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ABSTRACT

A historical review of higher education is offered, with mention made of particular individual contributors in the field. The significance of the historical continuum is related to the function of post-secondary education. It is suggested that colleges and universities perform many functions for society, including educating students, investigating the nature of the world and of man, conserving the heritage of the race in libraries and museums, screening out those unfit for the more difficult occupations, criticizing society and its practices, acclaiming worthy individuals by means of honorary degrees, and providing a haven for creative individuals. The difference between function and purpose is stressed. The meaning of liberal arts and liberal education is also examined, with historical references cited. (LBH)

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The Heritage and Purposes of Higher Education

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On January 11, 1886 the Pall Mall Gazette of London published an article by Sir John Lubbock which immediately stirred up a considerable flurry in England and had prodigious reverberations in the United States: he listed what he called "the best 100 books." When John Ruskin declared the list full of "rubbish and poison," a score of well-known Englishmen joined in the controversy including the Lord Chief Justice, the poets William Morris and Charles Swinburne, the novelist Wilkie Collins, a number of leading clergymen, and Professors James Bryce and Max Müller of Oxford.

A dozen years later an American publishing house decided that something could be done commercially with the idea of best books and published in 60 volumes The World's Great Classics. It got Timothy Dwight, the just-retiring President of Yale, to head the editorial committee. Then a decade later appeared the Harvard Classics edited by President Emeritus Charles W. Eliot of Harvard. Both enterprises made a great deal of money for their promoters and editors. Almost 300,000 sets of the Harvard Classics, for example, were sold during the 17 years between their appearance and Mr. Eliot's death.

Professor John Erskine of Columbia brought the idea of great books into the academic world in 1919, and from there it spread to the University of Chicago and to St. John's College, Annapolis. Not proving to be the curricular panacea that Mr. Hutchins thought it, the idea has now returned, by means of the Great Books Foundation, to its original habitat, namely, adult education: Lubbock had made his list for an adult education group in London.

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Probably some here today belong to reading circles of the Great Books Foundation and thereby extend and deepen their awareness of the heritage of which we are all both debtors and trustees. Perhaps others have not joined such circles, however, for the reason that Darwin gave to Lubbock when he asked him to list what he considered to be the world's greatest books. Darwin replied that because every subject is the center of the universe and leads into every other, one should read widely and deeply in the subject in which he is most interested.

Since my undergraduate days I have been interested in the problems of colleges and universities, and so I have been trying to read the great writings -- books, addresses, articles, documents -- concerned with higher education. They range from Isocrates' address "Against the Sophists" with which he inaugurated his famous school in Athens several years before Plato founded the Academy to such current books as General Education in a Free Society written by a committee of Harvard professors in 1947. Herbert Spencer observed that education is "the subject which involves all other subjects," and I have found that reading the great writings of education leads into most other great writings.

The Program Committee has asked me to speak about the heritage of higher education because presumably it thinks heritage important. I hope it hasn't misinterpreted the interests of the Association. When I began teaching at Stanford a decade ago, I opened my introductory course with a 15-item identification test, each item being the name of an individual who has potently influenced the present practises of American colleges and universities. I have long since abandoned the test, however, because it got me off to a bad start. I discovered that my students -- all of them enough interested in

higher education to elect the course -- had little knowledge of higher educational history, and moreover, considerable antagonism toward learning any. I found that I had to woo them more patiently. In any case, here are the names on that ill-fated identification test:

James Burrill Angell	James McCosh
F. A. P. Barnard	Eliphalet Nott
Timothy Dwight the Elder	Noah Porter
Charles W. Eliot	Henry Philip Tappan
Daniel Coit Gilman	George Ticknor
William Rainey Harper	Jonathan Baldwin Turner
Mark Hopkins	Francis Wayland
	Andrew Dickson White

Most students did not recognize more than two or three of these names, and at the end of the test the class always bombarded me with such angry questions as "Who cares?" and "So what?" I responded by quoting Walter Lippmann's eloquent plea for a better understanding of our national heritage. He wrote it during the second world war when he and others despaired of our future because our ignorance of history led to serious mistakes in foreign policy. It reads:

> When shall we recognize the truth of our situation? Only when we see ourselves and the events of our day as one act in a drama which began long before we were born and will not be played out until long after we are dead. We shall never manage the present, or make any sense of it, unless we have explained our past well enough to imagine our future.

