



What Is a School?

An Institution in Limbo

Trim The College!

A Utopia

Jacques Barzun

Hudson Institute
American Academy for Liberal Education
Council for Basic Education

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Printed in the United States of America.

Jacques Barzun, in his long career, has devoted a large part of his energies to education. A teacher himself, he has published and lectured widely on many aspects of the subject. He has served on public and private bodies concerned with the work of schools and colleges, notably the American Council on Education and the American Council of Learned Societies. He was an early member of the Council for Basic Education board of directors and is now honorary chairman of the American Academy for Liberal Arts Education. His first bestseller, *Teacher in America*, appeared in 1945 and has stayed in print, being recently awarded by the Museum of Education a place among fifty most influential works. In 1991 he published *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning*. Within the last decade Dr. Barzun has frequently been asked to state in brief form what he believes might be done to cure the ills of American education. His answer is in the following pages, shorn of the usual apparatus and preserving anonymity for the quoted complaints. Unlike most current panaceas, that answer does not propose a new slogan or a special method, a gimmick or a posture. It is a reminder of the original Idea of schooling and teaching and what it implies in exact detail.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

Everybody, I hope, would agree that a school is a place where teaching and learning go on, steadily and systematically. That is its function. Its purpose is something else: to remove ignorance. A school can do several other good things at the same time, but it has one purpose only: to remove ignorance. This distinction is important because these definitions serve as a standard by which to judge what is done and what is proposed in the name of schooling. A half-century's agitation for reform has thrown into currency so many notions and slogans and started so many trial programs that in the best minds and most earnest hearts, confusion reigns. If it is to be dispelled, much demands our attention.

Removing ignorance is more complicated than removing tonsils, and it is sometimes as painful to the child. The teacher uses no anesthetic—and should not be one. Hence the first of our concerns is, How does a teacher teach? Next, How does the learner do his part? Followed by, What should be taught? Then, How to test the knowledge acquired? Next, Who should run the school? Followed by, What role for the parents? And lastly, What should go into teacher training?

One of the complaints today is that, alongside teachers who are willing and able, schools have many who are willing but *unable*. Worse, there is a teacher shortage—forty thousand are wanted in Texas alone—and everywhere good ones leave for other work. Teaching is becoming a lost craft. To understand and appreciate the act of teaching, imagine yourself in the following predicament. You are visiting a town for the first time and you want to find a post office. You accost a pleasant-looking person and ask the way. He smiles, waves an arm vaguely, and says, "You go down to Maple and then you walk three blocks, maybe four—no I guess it's only three—to Jackson, and then you turn . . . turn left toward the square. The post office is across the way—you'll see the flag in front."

All of this has been rattled off at speed, and you are no wiser. You thank him but must ask again. You approach a middle-aged woman with a bright countenance. "The post office?" she says. "Yes. You keep on as you were going, toward Maple Avenue. You can see it from here; it's the wide street where all the traffic is. You cross to the far side and, going right as you face that side, you walk two-and-a-half blocks to the narrow cross-street, called Jackson. There is no street sign, but facing you as you come to it is the name Jackson on the big general store. You turn left on Jackson. It soon takes you to a plaza with a fountain in the middle. There is a diagonal path, which you take all the way across, and straight ahead of you is a small office building. The post office is on the ground floor. Remember: down to and *across* Maple, then right two-and-a-half blocks to Jackson, the narrow street, left on it, and across the plaza."

What makes this woman's directions a model of what teaching is? To teach means first to put oneself in the mental state of the learner, aware of his ignorance and his capacity for confusion. The helpful woman removed both by breaking up the route into a series of things to be noted as they appeared. She took care to direct you to the far side of the avenue, pointed out that Jackson was a narrow street and had no sign. In describing, she repeated names and facts even before her final summing up.

That bespoke her talent. Now for her qualifications: she knew her subject in full detail, as the first informant did not. She spoke without backtracking and, unlike him, with pauses and not too fast. The poor man probably suspected his incompetence, because he ended in a way I did not mention. He said: "You can't miss it." That is a sure sign of poor directions.

