

## Generating Ideals and Transforming Lives: A Contemporary Case for the Residential Liberal Arts College

**I**N THE FOREWORD TO THIS VOLUME, Steven Koblik states that residential liberal arts colleges “remain the best models of undergraduate education in the country.” Can a case be made to support such an audacious claim? I believe so, if the ends of education—“consciousness” as meaning making, and satisfying the innate human need for coherence—are properly perceived. If ours is a “culture of neglect,” as I believe, then that must have a corrosive effect on our youth, which a liberal education can help alleviate if the ends and means inherent in such an education are correctly interpreted. Too many of the country’s influential publics yearn only for a “practical” and “professional” education, imagining that this is the opposite of a liberal education. As I believe this essay will show, they are mistaken.

### EDUCATIONAL INCOHERENCE: ELIZA’S LAMENT

Helping young people make sense of the world has always been problematic. Each generation worries about facing an uncertain future, and struggles to construct meaning in what is perceived as a complex and ambiguous world heretofore unknown to previous generations. The current generation of stu-

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dents is no exception to this phenomenon. American society feels as if it has become a free-for-all, a social lottery with no security, not even from a lifetime of merit. Technological, economic, and social changes of the last thirty years have rendered the psychic landscape seemingly unstable.

But this is not new. At the turn of the nineteenth century, an adolescent lamented:

I left school with a head full of something tumbled in without order or connection. I returned home with a determination to put it in more order. But I soon lost all patience, for the greater part of my ideas I was obliged to throw away without knowing where I got them or what I should do with them.

—Eliza Southgate to Moses Porter, 1801<sup>1</sup>

Eliza Southgate could sense coherence even if she had not experienced it. Sent to a fashionable Boston school at the age of thirteen, she had learned a little of this and a little of that, much as secondary students and undergraduates in many colleges and universities do today. She was hungry for learning and perceptive enough to know what she had missed. She lamented the disorder as well as the shallowness of her education. She wanted to know whence came the sentiments she had been taught, how they related to each other, and what to do with them.

There is a deeper concern in Eliza Southgate's letter. She was convinced her society had not asked enough of her. Her cousin, Moses Porter, had provoked her by arguing that as a woman she did not really need the kind of education she was seeking. "Do you suppose the mind of woman the only work of God that was 'made in vain'?" she answered. "The cultivation of the powers we possess, I have ever thought a privilege (or I may say duty) that belonged to the human species."<sup>2</sup>

Her lament is instructive. She articulates poignantly the idea that the essence of our humanity is to discover and construct meaning in our lives, to make connections among the "something tumbled in without order." Like us, at the turn of another century, she wanted to understand the connection between where knowledge came from and where it might lead her. For Eliza, the purpose of an education was the "cultivation of the powers we possess."

The quest to make sense of our past, present, and future, especially during times of rapid and substantial change, has been important throughout history. In considering the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, for example, Matthew Arnold admonished that “not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming is the character of perfection.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, American higher education after World War II was a model perhaps best suited to “a having and a resting.” For an America at the height of its well-earned and dearly bought influences, sustaining the status quo was the ultimate task. Teaching was conceived essentially as transmitting general knowledge and received wisdom to succeeding generations of students. As the multi-universities grew, they were, in those early years, the direct spawn of the traditional liberal arts campuses; their commitment to the same core curriculum was a way of demonstrating that they could be as good as their predecessors yet also deliver economies of scale.

But the sixties brought a new mood. The larger institutions, both public and private, dependent on state funding and massive alumni support, were forced to make an accommodation: they enlarged their support base by raising enrollments, with a promise of no loss of quality. The reverberations of this decision toward economies of scale, relaxed admissions, and rising prices have exacerbated the trends towards an increasingly less effective education system.

It is perfectly understandable that prospective students and parents should want the maximum return on their educational investment. In an economy with no long-term job security, parents impart to their children the same sort of anxieties as did survivors of the depression two generations ago. At the same time, a seductive myth prevails that large public universities are not only less expensive but, considering the price of private education, more cost-effective, offering an opportunity for large-scale networking and institutional name recognition.<sup>4</sup> And it is also unsurprising that the homogenizing tendencies of our mass-market culture should affect popular attitudes toward higher education—the best schools must be those that most resemble a “learning mall.” Few parents or students see through the false advertising and unquestioned assumptions lurking in the pages

of university catalogs: the priority of research, the prevalence of graduate students teaching the sections of high-salaried star professors too busy doing research to bother with the students who were lured by their fame.