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I am not, may I observe, an historian and am not, despite rumors I keep hearing, engaged in writing a history of higher education. I am concerned with problems of the here and now and use history as one of the dozen or so tools that the systematic student of social institutions needs. Long ago I learned that coping adequately with the present requires an understanding of the historic continuum. This I visualize as a graph whereon the present constitutes but a fleeting point in time emerging from the long and direction-pointing past into the ever-arriving future. All previous history has made its markings on the graph, and we add ours to the continuum that the past forces upon us and from which we can deviate only when we have enough power to counteract its inertia. To determine what markings we are able to make requires, first, that we understand the directions and the momentum of the graph we inherit and, second, that we assess the forces at our disposal to swerve it.

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Let me illustrate the significance of the historical continuum by turning to the second topic assigned me by the Program Committee, namely, the purposes of higher education. First, however, the terms higher education and purpose need defining as I shall be employing them. Higher education, may I point out, is an abstraction. In using it people mean a half dozen different things, but in this paper I shall chiefly mean the institutions -- colleges and universities -- performing the educational function above the level of secondary schools. Note well the word function in the last sentence because, although related, a function and a purpose differ. To illustrate: walking is a function of normal human beings; but unless one walks just for the exercise, or in a parade, walking is not a purpose. Rather one's purpose is

to arrive at some desired destination.

Colleges and universities perform a dozen or so functions for society including educating students, investigating the nature of the world and of man, conserving the heritage of the race in libraries and museums, screening out those unfit for the more difficult occupations, criticizing society and its practises, acclaiming worthy individuals by means of honorary degrees, providing havens for creative individuals. Behind each of these functions is a purpose or a complex of purposes. Many professors love to teach, but their essential purpose in teaching is not just to perform the teaching function but, rather, to communicate facts, concepts, and enthusiasms about some particular subject. Similarly, many professors engage in research, but they conduct their investigations not just to be doing research but because they seek answers to problems which they consider important or, perhaps, to win raises in rank and salary.

So much for the distinction between functions and purposes. The history of the evolving functions of colleges and universities abounds with drama, but perforce I concentrate upon the history of the purposes behind just one of these functions, namely, the educational function. One further clarification of terms, however, must be made, to wit, the identification of three stages in what might be called the purposive-act circuit: first, the subjective intention to do something, second, the projective actions resulting from the subjective intention, and third, the objective toward which one acts.

In healthy functioning these three stages in the purposive-act circuit intermesh in completed acts. Most individual and social institutions, however, have a number of subjective purposes which never get into the third or objective stage and which in the second or projective stage go no further than talk

or writing. John Dewey branded these sentimental purposes and their owners sentimentalists, and William James illustrated them with the story of the Russian woman who talked much about the need of improving the condition of the working classes but who let the driver of her droshky freeze waiting for her while she attended the opera.

The literature of higher education slops over with effusions about sentimental purposes. Consider, for example, the constantly repeated statement that the purpose of a college education is to teach students to think. Everybody applauds such declarations, but it's one of those exuberant clichés designating a subjective purpose so vaguely defined that it leads to inadequate projective action and hence to shabby objective results.

This short-circuiting wasn't always so as a study of the historic continuum makes clear, but instead of tracing the history of the purpose of teaching students to think, let me review another on which I've done more work: the purpose of promoting "the liberal arts." The statement that colleges exist to teach the liberal arts, I shall try to show, is vagueness incarnate and therefore inevitably produces faltering projective purposes, jumbled and insufficient objective purposes, and, further, frustrating confusion.

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The term "the liberal arts," of course, goes back to the Romans and has antecedents in Plato and Aristotle. Beginning with Capella in the fifth century they got limited to the famous Seven, a number which, incidentally, neither the Greeks nor the Romans ever associated with them. The much vaunted Seven Liberal Arts constituted the curriculum of the medieval schools; but they were such poverty-stricken studies that the medieval university couldn't develop until they had been superseded by the Three Philosophies of Aristotle,

an event taking place toward the end of the 13th century. Neither the Seven Liberal Arts nor the Three Philosophies of Aristotle, however, included the classical languages which came into higher educational curriculums during the Renaissance. Nor did they include experimental natural science or fact-anchored social science which didn't gain admission to curriculums until less than a century ago.

Meanwhile the meaning of the term the liberal arts expanded from the widely advertised seven and not only included the classical languages but, indeed, came to be synonymous with them. Otherwise expressed, during the 19th century the liberal arts meant what also went by the name of classical education. What are the liberal arts today? I'd readily accept a wager that if everyone in this audience were to write out his definition of them we'd find very little agreement. The nearest we'd come to a generally accepted definition would probably be this: the liberal arts are the subjects taught in so-called liberal arts colleges. This latter appellation, by the way, is only about 65 years old and isn't as widely employed as some seem to believe.