A teacher, then, is a person who, by squaring his or her mind with that of the class, collectively or singly, removes ignorance on a subject fully mastered. This definition tells us not only what teaching is like, but what teacher training calls for. The unhappy truth is that there are few born teachers, fewer perhaps than born poets. Schools must make do with people who are neither, but who can be trained for their task. More on that later.

Now turn to the learner, the child in school. The difference between the pupil and the adult who wants directions is that the child has no question in his mind. To get him to learn, to remove the ignorance he is not aware of, the teacher must create some equivalent to a question—in other words, stir up interest and hold attention. Long before school years, the infant learns at a great rate because it wants to walk, talk, and do all sorts of things with its muscular energy. Next, the child asks questions: What is that for? What does this mean? It is then that parents' care matters enormously. In one of his short stories, Ring Lardner has a boy ask his father a question, after which comes, "Shut up, he explained."

But although all can learn school subjects—no social class, ethnic background, or skin color creates exceptions—most children are not exactly eager for school. As Bil Keane points out in one of his *Family Circus* cartoons, "Billy's mind is amazing. It starts working when he wakes up and never stops till he gets to school." It is the school's duty to establish conditions that reinforce the teacher's effort to keep the child's mental engine in gear. An early start in a preschool program, where learning is close to playing, accustoms the child to going daily to work with others, doing what he is told by a grown-up.

Learning is an invisible operation, so it cannot be shown by example; but obviously *a learner is one who makes a mental effort under guidance and correction.* Knowledge cannot be poured into a child like liquid into a bottle. The pupil has a responsibility: if pupil is to turn into student, he must make a mental effort and follow instructions.

"We are going to give up the notion that the school is a place where we assign certain tasks and the child goes off and prepares those things and then comes back to convince us that he has done what is required. . . . In the school of the future, the child is going to live, really live. This means that what he learns he learns because he needs it then and there."

—A Progressive educator (1926)

Learning is done in three distinct ways: listening to the teacher explain, drilling to memorize rudiments, and taking part in discussion. Drill is done by coaching and recitation in class and also on one's own in study hall and at home. These last two are imperative. Study hall is scheduled for periods purposely left empty of class work; a supervising teacher is there to help and to ensure quiet application. Homework, which is practice in re-learning, enables the teacher to see what each pupil has or has not understood. These benefits disappear when the parents do more than encourage or explain the question and actually write the paper or solve the problems.

Memorizing has a bad name, but it is essential. The multiplication table, the verb forms of a foreign language, and all techniques such as using logarithms, cannot be mastered in any other way. Drill also teaches the lesson that in life one must often go through drudgery in order to achieve something one wants to know or do.

The third mode of learning, by group discussion, is appropriate in middle or high school when the teacher thinks the class mature enough to carry on this seminar-like exercise. The topic is an idea or situation that has been duly studied and offers room for opinion. When ably led, discussion teaches the young person how to think straight, which no course called "Thinking" will succeed in doing. In discussion, the teacher sees to it that each student speaks clearly, has listened accurately to the previous speaker, and meets the point just made, using facts and reasoning and keeping the temper cool. A session of this sort engages the whole class, unlike what is often done—a pseudo debate between students who impersonate a pair of historical figures and argue their views. Reading an assignment in a textbook, by the way, is not a fourth way of learning. Although it is reading practice, it is only another form of listening to a teacher expound.

All that I have described so far—school, teacher, and learner—imply some definite contents: What is to be taught and learned? *Any proposed subject must meet two demands: does it remove a patch of harmful ignorance? And is it teachable?*

Before any answer, one fact stands out:

reading is central. Every act of learning, through school and later life, depends on the ability to read; and the way to learn this skill is through the

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The insufficiency of teacher preparation in reading is widely acknowledged in many states and was addressed at length in the recent report of the National Research Council on "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children."

—The Keys to Literacy (1998)

drill called phonics—recognizing and sounding the letters and combining the sounds to form words.

It is sheer lunacy to try to teach the young to recognize a full word as a picture using the “look-and-say” method, assisted by flash cards and the *Dick and Jane* books. That adult readers grasp the whole word in one glance

When she found that some of her ninth-graders could not understand the textbook assignment, she had the idea of asking students from speech class to read it aloud to those students. It worked like a miracle.

