On Liberal Education

We begin together. As you experience the exhilaration and the anxiety of a new home, I experience the exhilaration and the anxiety of my first year as president. We have clean slates before us, enormous opportunities to make a difference, for ourselves and for our community.

It seems fitting, as we begin, to consider just what you are beginning. Your professors will tell you that the liberal education you are about to acquire is priceless. And your parents will confirm that it is, if nothing else, expensive. Let us consider what you and your parents are buying for all that money.

Liberal education differs fundamentally from professional education or vocational training. It is not intended to develop specific skills or to prepare you for any particular calling. Its teachings are more general and less obviously "useful."

Some commentators define liberal education in terms of its curriculum: great works of literature, philosophy, history, and the fine arts, and the central principles and methods of the sciences. Others follow Cardinal Newman, who argued that education is "liberal" when it is an end in itself, independent of practical consequences, directed toward no specific purpose other than the free exercise of the mind. From this perspective, liberal education cultivates the intellect and expands the capacity to reason and to empathize. The first view identifies liberal education with its content, the second with the qualities of mind it seeks to develop.

These views need not be in conflict. I quote from a report of the Yale College faculty: "By a liberal education ... has been understood, such a course of discipline in the arts and sciences, as is best calculated, at the same time, both to strengthen and

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enlarge the faculties of mind, and to familiarize it with the leading principles of the
great objects of human investigation and knowledge.” These words come from the text
of a report submitted to President Jeremiah Day and the Fellows of Yale College in 1827
and published the following year along with President Day’s own report on the plan of
instruction in Yale College. Note the faculty’s emphasis on two distinct objectives: the
development of qualities of mind and the mastery of certain specific content.
Concerning the content of a liberal education, the document that has come to be known
as the Yale Report of 1828 continues: “It has been believed that there are certain
common subjects of knowledge, about which all men ought to be informed, who are
best educated.” The faculty recognized, however, that the corpus of knowledge
appropriate to a liberal education was not immutable. The authors observe: “What ... at
one time has been held in little estimation, and has hardly found a place in a course of
liberal instruction, has, under other circumstances, risen into repute, and received a
proportional share of attention. ... As knowledge varies, education should vary with it.”

As observers and forecasters of the development of the liberal curriculum in
America, the authors of the Yale Report were quite accurate. We no longer consider
rhetoric and theology, for example, to be indispensable subjects. And, in contrast to our
18th century forbears at Yale, we consider the literatures of living languages to be
central elements in a liberal education. Yet the Yale College faculty’s endorsement of
change in the content of a liberal education is ironic in the context of a report that
rejected curricular innovation and retained the mandatory study of Greek and Latin.
This irony reveals a subtle truth: though the curriculum is always changing, it is rare to
find among the faculty advocates of curricular change.
This example also teaches a more general lesson. It is all too easy to endorse certain values and remain quite blind as to how they should be applied in one’s own life. As I shall suggest shortly, a liberal education leads us to question and define our values. But this is not enough. To understand fully what our values mean, we must also test what it means to live by them.

In defining liberal education, the Yale Report gave equal weight to the content of the curriculum and the development of a particular quality of mind. Although the content of a liberal education has changed, the capabilities it seeks to encourage have not. I believe that the essence of liberal education is to develop the freedom to think critically and independently, to cultivate one's mind to its fullest potential, to liberate oneself from prejudice, superstition, and dogma.

The content of a curriculum intended to foster these qualities is not without consequence. Science and mathematics are essential components of any such project, because they present to the student methods of inquiry that are indispensable to the full development of human mind and its powers to reason independently. In pure mathematics and theoretical physics, for example, one learns how to reason deductively from clearly defined premises. In the experimental sciences one learns the method of induction, how to make proper inferences from evidence. Similarly, the great works of Western philosophy provide examples of how the mind liberates itself from prejudice by the rigorous application of reason to questions of how we know and how we should act.

What you read does matter. But I would suggest that we give less attention to the race, ethnicity, or gender of the authors we read, and more to the seriousness with which they confront what it means to be human. Truly profound works from any cultural tradition can serve to develop and exercise one’s capacities for reflection and critical judgment. Indeed, if these capacities were more thoroughly exercised in
thinking about the curriculum of a liberal education, the debate could be guided by the light of reasoned argument rather than the heat of passion.