This state of affairs is increasingly being questioned. Parents are showing growing signs of hesitancy at the idea of sending their children to campuses of twenty thousand students, where they live in dormitory towers redolent of public housing, hear lectures in cavernous halls with the assistance of a television monitor, and sign their exams with a Social Security number. It is unsatisfying and, moreover, inefficient: fewer than 50 percent of those students in such institutions ultimately graduate.<sup>5</sup> The point has been underscored by the report of the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities*, which recently concluded that what most large research universities promise is not delivered.

An undergraduate at an American research university can receive an education as good or better than anything available anywhere in the world, but that is not the normative experience. Again and again, universities are guilty of an advertising practice they would condemn in the commercial world. Recruitment materials display proudly the world-famous professors, the splendid facilities and the ground-breaking research that goes on within them, but thousands of students graduate without ever seeing the world-famous professors or tasting genuine research.<sup>6</sup>

The report goes on to echo Eliza's lament:

Many students graduate having accumulated whatever number of courses is required, but still lacking a coherent body of knowledge or any inkling as to how one sort of information might relate to others. And all too often they graduate without knowing how to think logically, write clearly, or speak coherently. The university has given them too little that will be of real value beyond a credential that will help them get their first jobs. And with larger and larger numbers of their peers holding the same paper in their hands, even that credential has lost much of its potency.<sup>7</sup>

There are countless thousands of modern-day Eliza Southgates, graduating from colleges and universities with profound feel-

ings of incoherence, of heads “full of something tumbled in without order or connection,” ideas that they are “obliged to throw away without knowing where (they) got them or what (they) should do with them.” This condition exists in part because the academy, most often but not exclusively in large universities, has poorly understood the complex nature of teaching and learning required to truly unleash the human “powers we possess,” to use Eliza’s phrase, and the necessity of coherence in both the ends and means of a liberating education.

Acknowledging the ineffectiveness of higher education today, many recommend panaceas, the most alluring of which is the use of technology. Indeed, we are now confronted with the notion of “virtual universities,” premised on the use of technology to transcend place and person-to-person interaction. The University of Phoenix and its ilk are quite real, if “real” is an appropriate notion in this context. And while most colleges need some of what modern technology offers, it is not so true that what technology can offer has anything that approaches the transformative power of a genuine liberal arts education.

#### A CULTURE OF NEGLECT

At the close of the so-called American Century, the moral fabric of American society is fraying from the strains of identity politics, the celebration of victim-status, the attenuation of community bonds, the dissolution of family structure, and the economic pressures that make financial stability elusive. All loyalties seem to be negotiable. Economies of scale, mass-marketing, and technology have created a centrifugal culture with a decreasing sense of history, community, and stability, in flight from personal responsibility, addicted to speed, and easily distracted.

Our culture has produced a generation of quite fragile students who come to college unsure of who they are, fearful in their lack of identity, and without confidence in the future. Many are ashamed of themselves and afraid of relationships, which is too often manifested in the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. This diminished sense of self has caused an increase in acts of racism, sexism, assault, date rape, attempted

suicide, eating disorders, theft, property damage, and cheating on most campuses.<sup>8</sup> In a recent national study of college students, Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University, concluded,

The bottom line is that students are coming to college overwhelmed and more damaged than those of previous years. Six out of ten chief student affairs officers (60 percent) reported that undergraduates are using psychological counseling services in record numbers and for longer periods of time than in the past; this is true at 69 percent of four-year schools and 52 percent of two-year colleges. Eating disorders are up at 58 percent of the institutions surveyed. Classroom disruption increased at a startling 44 percent of colleges, drug abuse at 42 percent, alcohol abuse at 35 percent of campuses. Gambling has grown at 25 percent of the institutions, and suicide attempts have risen at 23 percent.<sup>9</sup>

This cannot be explained as an “underclass” problem; it is found on our most privileged campuses, large and small, public and private, professional and vocational. It is happening because the generation now entering college has experienced few authentic connections with adults. This is the manifestation of what I call a “culture of neglect,” and we—parents, teachers, professors, and administrators—are among its architects.