Assuming that the liberal arts are the subjects taught in liberal arts colleges, are chemistry and physics, economics and psychology, dramatics and physical education liberal arts? The doughty supporters of the classics of earlier times would have scorned the suggestion. This wouldn't, of course, be of any consequence if we today could agree on what we mean by the term; but we don't and probably can't. It served nobly for many centuries, but long ago it died of the infirmities of age and cries out to be buried. Its continued use not only betrays sentimental purposes but also contributes conspicuously to the snarled and baffled state of higher education.

It seems to me that the term liberal education needs the same kindness and is, as I shall in due course show, giving way to two other terms. It first appeared in the English language in Shakespeare's time although Shakespeare himself never employed it. Nor did his scholarly contemporaries who produced the King James version of the Bible. Only an occasional writer penned it during the next 250 years. Thus neither Mark Hopkins in his inaugural address at Williams in 1836 nor Josiah Quincy in his two-volume history of Harvard published in 1840 found any need of using the term liberal education.

Although the two writers of the extraordinarily influential Yale Report of 1828 brandished the phrase to belabor education tendencies that they feared and hated, it didn't achieve wide popularity until after the printing in this country of John Henry Newman's 1852 Dublin lectures entitled The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated. Beginning about then it took hold, but a number of key educators avoided it seduously. Thus in his celebrated inaugural address as President of Harvard in 1869 Charles W. Eliot made not a single reference to liberal education because, as he had earlier made clear, it meant to him what he considered to be the two greatest enemies of educational progress: first, classical education whose monopoly he sought to break and, second, the education of the gentleman, which he castigated as "beneath contempt" in democratic America.

Down to the mid-nineteenth century the liberal arts and liberal education meant the education, especially in the classical languages, of the men of leisure and economic self-sufficiency known as gentlemen. The Industrial Revolution and the Jacksonians, however, so effectively banished the gentleman from American

life that Professor Charles E. Norton could observe to one of his Harvard classes about 1890 that "None of you, probably, has ever seen a gentleman." Today the concept of the gentleman has been even further limited to the courtesies of legislative bodies, to saluting audiences at the beginning of speeches, and in high-priced hotels to labelling half of some rather essential white-tiled rooms.

Undoubtedly most of us would welcome more emphasis upon the gracious manners of the gentleman of blood, wealth, and leisure; but I know of no one who today believes that the prime purpose of higher education is to produce gentlemen. Nor are many still about who believe that the classical languages should again be the core of college and university curriculums. Those who do are unreconstructable sentimentalists in the Deweyan sense: they cannot convert their deeply cherished subjective purposes into either projective or objective purposes because the rest of us stand in their way.

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Some educators have tried and are still trying to rescue the term liberal education from its long aristocratic associations by defining it as liberating education. Such an effort in sports would call forth the exclamation "Nice try!" because it doesn't quite come off. Clearly all education is liberating as witness the student, for example, who completes a course in automotive mechanics. In learning the principles of gasoline engines and the methods of keeping them in good repair, he is liberated from ignorance about such matters and is equipped to apply his knowledge for the benefit of his customers.

Those who define liberal education as liberating education mean, of course, spiritual and high-level intellectual liberation which, they aver, can be

achieved only through the subjects that have lately come to be called the humanities. Hence they are dropping the term liberal education and substituting "humanistic education" and its correlatives. When half a dozen years ago, for example, Stanford restructured its undergraduate work and for the first time organized what would once have been called a college of arts and sciences or a college of letters and sciences, it named the unit the College of Humanities and Science.

This is another nice try, but the name "the humanities" has encountered difficulties not only because of its invidious implication that the sciences and social sciences are unhumanities if not inhumanities but also because some quite important people object to it. For example, some years ago Ralph Barton Perry, eminent Harvard philosopher wrote:

> There has lately developed a practise of grouping departments under "divisions," a popular classification being: physical science, biological science, social science -- and "the humanities." Now this is a most extraordinary arrangement. In an institution which professes to exist for the purpose of inculcating it, liberal culture is only one quarter of the whole; and a nondescript quarter, occupying the place of a sort of rearguard appointed to pick up the stragglers and misfits which find no place higher up in the procession.

