WINTER 2013 HONORABLE MENTION

Ansh Shukla

INSTRUCTOR'S FOREWORD

As Ansh observes, debates about the meaning and purpose of liberal education are as old as the clouds – and his epigraph from Aristophanes reminds us of the dangers of having those empyreal objects too much in view. If these debates seem newly urgent today, this is because what Ansh calls the “liberal arts problem” is one crucial aspect of a larger and more recent problem: that of defining the social role of the university in US society. “Due to an immense expansion in American higher education during the 20th century,” writes Ansh, “the modern university is more than just an ivory tower of academia; it is a credentialing body that signifies upward social mobility.” How might these divergent roles be reconciled? And what might be the place of liberal education in this new university?

Despite the national, even transnational, scope of these questions, it was a distinctly local experience that led Ansh to ask them. The first spark of inspiration came from a rhetorical analysis of the public face of the university (not unlike this very book!) through which Stanford communicates to the public its mission and identity as an institution. In subsequent assignments, Ansh was led to compare this mission and this identity with those expressed by other institutions, and to seek an explanation for Stanford’s difference in the history and theory of education. In Stanford’s innovative approaches to undergraduate education, Ansh finds a new and more inclusive model, based on a reconceived notion of the “ownership” of the liberal tradition.

Ansh’s “reframing” effort suggests that the certificate of death, while premature as regards the ideal of liberal education, may be more properly applied to the figures of the “Purist” and the “Utilitarian,” representatives of entrenched ways in which ink is spilled for and against this ideal. What “The Four-Year Plan: A Reframing of Contemporary Debate Regarding the ‘Death’ of American Undergraduate Liberal Education” shows us, in the range and depth of its research and the rigor of its argument, is that liberal education is far from dead. Rather, it finds new life as the reflection of our changing vision of the “good life” that is education’s goal.

—Mark Taylor

The Four-Year Plan: A Reframing of Contemporary Debate Regarding the “Death” of American Undergraduate Liberal Education

Ansh Shukla

“I am walking in the air, and speculating about the sun.” —Socrates in Aristophanes’s The Clouds

“One night, when Socrates was studying the course of the moon and its revolutions and was gazing open-mouthed at the heavens, a lizard crapped upon him from the top of the roof.” —A disciple in Aristophanes’s The Clouds

In Aristophanes’s comic play The Clouds, The Thoughtery is envisioned as a fortress of learning within which the enlightened Socrates spends his time producing lofty ideas and intricate natural philosophies. An early Athenian in the play named Strepsiades, one of many such pilgrims, travels to the institution to enroll Phidippides, his son, as a disciple, hopeful that training in rhetoric will help his family defeat its usurious creditors. However, the “world of subtle thought, of reasoning and of meditation” revealed to Phidippides at the Thoughtery leads him to an unhealthy cynicism that culminates in his public thrashing of his father. Instead of a glorious triumph of knowledge over the iniquitous creditors, the play ends with a spiteful Strepsiades torching the Thoughtery and killing Socrates and his disciples within.

Aristophanes’s lampoon of Socrates’s pedantic intellectualism in The Clouds is the earliest recorded work in what is now a rich tradition of attacks against the liberal arts. Historical criticisms of a liberal education address weaknesses that remain relevant today: liberally educated students study words and not matter and liberal arts institutions ignore the gap between the practical and the theoretical.
To a scholar of education, these claims are neither out of place nor prescient at any point in the history of higher education, yet they command legitimacy as contemporary American issues. Due to an immense expansion in American higher education during the 20th century, the modern university is more than just an ivory tower of academia; it is a credentialing body that signifies upward social mobility, and time-tested approaches to learning are not sufficient to simultaneously satisfy both roles (“Why College”). This environment has forced universities to confront a commercial and existential issue that I define as The Liberal Arts Problem: should higher education adhere to liberal education ideals and risk losing students (i.e., paying customers) or has the time come for a utilitarian, skills-based education to supplant a liberal education as the default pedagogical vehicle of the university?