It begins at home, where social and economic factors such as declining wages and stagnating incomes require longer work hours and result in less family time. Young people have been allowed to or must take part-time jobs rather than spend time in school, on homework, or with their families. More children and adolescents are being reared in problematic family situations, with television and peers as their companions.

Again and again, deans of students reported on the growing rate of dysfunctional families among their students. They talked of violence; instability; blended families; and emotional, sexual, and financial problems. As one dean put it, “It’s hard to send a student home, when home is the problem.”<sup>10</sup>

All along the line leading from kindergarten to matriculation, we have failed to teach an ethic of concern and to model a culture of responsibility. We have created a culture characterized by dysfunctional families, mass schooling that demands

only minimal efforts, and media idols subliminally teaching disrespect for authority and wisdom.

Like most college presidents I receive angry letters and phone calls from parents demanding an acknowledgment of their child's victimization. One parent wanted to know how it was possible that her son had received an F. Another insisted that with such high tuition it was somehow the college's responsibility to provide a lawyer for students when they are arrested by city police after presenting false identification. On an admissions tour, a parent left the campus angrily upon learning that we did not provide cable-television hookups in residence halls. This is consumerism writ large; not surprisingly, we see these same attitudes in our students. As Mark Edmondson, a professor at the University of Virginia, recently observed,

For someone growing up in America now, there are few available alternatives to the cool consumer worldview. My students didn't ask for that view, much less create it, but they bring a consumer weltanschauung to school, where it exerts a powerful, and largely unacknowledged, influence.<sup>11</sup>

Levine describes the same phenomenon.

[Students] want easy, accessible parking, . . . no lines, and a polite, helpful, and efficient staff. They want high-quality education at a low cost. For the most part, they are willing to comparison shop, placing a premium on time and money. . . . Their focus is on convenience, quality, service, and cost. They believe that since they are paying for their education, faculty should give them the education they want, and they make larger demands on faculty than students in the past ever have.<sup>12</sup>

Colleges and universities, however, must accept some responsibility for the culture of neglect. We have succumbed to lower standards by believing we must cater to our student-consumers. Faculty members and administrators have lowered their expectations, resulting in grade inflation. The intellectual demands that are placed on students are less than students need or are capable of handling. And those who graduate are increasingly seen by employers as having learned too little.

Is it possible that in one generation America could have changed from a nation that held to its beliefs despite all pains

and costs until the world was free to one that has no core beliefs besides buy low and sell high? Indeed it is possible, in large part because, along with families, the impersonal mass schooling that has largely replaced elementary, secondary, and higher education in America may be failing to impart the core human values necessary to turn the tide. A nation of individuals who cannot read or write well, with no sense of the major human questions, who cannot think critically or show interest in learning, and who are unable to act responsibly in a diverse democratic society will be ill-equipped to compete in any new world order. A culture of neglect asks very little; a culture of responsibility demands more but holds the promise of far greater rewards.

THE ENDS AND MEANS FOR A  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY EDUCATION

We have created our own educational crisis; yet we cannot thrive without a creative, healthy, socially cohesive, educated, and hopeful citizenship. The solution is not only in the miraculously reified-by-decree nostalgia of “back to the basics” (although that is necessary) so popular among politicians but in current concerns about families, schooling, and higher education. In a sense, America has to take up the task of redefining itself as a unified polity, which cannot be achieved by the mere transmission of data and factual knowledge. It can only be done by having leaders who can and will grapple with ideas and cope with intellectual challenges—who can approach problems not only creatively but by enlarging the scope of their analytic embrace, which is comprehension in its truest sense.

Most of higher education advocates these same ends. Yet a dependence on graduate students as teachers, technology used as surrogate professors, large classes, and massed housing—none provide the appropriate educational environment in which to accomplish these ends.<sup>13</sup> As the research below suggests, the residential liberal arts college, by virtue of its small size, residential nature, and linkage of educational ends and means, promotes student participation in the ongoing civic life of its community. When it comes to creating the optimum educa-

tional environment in which to produce the profoundly liberating education required to redress our larger cultural conditions, not to mention the requirements of future employment and democratic civic engagement, liberal arts colleges emerge clearly as the model to embrace.

