals to certain kinds of progressives) has a long history.[25] But traditional humanism has just as often inspired social and political progressives who espouse communitarian ideals and a strong commitment to social justice. The Jesuits—and Catholic schools in general—furnish a more widely known example. Earl Shorris, founder of the Clemente Course, grounds his program in a neo-Aristotelian theory of citizenship that combines knowledge and action into a model of citizen empowerment.[26] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., is an avowed liberal democrat, and Paul Gagnon was one of the most gentle, reasonable, and nuanced education thinkers of my lifetime. One of the virtues of the kind of education I've defended is that it rewards those who acquire it with the ability to see through various partisan positions, unpack them, and assess them dispassionately. It aims to produce thoughtful citizens who can see merit in all sides of an argument, and who continually revisit and revise their own views in light of new evidence and ongoing reflection. Traditional humanists could do a better job of highlighting and modeling this approach.

Another critical activity of a new CBE would be to identify and network like-minded educators. Advocates of other education perspectives depend on networks to advance their agendas, exchange ideas, and share resources. I suspect that every large high school and perhaps one in three elementary and middle schools in the country has at least one teacher with a passion for the traditional liberal arts. That represents a core of thousands of professional educators laboring in isolation who are dissatisfied with the national subject matter councils and other professional associations currently available to them. Tap half of them, and you've got the beginnings of a new and potentially powerful professional network.[27]

We need to recruit new teachers into that network as well. The current focus on recruiting urban Ivy League missionaries and burnt-out mid-career engineers into teaching leaves unrecruited thousands of graduates of small liberal arts colleges. These

graduates might be persuaded to become teachers if given a training that respects rather than denigrates their intellectual passions. The Hutchins Graduate Institute's Core Knowledge–based teacher education program at Shimer College offers one such model. We need more.

Finally, I'd like to see this new organization broaden the appeal of the liberal arts. The generation of Barzun, which included such luminaries as Clifton Fadiman, Gilbert Highet, and Charles Van Doren, among others, excelled at this. Through popular books, book clubs, radio, and television, they eschewed highbrow snobbery and made the fruits of higher learning engaging and accessible to a broad audience.[28] We need to bring that same spirit to our curricula and professional advocacy. Although certain advocates and organizations have grown more strident and self-marginalizing, others have given too much away to appease criticisms based on criteria of gender and ethnic representation, U.S. demographic trends, global geopolitics, postcolonial restitution, and all the rest. Some adaptations are always necessary, but their standards of excellence (of thought, aesthetic merit, and so on) and the particular stories they embody about the evolution of the civilization that produced modern Western societies are exactly what makes the traditional liberal arts what they are. Those standards, those stories, still hold up. If we can find that zone of quiet self-confidence that lies between the extremes of guilty self-loathing and resentful dogmatism, we will find our audience among students, families, fellow educators, and even the general public.

## Endnotes

1. Robert Perkins, Brian Kleiner, Stephan Roey, and Janis Brown (Project Officer: Janis Brown), *The High School Transcript Study: A Decade of Change in Curricula and Achievement, 1990-2000.* NCES 200-455, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C.
2. Clifford Adelman, *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006).
3. A good recent articulation of this view comes from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century Workforce* (Tuscon, AZ: Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). The executive summary is quite pointed about the supposed need to replace "basic skills" with "21st century skills."
4. See Michael Hamell Remaley and Claudia Feurey, *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of School Reform* (New York: Public Agenda, 1995); Richard Rothstein and Rebecca Jacobson, "The Goals of Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* (December 2006): 264–272.
5. Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: Beyond Facts and Tests, the K-12 Education that Every Child Deserves* (New York: Penguin, 2000). See especially Chapter 8, "Close Looks."

[6] The feud between Gary Nash and Lynne Cheney over the American history standards-setting project of the 1990s captured the scope and intensity of the conflict over the terms and extent of inclusion. See Nash's *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage, 2000), which was written with Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn; and Cheney's, *Telling the Truth* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

[7] Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). Appiah's book doesn't focus on education per se, but is a clear and succinct theoretical statement of the worldview.

[8] For a good introduction to the various forms of world history education, see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

[9] See *College Learning for the New Global Century*, A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, Association of American Colleges and University, 2007. See also Walter Russell Mead, *The State of State World History Standards*, a report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2006.