Ken Auletta can be credited with bring The Liberal Arts Problem into the mainstream with his controversial recent New Yorker article “Get Rich U.” The article accuses Stanford University of abandoning its intellectual mission in response to the Liberal Arts Problem, and this paper will attempt to evaluate the veracity of Auletta’s argument. In order to do so, we will have to not only construct a method of categorizing mainstream responses to the Liberal Arts Problem but also adopt a series of definitions that formalize Auletta’s attacks and Stanford’s position in contemporary theory. However, our paper will reveal that current scholarship is inadequate at describing the vast, complex domain of potential resolutions to the Liberal Arts Problem, of which Stanford is only one instance. This inadequacy, this study will demonstrate, results from a limiting notion of ownership in the liberal arts: theorists believe in the ideal of Liberal Education, instead of a plurality of competing ideals. As a result, contemporary debate only considers mainstream scholarship in Liberal Education, and experimental approaches are excluded. We will argue that such a notion is insufficient in the 21st century, and that many manifestations of liberal education must be accepted for the ideal to persist into the future.

MEGA-SUCCESS: STANFORD UNIVERSITY AS THE POSTER CHILD OF THE LIBERAL ARTS PROBLEM

Following Ken Auletta’s critical treatment in The New Yorker, perhaps no school embodies the contemporary Liberal Arts Problem better than Stanford University. Auletta’s article, provocatively entitled “Get Rich U,” profiles Stanford from a variety of angles: university President John Hennessy, the school’s integration with the Silicon Valley community, and the campus culture. In all facets, the school is apparently flourishing—money pours in and balloons the endowment, professors and students seek and find fortunes in the Valley, and people are genuinely happy with the school’s state of affairs. Yet, amidst all this apparent success, we find a disturbing trend away from the transformational and aspirational aims of a liberal education. Students’ profiled success comes at the expense of their ability to be free-thinking intellectuals in Auletta’s mind, and his article is primarily concerned with revealing the dynamics of such a compromise.

Perhaps the most troubling accusation brought up by Auletta is a sense of “mega-success” which pervades the atmosphere on Stanford campus. This goal purportedly influences all campus activity in a way that encourages the Stanford community to ignore any borders between the university and business. Misguided by the belief that making money is supremely virtuous, professors and students come together in Auletta’s Stanford to work towards this—and only this—ideal. Such a scene in higher education is disturbing for any reader because it violates the fundamental ideals of a university as a place of intellectual refuge, and the product of new knowledge is often expected to be detached from worldly pressures at universities. However, the people at Stanford themselves cannot recognize these concerns because they “profess a sometimes inflated belief that their work is changing the world” (Auletta). The symbiosis between the Valley and Stanford which has created the notion of mega-success on campus, Auletta implicitly claims, has become so pervasive that it is hard to imagine “Silicon Valley without Stanford University” and Stanford University without the Silicon Valley.

Some on campus believe that recent curricular changes towards a more interdisciplinary education are evidence of Stanford’s lasting commitment to providing a liberal education. These new curricula and majors, potentially the lasting legacy of current President John Hennessy, emphasize the importance of a broad education in posing interesting questions about knowledge today. Many hail this experiment as a triumph in curricular reform for its ability to produce “T-shaped” students who have depth in a particular field of study as well as breadth across multiple disciplines (Auletta). However, Auletta also dismisses these claims and presents newfangled interdisciplinary majors as little more than an alternate means of achieving the same mega-success described above. Such an approach, he claims, “worked” (emphasis added) for Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, who used their knowledge as T-students to successfully found and sell Instagram. The dismissive “worked” typifies his broader interpretation of interdisciplinary majors—they are simply ways of bringing together minds to encourage creative solutions that perpetuate mega-success on campus.
The reader emerges from “Get Rich U.” with the impression that amidst the environment of mega-success at Stanford University, the mission of liberal education has been perverted, displaced, or abandoned. These concerns, Auletta reassures, are not unreasonable; David Kennedy, Gerhard Casper, and many other notable Stanford faculty are quoted sharing similar opinions about the “toxic” atmosphere. Contextually, his case seems persuasive: Stanford, like many other universities, is faced with the same Liberal Arts Problem, and its decision to switch to practicality makes sense. However, Stanford rejects this conception; it claims to be a fundamentally liberal arts institution that educations cultured citizens (“Freshman Convocation 2011”). We will now attempt to evaluate Auletta’s accusations by grounding them in educational theory.