It is an evasion of adult responsibility to believe that undergraduates are anything more than physically mature. Most are in an elastic, formative stage of development. They need an education that is personalized as well as demanding, coherent, and mentored. It is a human-intensive calling, not a job for televisions, central processing units, and modems. It is extremely difficult for large universities to sustain the community dialogue necessary for liberal learning at the undergraduate level, although it is interesting to note that a number of such institutions are creating liberal arts colleges within their own larger campuses in the hope of replicating the conditions required for a transformative education. Why? Because residential liberal arts colleges are dedicated to working closely with individual students and, simultaneously, to building community. They are places that understand Emerson's admonition that "the ends preexist in the means." They recognize the need for small classes, professors who teach and form genuine relationships with students, and a campus community that demands active participation of its citizens as a condition of one's education.

With the focus solely on undergraduates, it is the faculty and administration of liberal arts colleges who understand the developmental process and the need for an environment that encourages students; that helps them develop a secure sense of their own voices; that gives them the courage to exhibit humility in seeking wisdom from others; that generates a class of citizens who hold themselves accountable for and take pride in being articulate in their writing, speaking, and social behavior; that teaches students to care about others even more as they learn to value the meaning of being themselves. Such an education requires the use of human faculties: imagination, judgment, compassion, abstract reasoning. These form the substrate of ethical and emotional intelligence on which powerful reasoning must rest. We know from research and experience that these

develop best in conditions of active intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with demanding and caring mentors and with the constructive power of a peer group that shares equally in such a commitment.

Most colleges and universities promise students and parents that the students who graduate from their institutions will not only be more fit to survive in the next century but will be more fully human. This is a promise of an education that is not so much a transition as it is a dimensional transformation. Yet, as the research shows, the sort of mind that can master a technological world's challenges is one that is handcrafted, developed in an authentic, daily apprenticeship of faculty and student—small classes, tutorials, independent study and/or research with a professor, and out-of-class contact with professors.

#### RESEARCH SUPPORT FOR RESIDENTIAL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

The best education takes place at the nexus of profound intellectual and social/emotional development. Yet most colleges and universities dichotomize the various facets of learning, as if our intellectual, emotional, and ethical lives were compartmentalized. This paradigm of compartmentalized learning is extended to “life” on most campuses—faculty take care of the intellect, student-services staff and coaches handle the rest. What goes on inside the classroom is thought of as separate and different from what takes place outside. One of higher education's fundamental tasks, and the *modus operandi* of liberal arts colleges, is to undo such false dichotomies and foster a more global or holistic version of education. “Higher” learning, the type expected to occur in colleges and universities, is not simply learning poured or programmed into the brain. Imaginative and creative problem solving, analysis and synthesis of data, collaborative decision making, creative or persuasive writing or speaking, moral judgment—each requires what cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists refer to as “constructed learning.” The professor's primary role is therefore not simply to offer information in the traditional lecture mode but to provide a stimulating environment in which students actively engage in the construction of knowledge, alone and with others, in class and out.

What conditions are optimal for the kind of intellectual and psychosocial outcomes embedded in the concept of a “liberal education”? The research consistently points to several variables, the most fundamental of which is the quantity and quality of student effort and involvement. Pascarella and Terenzini affirm this in their comprehensive study *How College Affects Students*:

One of the most inescapable and unequivocal conclusions we can make is that the impact of college is largely determined by the individual’s quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and nonacademic activities.<sup>14</sup>

But how best to optimize student effort and involvement? They do not occur by chance but are heavily influenced by the size of institutions, the nature of their residential arrangements, the faculty’s commitment to students, and the amount of student-student and student-faculty interaction. It is on a small campus, with its sense of community and peer identity created by shared residence and a faculty committed to engaging students in and out of class, that the most profound positive effects on student effort and achievement occur.