Whatever the content of the curriculum and however it may evolve, let me suggest that a liberal education is not intended to teach you what to think, but how to think. For advice on this subject, consider what Thomas Jefferson told his nephew Peter Carr in 1787: "Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. ... [L]ay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, because any other persons ... have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision.” This endorsement of the powers of reason and independent critical thinking has lost none of its force. The University remains committed to these values of the Enlightenment.

I have argued that the purpose of liberal education is to develop the capacity for independent thought, rather than to acquire specific or “useful” knowledge. In this view I find myself allied with Cardinal Newman, who rejected the straightforward utilitarian arguments for support of higher education. But, as Newman concluded with some irony, a liberal education aimed solely at developing the capacity to reason can be defended on utilitarian grounds because it produces citizens who can make a genuine contribution to society.

“Training of the intellect,” Newman observes, “which is best for the individual himself, best enables him to discharge his duties to society. ... If ... a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society.” Newman continues: “It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and
to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility.”

This theme, that a liberal education best prepares one to serve society, resonates deeply with Yale’s historical purpose. In 1701 the General Assembly of Connecticut approved *An Act for Liberty to Erect a Collegiate School*, which it defined as a place “wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences who through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State.” For nearly three centuries Yale has fulfilled its founding mission with distinction, supplying leaders to the nation and the world.

The theme of public service finds a different, more immediate and direct expression in the activities of those who have preceded you to study at Yale in recent years. Last year over 2200 Yale College students engaged in community service activities in schools, soup kitchens, health care facilities, counseling centers, and churches throughout New Haven and the surrounding region. I encourage you now to join them, and I expect that, when we gather in the spring of 1997 to celebrate the completion of your course of study, I shall encourage you then to keep service to society among your priorities as you pursue your chosen vocations.

To equip students for public or community service is only one contribution that liberal education makes to the well-being of our nation and the wider world. Liberal education is also a powerful force for the preservation of individual freedom and democracy.

Let me develop this argument, because I believe there are two distinct points to be made. First, because liberal education develops the capacity for reason, reflection, and critical judgment, democratic processes work best when citizens are liberally educated. This idea stood behind Jefferson’s support for public education, and it was

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well understood by Tocqueville, who observed that “in the United States the instruction of the people powerfully contributes to the support of the democratic republic.” He described with admiration the ability of Americans to think clearly and precisely about public issues, and he noted especially the high level of civic intelligence among the inhabitants of Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Second, a liberally educated citizenry is the most reliable source of resistance to those forces of prejudice and intolerance that would undermine our nation’s commitment to free inquiry and free expression. Those educated to “fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion,” are those most disinclined to fall under the sway of prejudice, to succumb to intolerance. It is no accident that universities have historically been bastions in the defense of free inquiry and free expression, no accident that within Eastern Europe and China, they harbored and nurtured resistance to totalitarianism.

The forces of intolerance are not easily overcome. Forty years ago, President Griswold outlined the dangers of McCarthyism. Today, threats to free inquiry and free speech come from within as well as outside the University. Doctrinaire advocates of the “politically correct” substitute a wish to rewrite history for critical self-examination. They, and many of their opponents, manifest little toleration for open-minded debate. The issues at stake need full and free discussion, with toleration and respect for differences of opinion. We must bring to this debate the full power of our intellects and all our capabilities for making critical distinctions and reasoned judgments. These are precisely the qualities that a liberal education seeks to cultivate.

A liberal education will prepare you to be thinking citizens for a lifetime, to subject the claims of all groups and interests to critical scrutiny, to resist those who would substitute the emotional appeal of prejudice for the use of reason. Given the

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blessing of free and independent minds, you will have the burden of defending
freedom and independence for all.

You enter an institution rich in the traditions of scholarship, abounding in the
joys of learning. But a liberal education is not simply given to you. You must actively
pursue it. Take every advantage of the treasures before you. The world is all before
you, where to choose your place of rest.

In four years, we beginners will meet again at another ritual celebration to assess
what we have accomplished. As we begin together, let us, with open minds and
steadfast hearts, dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of light and truth.