A TALE OF TWO THEORIES: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The picture of decline that Auletta paints finds its roots in an expansive literature produced by liberal arts critics in the last three decades. These critics, as suggested by Daniel DeNicola, can be usefully partitioned into two types: “critics of practice” and “critics of theory” (16). Critics of practice are champions of the liberal education ideal and accuse contemporary universities of not living up to it. One recent work from this group, which contains passages evoked by Auletta, is Liberal Arts at the Brink: a self-described “wake up call for liberal education” that decries liberal arts schools for potentially “becoming mere dispensers of employment and professional school credentials” (“Liberal Arts at the Brink”). On the other hand, critics of theory provide a far greater existential threat to liberal education because their arguments contend that the ideal is itself problematic in the 21st century. In response to the barrage of scholarly attacks produced by these two camps since the 1980s, two corresponding groups have formed that together comprise the bulk of modern higher education theories. To accurately evaluate where Stanford stands in the categories of higher education these groups have generated, we must first understand their positions.

Purists

The first such group will be called “Purists.” As the name suggests, the Purists are a fundamentally conservative group aligned with critics of practice that resist any change to the humanistic mission of higher education. As a result, the Purist evaluation of higher education invokes historically lofty paradigms such as cultural inheritance, self-actualization, and world understanding (Thwing 446-448). To them, liberal education is about the continual pursuit of an ideal and its attendant advantages: a student must seek intellectualism and, only in the process, gain the relevant knowledge to become a productive, democratic citizen; celebrate knowledge for its own sake and thus gain practical skills; develop the habits for lifelong learning and consequently establish the foundation for advanced, professional study (DeNicola 15-16). As Auletta demonstrated with Gerhard Casper, the most vocal defenders of these ideals are ex-university officials who display eager interest in the fate of their institutions in this period of flux. James Freedman, the ex-President of the University of Iowa and Dartmouth College, implores universities to resist the imperative of fundamental change and instead “find new ways of expressing [their] mission that preserve the essence of [their] character” (32).

Purists’ envisioned reforms of higher education substantiate their conservative underpinnings, and many of the more radical solutions draw direct inspiration from history. We will consider but two of the many urgent issues Purist literature confronts because they hold particular importance in the context of Stanford University and typify the general spirit of designs to revitalize higher education. The first is—as labeled by Daniel DeNicola—the issue of curricular reform in the face of “hyper-specialization” (227). This general category of reform cites the system of elective classes introduced by Harvard President Charles William Eliot intended to encourage a “freedom in choice of studies” as the origin of disciplinary “major” (Eliot). Ironically, Purists point out, the contemporary major is quite opposite: it places restrictive requirements on its students and introduces “educational compartmentalization” and “threatening disciplinary hierarchies” (DeNicola 227; Davis 176). In response, Purists such as Daniel DeNicola suggest reforming “the presentation of the curriculum…so that the specialization of the major—the need to study something in depth—is conceived as one of the general education requirements for a liberal arts degree [emphasis added]” (229). By this, DeNicola means a general education requirement that, like the original elective system, allows students enough latitude in course selection so that their interests lead them to their own expertise and specialization, instead of university-enforced major requirements.

Daniel DeNicola’s emphasis of place as a critical factor in developing a vibrant educational community is the second Purist reform we consider. This reform is a reaction to the impersonal mode of education enabled by technology (online lectures, emails, etc.) and its concomitant effects. Historically, DeNicola argues, liberal education was characterized by a “pedagogy of the personal” that enabled...
“diverse viewpoints, contrarian sentiments, spontaneous responses, [and] serendipitous insights” (234-235). Only this sort of approach satisfactorily emphasizes the student’s development as an individual actor; others all subsume the student into a regiment that idealizes efficiency and information transfer. As a result, contemporary liberal education requires a restoration of the vibrant learning community enabled by proximity in place. It is through this sort of reform that the learning communities required for liberal education to thrive can be established.

Utilitarians

Essentially opposite to Purist theories and reforms, the second group—which I define as “Utilitarians” —believes that higher education can be organized around telic purposes and justified with a scientific practicality. Indeed, many of the theories developed by Utilitarian thinkers depend on economic analyses of educational outcomes and cognitive research into efficient learning. In fact, J.S.S. Edwards and S.C. Oglice’s introduction to the economic analysis of higher education is such revealing insight into the intense practicality of Utilitarian approaches that it is worth quoting at length:

Before we begin, we need to be clear about some basic features of the following analysis, which are characteristic of economists’ approaches to discussing education. The first is that economists tend to focus on the role of education in economic success, as measured, for example, by higher wages received by more educated workers. This is not to deny that education yields other benefits to individuals…These other benefits, however, are typically not the subject of economic analysis of education. The second characteristic feature is that economic analyses of education do not consider the details of the educational process…For economists, better-educated individuals are individuals who have completed more years of formal education: typically, economists have nothing to say about whether a given number of years of formal education results in better-educated individuals if these years are organized in one way rather than another (39).