While student involvement and effort are greatly influenced by the size and nature of the peer group interaction, it is important to emphasize that the faculty plays a major role. They determine the educational objectives and the structuring of student effort by virtue of their expectations, standards, commitment to teaching, and a pedagogy that purposefully engages students in and out of class. As Pascarella and Terenzini note,

the research makes clear the important influence faculty members have on student changes in virtually all areas. There can be little doubt about the need for faculty members’ acceptance of their roles and responsibilities for student learning and for their active involvement in students’ lives.<sup>15</sup>

No single variable alone guarantees a liberating education. Whether a college or university is private or public, well endowed or not, urban or rural, is of little consequence by itself. Ultimately it is the college’s culture and ethos that undergird all else. The research points to a cluster of attributes that, in their

cumulative and synergetic effects, creates an institutional ethos that increases the probability of significant student cognitive and socioemotional development, retention, and satisfaction. These attributes influence and in reciprocal fashion are influenced by students and faculty:<sup>16</sup>

- *High expectations and standards.* The higher the expectations and standards held by professors and the institution, the greater the learning.
- *Emphasis on high academic engaged time.* The more time devoted to a learning task (if the task is at the appropriate level of difficulty), the greater the learning.
- *Frequent assessment and prompt feedback.* Learning is increased when one is assessed at frequent intervals and feedback is promptly provided. Assessment might take the form of short quizzes, oral questions in class, short or long papers, or comprehensive exams. Feedback may come from professors and/or one's peers.
- *Active student engagement.* Effective learning occurs best when students move out of a purely receptive learning mode and into one in which they actively operate in and on the environment. Classroom discussion, individual or group projects, laboratory work, significant reading and writing, research projects, tutoring and teaching others—all require active learning.
- *Frequency of faculty contact, in and out of class.* Student-faculty interaction increases academic achievement. Such interactions increase the probability of student risk-taking, useful feedback from the professor, greater clarity of the learning objectives, and a greater sense of student connection to the institution. The greater the faculty-student contact the greater sense of intellectual and personal development reported by students.
- *Collaborative learning.* Working in student teams, peer tutoring, and student study groups outside class enhance problem solving and communication skills, provide immediate assessment and feedback, and promote respect for different perspectives. Such teamwork is also active practice for future postcollege employment.

- *Residential campus.* Living on campus maximizes the potential for academic, social, and cultural involvement. The greater the connections to the institution through involvement with faculty and other students, the greater will be student retention and satisfaction.
- *Individualized learning.* Learning is enhanced when the institution and faculty respect the individualized needs of each student. Students enter college with different backgrounds, interests, and competencies, and the degree to which the institution respects such differences is the degree to which student success is enhanced.
- *Emphasis on active learning and connection to the institution during the first two years of college.* Finding one's academic and social place on a campus is crucial to ultimate college success, and institutions that help students make these connections early and often promote student success. Crucial in this task is what is called "psychological size"—the sense a student has that a college feels small enough to venture forth in making friends, faculty connections, and engage in social and cultural activities.

It is in residential liberal arts colleges that one finds these attributes most often in optimum combination. As Chickering and Gamson contend, "The selective private liberal arts college, perhaps more than any other type of American higher education institution, exemplifies much of what has come to be known as 'best' educational practice in undergraduate education."<sup>17</sup>

Research, experience, and wisdom converge. No matter how one asks the question, it is close working relations between students with faculty and other students, high expectations, and sustained student effort and time that make a difference. This does not happen by chance; it occurs when an institution sets out to create such conditions. It is in the residential liberal arts college that we find these conditions, that optimal mix of human ends and means conducive to a transforming and liberating education. Such a transforming process is a rare and precious gift. P. F. Kluge, in his reminiscence *Alma Mater*, quotes Ron Sharp, professor of English at Kenyon College:

I have this romantic idea of teaching as gift exchanges. What matters is if I reach a few students at a level that transforms them and gets them to see the world in a different way. Gift exchange. Sure, teaching is method and information, but it is something else, a gift, an enrichment of your life, a transformation that you can spend the rest of your life discovering.<sup>18</sup>

Surely this is the best “gift” that money can buy: small classes, faculty dedicated to students, and a small residential campus community that nurtures intellectual and emotional development. Such growth is in turn crucial to the development of moral character as well.

While all of higher education espouses as one of its ends the moral development of its students, embedded in the ethos of a small college dedicated to forming a community among a diverse group of students and faculty is a commitment to such moral values as justice, mutual understanding, civility, honesty, trust, and respect for others. This ethical dimension helps bind together the ends and means of such an educational enterprise, crucial because the ethical underpinnings of character development are inextricably a part of a liberal arts education. Not only are the great moral questions debated in the classroom, they are discussed in the residence halls, cafes, and locker rooms as well.

