

Introduction

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This is a must read for any faculty or administrators involved in liberal arts colleges or liberal education. The terms “liberal arts” and “liberal education” have been used (and abused) in so many ways that one wonders if they have any meaning at all. This volume will be invaluable in helping you and your faculty and staff sort out the confusion.

Professor Kimball’s four lectures include:

- A Historiographical Fresco of the Liberal Arts;
- Emergence of Competing Traditions of the Liberal Arts;
- Alternative Historical Models in the 20th Century; and
- In Defense of the Liberal Arts, now under Siege by the Disciplinarians, Technologists, Outcomers, Bottom-liners, and Profiteers.

There is no question that liberal arts education is experiencing a resurgence in American higher education. Undergraduate education is receiving renewed emphasis at major research universities where it is increasingly seen as having to do more than prepare students for graduate school or a profession. Liberal Arts colleges are by and large flourishing. And major initiatives of national academic organizations, like the AAC&U’s Presidents’ Campaign for the Advancement of Liberal Learning, have gained tremendous momentum.

But this resurgence has been accompanied by substantial confusion about the nature and aims of a liberal arts education—confusion that threatens to make its renewed emphasis a passing fad. Is a liberal arts education an education in a particular set of disciplines? Is it an education at a particular kind of institution? Is it an education with non-utilitarian goals? Is it simply a broad education? With so many competing interpretations we might ask, is there anything that can’t be made to count as a liberal arts education? If the answer to that is no—if virtually any kind of higher education can count as a liberal arts education—then the phrase “liberal arts” can be used simply to attach prestige to whatever developments in higher education the market happens to dictate and we risk losing an invaluable educational resource.

The place to start, then, is with clarity. How have the terms “liberal arts,” “liberal learning,” and “liberal education” been understood over the centuries? How are they used today? And the person to turn to for such clarity is Bruce A. Kimball, Professor of Education at the Warner Graduate School of Education at the University of Rochester. Professor Kimball’s work has done more than anyone’s to make sense of the often confusing history of the idea of liberal education. The lectures reprinted here were delivered by Professor Kimball at the second annual Conversation on the Liberal Arts, hosted by the Institute for the Liberal Arts at Westmont College in February 2002.

Professor Kimball's central historical claim about liberal arts education, set forth in the second selection here, is that there is not a liberal arts tradition. He identifies two traditions, the oratorical and the philosophical, which are, in several fundamental respects, in tension with one another. Much of the current confusion over the liberal arts is simply a result of the fact that academics often tacitly assume that one or the other of these traditions is the liberal arts tradition, unaware that competing claims for what a liberal arts education might be as firmly rooted historically as their own.

Developments in the twentieth century did not simplify matters, as Professor Kimball shows in the third selection. For the twentieth century was marked by efforts to create hybrids of the two ideal types—hybrids that, by their very nature, cannot be entirely coherent. In addition to these hybrids, Professor Kimball identifies a number of other trajectories related to liberal education as well, revealing, among other things, the source of the common association of liberal education with general education. However, one of these trajectories promises, on Professor Kimball's account, to bring consensus, even coherence, out of the chaos. Professor Kimball identifies the emergence of consensus at the end of the twentieth century around the idea of pragmatic liberal education—a consensus, he argues, that is not a mere marriage of convenience, but well-grounded in the American pragmatist philosophical tradition.

As contested as the terms “liberal arts” and “liberal education “ have been, the historiography of the liberal arts tradition has been equally contested, and this is where Professor Kimball begins his analysis. He identifies no less than nine accounts of the origins of liberal education, revealing at once both the source of much confusion over the nature of a liberal arts education and the tendency to shape the interpretation of its history to fit the educational agenda with which one begins.

Of course the effort to gain clarity regarding the history and historiography of the liberal arts tradition assumes that it is a tradition worth maintaining and developing and it is this issue that Professor Kimball addresses in the final selection. This lecture was delivered to a wider audience than the others, including not only academics but members of the broader public—a public sometimes skeptical of liberal arts education for its supposed impracticality or elitism. In this lecture Professor Kimball defends liberal education from a number of trends in higher education which he claims undermine it, even some which claim to be its allies. In so doing he also identifies what he takes to be the heart of a liberal arts education—it is an education free of constraint. Some of the constraints that can make an education illiberal are among the usual suspects. Others are rather surprising.

The lectures that follow prompted spirited and valuable discussion among those gathered at the Conversation on the Liberal Arts. They enabled each of us gathered to better situate ourselves and our institutions in the landscape of American higher education and to better understand how the historical development of the liberal arts tradition has shaped our education visions. We are confident that they will facilitate the same process for the reader.