

# What's the Point of a Liberal Education? Don't Ask the Ivy League

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American colleges and universities should be bastions of self-knowledge and self-criticism, simply because they exist to teach people how to think. But in recent years America's campuses seem to have abandoned this tradition. Worse, the meager course offerings on the topic of liberal education tend to reinforce misunderstandings about its character and content.

I reviewed the course listings at five top private universities: Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, the University of Chicago and Yale; six high-ranking public research universities: UC Berkeley, UCLA, Michigan, North Carolina and Virginia; and five distinguished liberal arts colleges: Amherst, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Wellesley and Williams.

Few of the liberal arts and sciences faculty at these schools offer courses that explore the origins, structure, substance and aims of the education that they supposedly deliver. Instead they provide a smattering of classes on hot-button topics in higher education such as multiculturalism, inequality, gender and immigration. This is no trivial oversight, as the quality of American freedom depends on the quality of Americans' education about freedom.

A tiny number of elective classes on the curriculum's periphery—taught for the most part by part-time professors—approach the heart of the matter. Harvard presents a few freshman seminars on the history of the university and issues in higher education. One called “What Is College and What Is It For?” addresses “what constitutes a liberal arts education.” Michigan offers a first-year seminar that considers a university education's purpose. In Stanford's freshman program “Thinking Matters,” students examine the relation between the university's pursuit of knowledge and its pursuit of justice.

Not one political science department at the 16 top schools I reviewed offers a course on liberal education. Isolated offerings concerning the topic are taught in Williams's philosophy and English departments, as well as in Education Studies at Yale and American Studies at Stanford. Meantime, Princeton, Wellesley and the Universities of North Carolina and Virginia teach their own history.

Overall, the pickings for courses on liberal education are slim. And they tend to reinforce the politicization that afflicts higher education by focusing on the extent to which education advances social justice.

Don't expect to find much guidance on liberal education in the mission statements of leading American colleges and universities. They contain inflated language about diversity, inclusion and building a better world through social transformation. Missing are instructive pronouncements about what constitutes an educated person or on the virtues of mind and character that underlie reasoned inquiry, the advance of understanding, and the pursuit of truth. Instruction on the ideas, norms and procedures that constitute communities of free men and women devoted to research and study are also scarce to nonexistent.

Hope should not be pinned on colleges and universities to reform themselves. Perhaps a university president or provost who prioritizes recovering liberal education will emerge, but progressive ideology remains deeply entrenched in administrations and faculty. Tenured professors want to reproduce their sensibilities in their successors, and huge endowments insulate the best universities from market forces that could align their programs with the promise of liberal education.

Major impetus for reform must come from outside the academy. Legislative initiatives designed to impel public universities to honor their First Amendment obligations, like the Goldwater Institute's model bill for state legislatures, might also spur private universities to

reinvigorate their commitments to free speech. And educational entrepreneurs could develop alternative accrediting companies.

Private donors and foundations should further establish special faculty-driven programs in the humanities and social sciences like the Program on Constitutional Government at Harvard, the James Madison Program at Princeton, and the Constitutional Law Center at Stanford Law School. These programs teach neglected ideas and books that form an essential part of the Western tradition of freedom.

Student-run organizations like the Federalist Society at law schools and the Alexander Hamilton Society, which focuses on foreign affairs and national security, are other good vehicles for educating students in freedom. They do well at staging debates on complex issues.

Philanthropic organizations—such as the Hertog Foundation, for which I teach—should continue to develop independent gap-year, summer and postgraduate programs providing students with a taste of the great books, the American constitutional tradition, and diplomatic and military history.

It is consistent with the tradition of freedom in which liberal education is rooted to rely on the private sector to lead a reform movement on and off campus. These small steps move us closer to restoring liberal education and equipping members of the next generation with the ability to think for themselves.

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