[10] Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. Richard Mayne (New York: Allen Lane, 1994), 304.

[11] Not that they don't believe in "relevance." They do. It's just not a kind of relevance that is synonymous with "practical" or "immediate." It's a conception of relevance that can admit knowledge of, say, the Carolingian Renaissance or the publication of *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* if taught well and with due regard for their most salient contributions to modern conditions and understandings.

[12] Jacques Barzun, "Reasons to De-Test Schools." Reprinted in *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 34–35.

[13] Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Touchstone, 1998). (reprint); Paul Gagnon, "What Should Children Learn?" *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1995), 65–78.

[14] Jacques Maritain, *The Education of Man: The Educational Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, eds. Donald and Idella Gallagher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962).

[15] This, to my mind, is partly what distinguishes them from more familiar proponents of education traditionalism, such as Lynne Cheney and William J. Bennett, assorted "back-to-basics" organizations such as Mathematically Correct, and many religionists and homeschoolers.

[16] See, for example, John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); or Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Characteristically, Barzun himself makes the point most succinctly in "Of What Use the Classics Today," reprinted in *Begin Here.*

[17] My sources for these arguments are too varied to list exhaustively here. They include Charles Taylor, John Rawls, and Michael Sandel—two social democrats, one a Hegelian, the other a Kantian, and one neo-Aristotelian communitarian—whose different philosophical lenses have led them to similar insights about the role of canonical traditions in shaping thought and the value of being aware of how they do so. I have been similarly influenced by Edward Shils, a sociologist who drew similar conclusions about the inescapability of traditions from the very different perspective of his discipline. See *Traditions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). I've drawn inspiration from the likes of Gagnon, Barzun, Adler, and E.D. Hirsch, as well, although I have quibbles with all of them. And I've always found attractive Neil Postman's "thermostatic" theory of educa-

tion, which holds that schools should not slavishly ape trends in contemporary culture but self-consciously focus on things students are unlikely to be exposed to elsewhere. See *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979).

[18] Again, see Hirsch, *Knowledge Deficit*. Also see Robert J. Marzano, *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD Press, 2004).

[19] To take one example chosen at random, see Arthur D. Elfland, *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

[20] There is some research to back this assertion. See, for example, Fred M. Newmann, Anthony S. Bryk, and Jenny Nagaoka, "Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?" A report of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001.

[21] I confess that I believe at least part of this problem is caused by the separation of skills and content so predominant in education theory and practice. If content-rich instruction in arts, humanities, and science were understood as part and parcel of effective skills instruction, rather than as a luxury or distraction, the problem might be greatly mitigated. Again, I refer to Hirsch, Marzano, and the literature on arts and cognition.

[22] This volume and the conference that spawned it, along with other efforts by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute to resuscitate more robust national standards, furnish an important example from the center-right. Richard Rothstein's efforts to broaden accountability regimes to comprise traditional, nonacademic goals for public schools, such as good citizenship and physical fitness, furnishes one from the center-left. See, for example, "The Goals of Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* (December 2005), co-authored with Rebecca Jacobsen.

[23] See Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958,* 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004); Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

[24] See again, Nash and Crabtree, and Cheney, on the national history standards effort. For a more limited account of the English standards-setting effort, see my "The Culture Wars Go to Washington: Ideology, Realpolitick, and the NCTE English Language Arts Standards," *Journal of Thought* (Spring 1999).

[25] This observation points to a problem I've only obliquely acknowledged thus far: the tendency for education advocacy, including curriculum advocacy, to serve partisan political or ideological ends. And so, as foils to the organizations I just mentioned, there are organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, the Coalition of Essential Schools, Educators for Social Responsibility, and the National Association for Multicultural Education that yoke curriculum and pedagogy to various forms of social democratic or ethnonationalist causes. There's a long history of this sort of thing stretching back at least two centuries. I have to admit that this presents complications for everything I have to say in this section.

[26] Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities* (New York: WW Norton, 2000). In light of the traditionalist's reputation for Eurocentric triumphalism, it's worth noting that Shorris is also a scholar of aboriginal cultures and staunch advocate of indigenous language preservation.

[27] The National Council for History Education, International Baccalaureate, and Core Knowledge may furnish serviceable examples or starting points.

[28] See Joan Shelley Rubin, "The Scholar and the World: Academic Humanists and General Readers in Postwar America," in *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II,* ed. David Hollinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).