The development of one’s moral sense involves intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth, each fueled in interaction with one’s peers, faculty, family, and others. Moreover, it includes how one ultimately behaves—what one actually does when confronted by a moral dilemma. Here the classroom lessons of history, sociology, philosophy, literature, economics, and biology, for example, converge with the influences of peers, mentors, and the moral atmosphere (or lack thereof) of the community in which one is expected to participate fully. It is thus that the civic virtues taught and learned in a liberal arts college are connected in moral consequence. Harry Payne, president of Williams College, eloquently makes this point:

So, too, when one works to create an effective residential community among a diverse group of students, one also works to nurture such virtues as mutual understanding, civility, and cooperation. Moral education is embedded in the definition of what we have always been committed to do.<sup>19</sup>

LIBERAL ARTS AS PRACTICAL EDUCATION?

A transforming liberal education is not currently understood by the public to be a necessity for life in the twenty-first century. Rather, the sense is that education must be practical; its mantra, “Get a job!” Thus each spring, more than one million high-school students, shouldering the anxious hopes of their parents and the larger culture, choose a college that will give them a “practical” education. Roughly four years later they test their assumptions, as well as those of their parents, about the practicality of that education in the job market.

The inherent value of a liberal education notwithstanding, the vast majority of college students enroll not in liberal arts programs but in degree programs, whose chief purpose is to land them their first job. The reasons for this are clear. Pragmatism and rationality have gained a firm grip on America’s psyche. Driven by sober economic thinking, Americans are applying cost-benefit analysis to all decisions and are focusing on the bottom line, examining all expenditures in terms of “What do I get?” or “What is the payoff?”

In a review of public opinion surveys, researchers John Immerwahr and James Harvey found a consistent public belief that higher education was a necessity for employment, and that a liberal arts education was irrelevant to this purpose. “If I’m going to be an accountant,” one survey respondent said, “what do I care what someone did back in ancient Egypt?”<sup>20</sup> But if the results of a recent national survey are any indicator, employers sharply disagree with this attitude and the fixation on a “practical” education.<sup>21</sup>

The survey, while verifying earlier findings that parents and college-bound students focus on the short-term value of “getting a job,” surprisingly found that business leaders and liberal arts college graduates more often look to the long-term benefits of a college education. The divergence of views between parents and corporate executives is worth noting. Specifically, the survey found that an overwhelming majority of parents (75 percent) and college-bound students (85 percent) believe that the ultimate goal of college is to get a practical education and secure a first job. But only about one third (37 percent) of

business leaders agree with this belief. CEOs value the long-term outcomes of a college education—those that prepare one not only for a first job but for a long and variable career.

Choosing an appropriate college or university is a serious and pragmatic decision for families. Financial considerations, preconceptions about colleges and universities, and perceptions of what employers want often point families in the direction of what they perceive to be sure-ticket schools that bestow prestige and, by implication, sure employment. One parent stated plainly, “We live in an environment that can destroy you if you are not practical.” The smart choice, some say, is a professional program tailored to specific jobs in business, computer technology, engineering, law, or medicine.

Employers, represented in the study by CEOs and human resource managers, presumably are every bit as “practical” as parents. But to them, practicality means the ability of higher education to impart general skills that give people the flexibility and capacity to keep on learning what today’s high-tech businesses require. Business leaders say that improving the bottom line calls for a competitive edge, and increasingly they view their human resources as a key to improved competitiveness. They insist that a college education produce people of strong character with generalized intellectual and social skills and a capacity for lifelong learning.

CEOs and human resource managers in the survey consistently asked for three clusters of skills: cognitive, presentational, and social. Cognitive skills include problem solving, critical thinking, and “learning to learn.” The ability to move up each new learning curve rapidly in response to new challenges, the ability to see things in a new light and make sense of ideas in new contexts, and an intellectual agility and playfulness are desired. Presentational skills include oral and written communication about oneself, ideas, and data, in a coherent, clear, persuasive, and articulate manner. The ability to communicate, to make sense of and present clearly what appears to others as information chaos across many disciplines is, they say, crucial if one is to advance in a career. Social skills include the ability to work with other people cooperatively in a variety of settings. Intercultural understanding, as well as the ability to

work with people regardless of race, gender, and age, is important. International experience and foreign language facility are considered very desirable.