The assumptions made by the analyses are telling: monetary outcome is the only measured benefit and all education—regardless of nature, subject, and rigor—is equivalent. As a result, Utilitarians design education to optimize measurable educational outcomes, often manifesting in attempts to maximize professional competency and job placement out of college. In addition, because of this particular brand of pragmatism, the Utilitarian education is popular, but not unique to, professional schools.

Just as economic analysis dictates educational objectives for Utilitarians, cognitive science is cited as the scientific backbone of curriculum design. There are two seminal studies that shed light onto the Utilitarian decision to educate deeply specialized—as opposed to generally educated—students: schema theory, which proposes that the overriding factor in determining comprehension of new reading is prior knowledge about subject matter, and cognitive psychology, which links intelligence and expertise to deep, domain-specific knowledge instead of general mental acumen (Anderson and Pearson; Chi, Glaser, and Rees). These are guiding principles for Utilitarians; every appraisal of educational efficacy centers on the degree of curricular depth and economic outcome. The fact that this attitude is evocative of the Stanford pictured in Get Rich U. is not a coincidence. After exploring the two mainstream theories of higher education, it is clear that Auletta accuses Stanford of becoming a Utilitarian institution.

WAR OF THE WORDS: DEVELOPING A METHOD OF CATEGORIZATION BASED UPON PURIST AND UTILITARIAN DEBATES

The drastic difference between Utilitarian and Purist approaches to higher education design seems to prima facie greatly simply the task of categorizing Stanford and evaluating Auletta’s claims. There is, after all, minimal overlap in the attitudes of the two groups, and the nature of discourse between them suggests little room for a compromising theory. In fact, Purists are often downright hostile towards any notion of a practical education. Freedman dismisses it as nothing but “premature vocationalism” and Alexander Astin, head of the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, sarcastically parodies the extreme Purist view by claiming they see Utilitarian students as “apathetic ingrates” (qtd. in Lewis and Liegler 49).

However, Utilitarian views of liberal education slightly complicate our task. Most Utilitarian scholars strongly encourage integrating liberal education into the curriculum, and many attempts have been made following Armour and Fuhrmann’s efforts in 1989 to identify the professional competencies that can be strengthened through the outcomes of liberal education. These efforts at integrating liberal education to enhance a professionally focused curriculum have been immensely popular. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing claims that liberal
education is "needed for the development of intellectual and innovative capacities for current and emergent generalist nursing practice" ("Essentials of Education" 11), and many professional organizations require some sort of broader, liberally inspired general education curriculum to supplement core learning. The practical use of this education is evident: a nurse choosing whether to provide a lone ventilator to a 20-year-old patient or to an 80-year-old patient must negotiate moral and ethical questions, a skill developed superbly by liberal arts courses. In this way, liberal education is little more than a "handmaiden to the acquisition of economically useful skills" to Utilitarians, yet its inclusion in the curriculum may obscure our analysis (Edwards and Ogilvie 55-56). As a result, we must be careful when evaluating Stanford to separate modes of education from purpose. A Utilitarian education may incorporate some features of liberal education, but it will always be identifiable by the immediate practicality of its educational objectives.

Generating an equivalent distinguishing philosophy for Purists proves challenging, and even Purist scholars agree "the situation of defining liberal education is more discordant than dialogue" (DeNicola 8). Although there is a sense that all participants grasp a similar notion of the liberal education ideal, it is hard to find unifying theories that assist us in identifying a Purist education in practice. Historically, Purist liberal education theories were presented in terms of strict binaries; the liberal arts were "those arts and science which are 'liberal' rather than 'mechanical' or 'servile'" (Edwards and Ogilvie 55). Unfortunately, with the growth of new, borderline disciplines within the sciences and humanities that provide no longstanding association with the liberal arts, such as Computer Science, such definitions are inadequate. Inclusive/exclusive definitions that define Purist education by what it is (e.g., the seven traditional liberal arts) or what it is not (e.g., professional education) miss the wide swaths fledgling fields of knowledge.