In the same vein John Ershine has written that "I have no use for a definition of the humanities which excludes the sciences. Louis Pasteur is for me one of the greatest of humanists." In turn, Professor Gilbert Chinard of Princeton has declared that "humanism is not a subject which can be

taught, but a state of mind and a discipline which permeates all human activities."

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The effort to substitute the phrase "the humanities" for the older term liberal education began only about 30 years ago but has been in competition with the much older locution "general education." I say "much older" because until this present century the humanities meant the Graeco-Roman classics and only the Graeco-Roman classics. The term general education, however, goes back in the form of "general studies" to Milton's Tractate on Education written in 1644 and had wide usage in its present form during the middle of the 19th century. In his inaugural address Mark Hopkins discussed not liberal education but general education, and so 33 years later did Charles W. Eliot in his inaugural. Because of the new lease on life that Newman and his fellow-thinking contemporaries gave to "liberal education," "general education" went into eclipse and had little vogue until about 40 years ago. Then the group known as functional educators reintroduced it to designate their "student-needs curriculum."

Despite the lowly status in the academic world of the functional educators, the term general education has again achieved wide currency in part because the committee of Harvard professors which produced General Education in a Free Society chose it a decade ago in preference to the term liberal education. One of the serious limitations of the term general education, however, is that it has a number of contradictory meanings including these four:

1. The functional curriculum emphasizing student needs.

2. The course in the typical college which are primarily preparatory for advanced courses or which are admittedly pre-professional.
3. The unitary general education courses taught at Harvard and a number of other institutions which have appeared to counteract the powerful trend toward making all courses either preparatory or definitely specialized.
4. The integrated general education programs of Columbia, Chicago, and a few other colleges and universities.

Some of the proponents of the humanities limit the meaning of general education to the functional curriculum which they abhor, but others consider the humanities to be a division of general education. In any event, whenever I read the words general education or hear anyone use them, I must determine which meaning is intended. This does not make for easy communication and, further, the term has another potent count against it: it does not in itself suggest the breadth and depth of understanding and committment that our best colleges seek to give their students before they begin their specialized career education.

The history of the phrase makes it clear that it means the education of the generality of people in the generality or commonality of knowledge, skills, and attitudes; but good higher education seeks to give students not only commonality but also breadth and depth beyond that possessed by the generality of people. Indeed, this has been one of the two essential purposes of higher education since it began in the western world four centuries before Christ, the other being specialized preparation for careers.

As far as I can discover no one has thought up a generally acceptable name

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for the purpose of educating students for breadth of commonality, and so I have been calling it education for advanced commonality. By commonality I mean the non-specialized knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by everyone; and the adjective advanced means broad, wide, and — for skills and attitudes — also deep. I do not believe that this cumbersome name will be popular, and so I'm hopefully waiting for a better one to emerge. I have found none in exploring the historic continuum.

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It may seem that I put undue stress on names, and beyond doubt some of you are thinking of Shakespeare's lines

> What's in a name? that which we call a rose
> By any other name would smell as sweet....

Shakespeare, however, didn't really believe that as witness his many other passages about names and naming. Literature teems with discussions of naming, and from the large number that I've been collecting I quote two which seem to me to be especially pregnant with wisdom. The first comes from one of the poems of James Russell Lowell and reads:

> Let us speak plain: there is more force in names
> Than most men dream of; and a lie may keep
> Its throne a whole age longer if it skulk
> Behind the shield of some fair-seeming name.

Samuel Butler wrote the other. "The Ancient Mariner," he observed, "would not have taken so well if it had been called The Old Sailor."

Names attract or repel, and fortunate is the enterprise whose name units its friends. Unhappily, many of the names we use in education sunder people into warring factions, and somehow we need to end the resulting battles and bitterness.

My proposed "advanced commonality" probably isn't the name that will unify the several groups concerned with the non-vocational purposes of colleges and universities; but if we can agree about the urgent need of finding a good name, perhaps the right one will one day appear.

Meanwhile may I suggest that a most essential element of commonality is common courtesy of which we need more in educational discussions, that the adherents of the term liberal education recall that one of the ancient and yet continuing meanings of liberal is generous, and that the proponents of the humanities meditate more frequently upon the humilities.

People sometimes refer to higher education as the higher learning, but colleges and universities are much more than knowledge factories; they are testaments to man's perennial struggle to make a better world for himself, his children and his children's children. This, indeed, is their sovereign purpose. They are great fortifications against ignorance and irrationality; but they are more than places of the higher learning — they are centers and symbols of man's higher yearning.

Western College Association
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