These are the “well rounded” and “practical” skills business executives want and for which in the study they cited a liberal arts education as the best “practical” preparation. Parents, however, reject what they perceive to be those charming ivory-tower liberal arts colleges (and their counterparts within large universities) that profess to turn out “well-rounded” graduates. To parents, looking through the lens of our culture’s mass-consumer orientation, “practicality” means getting a college degree as quickly, efficiently, and as cheaply as possible. Ironically, the very global conditions seeming to fuel such parental concerns are understood quite differently by corporate leaders. To them “practical” means liberally educated.

There is evidence to suggest that the corporate leaders are right, as reflected in a decade of social trends regarding the nature of the future workplace, our culture’s preoccupation with value, the quest for a higher quality of life, and the movement away from a focus on the self.<sup>22</sup> Business has grown more international, more competitive, and more susceptible to technology-driven change. In such a climate, rigid specialists limited to one specific skill are quickly left behind. In the workplace of the future, graduates must be capable of independent thought, creativity, risk taking, perseverance, and entrepreneurship as well as open to new ideas and willing to express unpopular points of view. They must be comfortable with different cultures and possess foreign language aptitude.

The past decade has witnessed a national obsession with securing value and making every nickel count in tangible ways. This helps to explain parents’ and students’ emphasis on getting a job. But employers, too, are preoccupied with value, and they see a college education as a necessary and valuable long-term investment that enhances one’s imagination, communication skills, values, and ethics—all attributes for a productive career, not to mention a lifetime. Simultaneously, Americans are turning away from material expressions of success toward a definition that emphasizes achievement of a better quality of life—less stress; better health; a safe, clean, living environment; and

the appreciation of art and culture. The notion of a “well-rounded” person is making a comeback. Interestingly, this is an outcome most parents and employers identify as a unique purpose of a liberal arts education. Finally, the sharp focus on the self that has fed hedonism, moral relativity, and overpersonalization is beginning to blur. Concern for the community, more attention to spiritual life, a greater focus on concepts of right and wrong, a search for meaning in life, and a hunger for idealism are all on the rise. These are identified by parents, students, and employers as outcomes most associated with the liberal arts.

Such trends point to a possible narrowing of the “practicality gap.” The culture is beginning to value liberal education outcomes. Simultaneously, liberal arts colleges have been redefining their sense of practicality as well, placing increasing emphasis on internships, international education, higher writing and speaking standards, foreign language skills, and computer literacy. Colleges also understand that it is not business alone that drives the need for such change. Graduate schools, non-profit agencies, and state and federal governments are all searching for people who are passionate of spirit, independent yet team players, less preoccupied with their own self-expressiveness, and capable of coping with a complex world. Given social and workplace changes, liberal arts colleges may be closer to what parents and prospective students desire in a “practical” education than they realize.

#### LIBERAL ARTS AS PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Lee Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, cogently makes the connection between liberal and professional education. The ends of professional education, suggests Shulman, center on: 1) an education for a moral purpose—service to others using knowledge and skills not readily available to those not so trained; 2) academy-based knowledge and practice; 3) knowledge that is not only theory-based but also field-tested in practical settings; 4) professional judgment—knowledge applied appropriately and ethically; 5) reflective practice in which one learns from experience

and modifies theory, knowledge, and skills; and 6) membership in a professional community in which there are publicly shared standards, values, and knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

These lofty professional education attributes encompass the very essence of a liberal arts education and represent the best of what parents, students, employers, and our larger society value. Shulman delineates the conditions required for such professional education: students are engaged with professors, with each other, and with practitioners in the field (by reading, writing, arguing, diagnosing, problem solving, questioning, and student reflection informed by feedback from caring mentors); collaborative work is valued and required as a means of encountering others who represent a diversity of knowledge, skills, values, and perspectives; faculty and student passion and commitment are valued and nurtured; and finally, a genuine sense of community, the idea that we are all in this together and share both the joys and disappointments inherent in profound learning. These, Shulman suggests, are also the conditions best created in liberal arts colleges.<sup>24</sup>

In a world that is fragmented yet drawn ever closer together by technology, there is a need to better educate for the nourishment of the human spirit. The real bottom-line issue for parents, students, and our society is not whether today's undergraduate education is affordable but whether we can afford not to have it done well. The wish to have it on the cheap is understandable, but the defining quality of a college education is not something that lends itself to mass production. Indeed, the "savings" in cost on a large scale, if there is a savings at all, is reflected by a loss in real and lasting value. Our current higher education system, oriented toward mass education that breeds impersonal, passive, and incoherent learning, is not sufficient to the task. Higher education can and ought to be pivotal in the revitalization of our society and preparing students for the complex and international dimensions of the twenty-first century. The key to a stable and humane society is the education of citizens whose concern for justice, community, and democracy is at the moral center of life. In short, higher education's role is to generate ideals and transform lives.