Daniel DeNicola offers a potential solution by reimagining how Purist ideals may be recognized. His definition has two parts: "(1) to pursue the articulation of a compelling vision of the good life, and (2) to prepare for and cultivate such a life" (1). This theory, as it stands, is admittedly thin, but its approach—defining liberal education in terms of its supreme aims that encapsulate values and direction—allows it to be unpacked such that it is specific enough to fit our needs. I extend the goal of pursuing and articulating a vision of the good life in two significant ways. Primarily, a liberal education must provide the educational breadth necessary for the students to faithfully engage in this search. This occurs through a satisfactory system of general education. Moreover, the students must be equipped to claim ownership of the conceptions they produce. This ability is developed by the liberal education's emphasis of knowledge ownership, which engages knowledge as something that can be interacted with instead of just accepted as true. I contest that the second part of the goal is achieved by the careful honing of skills ("prepare for") and lifelong learning ("and cultivate") in life.

With this definition of Purist education along with our understanding of Utilitarianism, we are now equipped with sufficient context and procedures to commence a fair and thorough evaluation of Auletta's accusations. Given that the categories we currently possess are so dramatically polarized, our judgment should come swiftly and unequivocally.

"A SCHOOL FREE FROM THE CONSTRAINTS OF LONG TRADITION"

An analysis of Stanford in its entirety is beyond the scope of any single paper. Instead, what we will focus on in our work is identifying and evaluating two key, representative questions: What type of education does Stanford purport to provide its students? What can we learn about Stanford's goals through the evolution of its pedagogy? The reader may observe that these questions are biased for omitted some of the most promising indicators of Stanford's Purist sentiments: traditional programs such as Structured Liberal Education (SLE) and newfangled interdisciplinary majors such as Symbolic Systems (SymSys) and Science, Technology, & Society (STS) are both praised for modernizing Purist ideals at Stanford ("Liberal Education for the 21st Century"). However, because these programs emerge out of expansive literature—requiring significant effort to properly contextualize and evaluate—and color the undergraduate experience of only a minority of students, I choose to defer their consideration to a future, more directed study. Indeed, similar thinking motivates many notable omissions, but the purpose of our analysis is to provide a template for future scholarship.
The first object of our analysis is the Stanford Viewbook. This Viewbook is an element of marketing text mailed out to perspective students that is designed to convey the values and benefits of a Stanford education. First impressions of the book are promising for Purists: it is organized with a heavy emphasis on “Freedom” and its three major sections describe how freedom is an actor in the place, the mission, and the people of the university.

A closer scrutiny of freedom’s influence on the university, however, produces a far more contradictory picture. The Viewbook claims that the Silicon Valley and the spirit of entrepreneurship are the primary fuel of the school’s freedom (“Stanford Viewbook” 3, 14). This statement is distinctly of the sort that troubles Purist critics such as Auletta: how can a school claim to cultivate the impartial conception of a good life when it identifies so strongly with institutions that depend on clearly defined, economic metrics of success? Indeed, this concern is further vindicated if we observe what the Viewbook seems to define as success. The mission of Stanford is to “overcome our time’s seemingly intractable challenges,” “address the world’s most pressing questions,” and pursue “excellence” (“Stanford Viewbook” 1, 17, 30, 43). These phrases pitch goal-focused activity under the pretense of social benefit, and they recur at the end of every major section in the Viewbook. In this new light, we may reinterpret the organization of the Viewbook: instead of unified by freedom, it is simply a sequence of resources that ultimately help students achieve their overriding desire for success.

The accusation of mega-success becomes even more compelling when we evaluate the Stanford Viewbook in terms of those distributed by competing Purist institutions. What is most striking in these other Viewbooks is the complete and conspicuous absence of success. In comparison to Stanford’s profiles of notable students (e.g., ones who go on to become novelists, Rhodes Scholars, and successful politicians), Princeton and Amherst students come across as intellectually skeptical and distinctly average. In fact, the Princeton and Amherst Viewbooks both include sections that describe the intellectually messy journey of their students through college—journeys that involve experimentation, exploration, and confusion (“Princeton Viewbook” 6; “Amherst Viewbook” 11). All evidence indicates that Stanford’s recurrent use of “freedom” belies the intellectual latitude afforded to its students. Indeed, the only time “freedom” appears in a sentence of the Viewbook is revealing: the “Freedom to Achieve” (“Stanford Viewbook” 66).

