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Is it the Best Education for Everyone?

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Is it the Best Education for Everyone?

Early in the 20th century, Robert Maynard Hutchins said “The best education for the best is the best education for all.” That best education according to Hutchins was a liberal education—the education that provides the foundation for life-long learning, one that prepares us for living in a democracy. For Hutchins, this meant acquiring a familiarity with the classics of the Western tradition, the “Great Books” approach to education.

Amid the multicultural and feminist discussions of the 70s, 80s and 90s, we came to question an educational canon that excluded the historical and literary voices of women, people of color, and working people. As a result, liberal education in the 21st century is no longer exclusively centered on the Western male tradition, and rarely does the Great Books approach enter in contemporary discussions about liberal education. Yet, only one out of three parents are valuing instead education training for a first-time job.

At a regional state university, students are first generation. They know that the human resources companies where they are family looking for the literacy needs. They are looking for level job skills. Should it be education? It’s a reason as the canon-question, and their parents are telling students to go there are faster and cheaper. It’s only about a piece of “dinosaurs” that some accuse us of being.

Making liberal education available to all people experiment, understanding necessary part of development education seen through becomes an education for life. This is the education for, understanding...
Maynard Hutchins argued that the best is the best education according to democracy. For Hutchins, education is best when the classics of books are discussed in an educational context. As a male tradition, and a concern with the classics of literature, the education of the working class is a liberal education. Yet, we still wonder whether the best education for all working people is the liberal education designed to produce critical thinking, problem-solving, oral and written communication skills, as well as the ability to work cooperatively with other people of different cultures. These are the skills that a liberal education is designed to produce. Yet, only one out of four college students, and only one out of three parents view liberal education positively, valuing instead educational paths that would result in training for a first-time job.

At a regional state school like ours, many of our students are first generation college students, and they know that the human resource departments of the companies where they want to work are not necessarily looking for the liberal arts skills that an executive needs. They are looking for people with specific entry level job skills. Should they really invest thousands of dollars and four years of their life for Hutchins’ “best education”? It’s a real question, as significant perhaps as the questions of the past. If our culture and their parents and their high school counselors are telling students to go to college so they can get a job, there are faster and cheaper ways to obtain job skills. If it’s only about a piece of paper, some for-profit educational institutions will sell them college degrees. If the piece of paper or the entry level job skills are all we can offer, we are the “dinosaurs” that some for-profit educational institutions accuse us of being.

Making liberal education, the “best education,” available to all people is the grand American college experiment, understood in the early 20th century as a necessary part of developing a true democracy. College education seen through the lens of liberal education becomes an education for citizenship, and an education for life. This is the education that W.E.B. DuBois fought for, understanding its value for working class Black...
Americans a century ago. This is also the education that John Dewey believed would support the necessary conditions for freedom, democracy and personal thriving.

Like all social movements, liberal education will continue only if enough people understand it and promote it. We have to keep reminding ourselves and our students that liberal education can make life more productive, more interesting, and meaningful. Coming to know oneself intellectually, standing on the shoulders of intellectual giants as we reach for new ideas and innovations, conversing with others about ideas that matter, understanding one’s culture as one of many in a rich global community—these enrich our lives, our communities. If this way of education is to survive, we have to keep talking with our students about its goals and values—helping them claim a liberal education for themselves—and keep reminding our communities and our legislatures about the value of this approach to education that is relevant to employment, to healthy and creative communities, as well as meaningful personal lives.

Endnotes
1 The citation of this oft-quoted line is rarely provided. One source reported that it is in Mortimer Adler, The Paideia Program: an Educational Syllabus, New York: Macmillan, 1984.

2 “Survey reveals college students are on the wrong educational track for the 21st Century” Geneva, N.Y.—(BUSINESS WIRE)—Nov. 20, 1996.