Residential liberal arts colleges—by virtue of their primary focus on teaching, their small size, residential nature, quest for genuine community, engagement of students in active learning, concern for a general and coherent education, and emphasis on the development of the whole person—provide the most important kind of undergraduate education for the twenty-first century. Because of their exclusive focus on undergraduates and the priority given to a teaching faculty, residential liberal arts colleges have become the benchmark for undergraduate education. They are *sui generis*, themselves a special kind of pedagogy. They not only properly concern themselves with the appropriate ends of education—the skills, knowledge, and competencies derived from the study of the arts, humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and sciences—but so, too, the means, by creating authentic communities of learning that focus more clearly on *how* all such study coheres into templates of consciousness, of what it means to be fully human and humane, and what it means to be a good person and a good society.

In a world that is increasingly fragmented by fear of difference and specialization of knowledge, a world that has lost a sense of connection between the individual and community, and a world of “McUniversities” or learning malls catering to the whims of their customers, liberal arts colleges stand as a bastion of handcrafted education that best nurtures individual growth and the development of competence and confidence.

How, then, to convince society to embrace an educational model that now enrolls only 5 percent of this country’s undergraduates? By making the case that a liberal arts college education offers people exactly what they claim they are seeking—the most professional and practical education possible. No invention is needed; America already has the patent.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nancy F. Cott, *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1972), 106.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

- <sup>3</sup>Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 11.
- <sup>4</sup>George Dehne, "A Look at the Future of the Private Colleges," *Trinity Magazine* (Summer 1995): 16–17.
- <sup>5</sup>Thomas G. Mortenson, "Institutional Graduation Rates, 1983 to 1998," *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* (July 1998): 1.
- <sup>6</sup>*Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1998), 5.
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>8</sup>Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Curetin, *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 95–96.
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup>Mark Edmondson, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education," *Harper's Magazine* (September 1997): 40.
- <sup>12</sup>Arthur Levine, "How the Academic Profession is Changing," *Dædalus* 126 (4) (Fall 1997): 7.
- <sup>13</sup>*Reinventing Undergraduate Education*, 6.
- <sup>14</sup>Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 611.
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 655.
- <sup>16</sup>This list of critical attributes is a synthesis of research findings from the following sources: Ernest L. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experiences in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993); Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*; Richard J. Light, *The Harvard Assessment Seminars: Explorations with Students and Faculty about Teaching, Learning, and Student Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, first report 1990; second report, 1992); Wilbert J. McKeachie et al., *Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom: A Review of the Research Literature* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, 1988); George D. Kuh, "Ethos: Its Influence on Student Learning," *Liberal Education* (Fall 1993): 22–30; Education Commission of the States, *Making Quality Count in Undergraduate Education* (Denver: ECS, 1995); and Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson, eds., *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).
- <sup>17</sup>Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson, "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," *The Wingspread Journal* (9) (June 1987): 2.

<sup>18</sup>P. F. Kluge, *Alma Mater* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 44.

<sup>19</sup>Harry C. Payne, "Can or Should A College Teach Virtue?" *Liberal Education* (Fall 1996): 2.

<sup>20</sup>John Immerwahr and James Harvey, "What the Public Thinks of College," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 May 1995, B1.

<sup>21</sup>Richard H. Hersh, "Intentions and Perceptions: A National Survey of Public Attitudes Toward Liberal Arts Education," *Change* (March/April 1997): 16–23.

<sup>22</sup>These trends are drawn from DYG SCAN, a trend-identification program developed by Daniel Yankelovich and used by his research firm DYG. Since 1986, SCAN has tracked attitudes on many values and issues directly relevant to the question of the status of liberal arts education. Used with permission of DYG, Inc.

<sup>23</sup>Lee S. Shulman, "Professing the Liberal Arts," *Education and Democracy: Reimagining Liberal Learning in America*, ed. Robert Orrill (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1997), 151–173.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*