It may be argued that a Viewbook is just a shallow marketing pitch, and the ideas expressed explicitly or implicitly in the text are not representative of how Stanford conducts itself in practice. I concede that the Viewbook’s role as marketing material is important in qualifying our interpretations and that some ideals may be falsely exaggerated. However, the Viewbook is important because, as marketing material, it is directed towards an audience. Namely, the students attracted by the ideals in the text are exactly the type of students Stanford wants. Although it is true that the Viewbook does not accurately represent the entirety of Stanford’s pedagogical approach, it does hyper-emphasize both the values that the university desires in its students and what it promises to them. For these two insights alone, it is an attractive text for our efforts.

The decidedly practical notion of Stanford we gain from its Viewbook is summarily refuted by The Study of Undergraduate Education at Stanford University (SUES). SUES is the culmination of a multi-year investigation by Stanford university faculty into how the school can fulfill its educational objectives as a liberal arts institution while being mindful of unique pressures in the 21st century. The report places Stanford—both philosophically and practically—squarely in the Purist camp. One of the major contributions of SUES is the definition of four elements as the goals of a successful Stanford education: owned knowledge, honed skills and capacities, a cultivated sense of personal and social responsibilities, and adaptive learning (Campbell and McConnell 11-12). Knowledge ownership, as we identified in our definitions, is a key precursor to developing a personal conception of the good life, and honed skills and capacities corresponds directly with the preparation and cultivation of such a life. The list’s omissions are also significant. Nowhere does the school mention a desire to emphasize professional competency or economic productivity. In fact, President John Hennessy has explicitly rejected this notion in his address at Convocation for the last six years: “Your undergraduate education is a foundation for life… It is much more than your ticket to your first job. It is an opportunity to develop the skills and passion for being a lifelong learner in areas
related to and outside of your future career”. Statements like these reinforce an educational philosophy that is strongly in line with Purist thought.

However, the Stanford Viewbook provides reason for skepticism when it comes to the attitude of Stanford in practice, and SUES’s recommendations for reform suggest such claims are unfounded. The concern of hyper-specialization and restrictive major requirements we earlier attributed to Purists is echoed in the report. The authors recognize that increasing requirements place an unsupportable burden on student exploration and “the first thing that gives is general education” (21). In fact, some of the concerns that they voice—that, for example, mandating a general education requirement is “ironically, anything but liberating”—echo distinctly Purist concerns (34). As a result, in order to fortify a useful general education for all students, the committee suggests two major changes to the design of the undergraduate education. The first is a “Ways of Thinking, Ways of Doing” program that directly integrates general education competencies into major specific courses in order to foster breadth (Campbell and McConnell 34). This approach is designed to allow students to sample a variety of disciplines without further placing burdens on the course load. The other suggestion, far more ambitious, is to vitalize the intellectual life of the school by making “students immediate and full partners” via Integrated Learning Environments (ILE) (65). These ILEs are borne out of the belief that classes in the humanities are neither the sole nor necessary method for effective learning. Instead, the SUES report recommends establishing learning communities within residential complexes that emphasize the encouragement of intellectual vitality within the places where students live. This type of reform, as we recall, is strongly in line with what Purists desire in the evolution of liberal education.

The SUES report and Stanford Viewbook describe a university that resists categorization. Although we found Purists and Utilitarians to create a scholarship that was resoundingly bimodal, Stanford somehow exists at the intersection of these two schools of thought. Its educational philosophy is grounded purely in Purist theory, and with impending changes to the liberal arts curriculum, it is tending towards the historical liberal education Purist literature admires. At the same time, we cannot define it as a Purist university because of how easily it embraces a particular ideal of success. It is clear that this approach has been unsatisfactory, but why?

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**Boothe Prize Essays 2012-2013**

**IF IT LOOKS LIKE PURIST EDUCATION, ACTS LIKE PURIST EDUCATION, AND CLAIMS TO BE PURIST EDUCATION…**

Why does there exist so much controversy around labeling a school that purports to provide a liberal education, designs its undergraduate experience mindful of liberal education ideals, often rejects purely Utilitarian notions of professional success, and encourages an intellectual curiosity unique to liberal education as a Purist institution? In fact, Stanford only transgresses one aspect of the definition we adopted to identify Purist schools: “to articulate a compelling vision of the good life”. Instead of allowing its students to take ownership of their conceptions of the good life, the school exercises its influence to produce a collective “good life” centered on social and economic success. However, given this violation, the only way for us to faithfully incorporate Stanford into the current debate as it stands is to claim that it represents an entirely new form of education—neither liberal nor practical—heretofore unexamined by critics or invalidate all evidence and accuse it of only adopting a pretense of liberal arts and being fundamentally Utilitarian.

The challenge I believe we face in categorizing Stanford is not an issue with the school, but a shortcoming in definitions. The trouble we had settling on a satisfactory definition to recognize Purist institutions is further complicated by the definition we ended up adopting—for all its openness—being hotly contested. In fact, if we had adopted an alternate definition, our analysis of Stanford may not have been as inconclusive. As a result of liberal education’s historical essentialism, Purist scholars are often engaged in debates attempting to claim ownership of the *timeless ideal* of liberal education, assuming only one can exist. Daniel DeNicola—who himself admits to some essentialism in liberal education—views its evolution as the function of “every age [constructing] and [debating] its own interpretations, its own realizations of liberal education” (38). However, we live in an age of plurality that has made a singular vision effectively impossible. Therefore, a variety of manifestations of liberal education simply must exist for it to remain a feasible educational approach.

If we empower all educational actors to produce and defend their conceptions of liberal education, we will introduce vitality to the conversation currently absent. The continuous dialogue and innovation such distributed ownership will allow can validate a diversity of practices and create a scholarship where educational debates are reframed around effectiveness instead of designations. Under this model, Stanford would be associated with a theory of liberal education with practical leanings,
instead of rejected by Purist camps altogether. Attacks against Stanford, then, would have to question the legitimacy of its practical bent. A model of such distributed ownership already exists in educational theory: the Utilitarian designation engages a spectrum of theories ranging from the extreme to the medial because no single institution or group controls mainstream thought.

Examples of how such a change to the landscape of scholarship will improve the state of discourse already exist. Bruce Kimball and Carl Bereiter both offer visions of a new liberal education generating nuanced solutions to the Liberal Arts Problem plaguing Purists. Kimball, who identifies a type of liberal education inspired by American Pragmatism, suggests confronting the explosion of knowledge by “promoting specialization through integration” into the general education curriculum (Kimball 488). His supporters have already undertaken efforts to develop a system that legitimizes the economic value of liberal education by changing how it is marketed (Menand 143). Bereiter’s conception focuses on challenging the notion that simply integrating liberal education into Utilitarian curriculums by “merging the two into lists of educational objectives, as in now common” can be effective because it “does not begin to resolve underlying differences [in those forms of learning]” (Bereiter 12). Instead, he envisions a new type of liberal institution that, much like Stanford, delivers a more practical education by leveraging humanistic principles. Although future insight may suggest that neither of these approaches are tenable, the fact that none of these theories are considered seriously because they exist outside of the “correct” definition of liberal education is concerning.

WHY NOW?

We live in a world where cultural attitudes towards liberal education are shifting. What was once an aspirational ticket to social mobility is doubted for its ability to provide any meaningful value to its students, and Robert M. Rosenzweig’s 1989 observations during his tenure as the President of the Association of American Universities seem to be realized:

In the last year or two I have noticed a disturbing growth in cynicism about universities, the one attitude that I believe we cannot long survive. None of society’s institutions...depends more than universities on the public belief that their purposes are different from those of other organizations—more public-spirited, less self-interested—and the corresponding belief that the conduct of universities will match their purposes. (qtd. in Costner 50).

I fear if these shifts are allowed to continue unabated, current skepticism will solidify and become a permanent and dominant view on liberal education. Such a future should be frightening to all because liberal education is critical to our intellectual and social well-being. Its goals are noble and unique in higher education, enriching our mind and preserving our humanity. Therefore, Liberal Education must transcend these stifling debates of ownership and learn from its Utilitarian rivals the power of intellectual diversity. Only discourse which accepts and builds upon new theories such as Pragmatist Liberal Education or Connectivist Liberal Education will we begin to save liberal education from becoming a relic of our past.
WORKS CITED