—News item (1997)

is a result of much reading, not a shortcut for beginners. Adults do arithmetic in their heads, but it would be madness to begin teaching the subject that way. To bypass phonics, as is done in the majority of schools today, suggests that the ancients who invented the alphabet to replace Egyptian hieroglyphics and cuneiform syllabics wasted their time. Look-and-say visits on the American child the plight of his Chinese counterpart, who must learn five thousand pictograms in order to become literate. This grievous blunder is *preposterism*—putting the cart before the horse—and it is preposterous also in the common meaning of absurd.

There is more to reading than making out words. The reading child must understand all that words mean and imply when put together in sentences. Next comes handwriting, which also depends on letters and sounds in spelling, and which requires the full attention it has lost of late years. Many business people are so fussy that they want employees who can write legibly. Some companies indeed have set up the equivalent of in-house elementary schools.

All school subjects face the challenge: Is it teachable? Today, school programs are loaded with subjects that are *unteachable*—for example, Family Living, Shopping and Community Resources, Good Citizenship,

A former U.S. Commissioner of Education has estimated that on the average only 18 percent of school time is devoted to “academic subjects,” i.e., established and organized studies.

—Educational report (1987)

Self Esteem, and Thinking. They sound interesting and desirable but they are in fact a waste of time and effort. The typical unteachable subject is Social Studies, which has largely replaced History. Why unteachable? Because it is formless. *A classroom subject is one in which each phase grows out of the one before and builds up from simple to complex, until the student commands a body of organized knowledge.* Grammar, arithmetic, plane geometry, algebra, history, geography, physics, chemistry, biology, and foreign languages—these are teachable. They are naturally unified by system or by cause and effect. As for reading, writing, composition, and literature, which are less systematized, they rely on techniques that are learned by practice.

What is wrong with Social Studies and other formless subjects is that

they are an indefinite mix of facts and ideas gathered from here and there among advanced subjects that *are* teachable: sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, demography, law, public health, government, and whatnot else.

It is indicative of the casual character of Social Studies that in one western state 85 percent of those who teach it are drawn from the teachers of Physical Education.

—Report on History in Schools (1987)

The result of trying to teach a hodgepodge is that it leaves in the mind neither organized information nor clear principles—and it favors sloppy work.

What of the arts, for which there is a demand by some parents and educators? Is it appreciation, history, or performance that is wanted? And of which arts? Too often where “Art” has been offered, pupils are again given a hodgepodge: two weeks of looking at Chinese painting and two weeks at Japanese, followed by a look at Belgian lace and then at Navajo rugs. The far more lasting and useful instruction aims at mastery of the fundamentals: drawing with pencil or charcoal and studying color and composition; for music, learning how to read notes, which leads to sight-singing and the recognition of simple musical forms. Some children will add playing an instrument, and some will join the band. The graphic rudiments equip students for future careers in architecture and the fine arts, commercial art, and industrial design. The music program gives a grounding for domestic enjoyment and professional work—all together preparing a child for what the public calls “the real world.”

Apropos of the real world, some parents—and still more students—complain that history, literature, foreign languages, advanced mathematics, and science will not equip them for the real world’s work, for being—say—a firefighter or keeping a restaurant. Teachers must explain to parents and pupils that the effort of learning difficult subjects develops the talent of learning as such, including learning the job on the job, where promotion goes to the one with a quick grasp of unfamiliar facts and ideas. Besides, the school has a duty not only to the individual but to society, which is to hand down the treasury of knowledge. Without schools to perform this task, a civilized nation would turn into a mass of illiterate barbarians in thirty years.

Lastly, as everyone knows, these questioned subjects open the way to college and the professions. None may appeal to a fourteen-year old who four years later may be glad it was required. In this country today, the world of work keeps pleading for more recruits in the occupations that require high training, in technology and science especially. A state of shortage is not a signal to neglect the basics of mental development.

But something more needs saying on this topic. It is a fact of nature that not everybody feels at home with words and ideas. Many instead are deft

with their hands; they have a sense of space and size, an affinity with the make-up and workings of machinery. Still others, who are good at figures and systems, enjoy the ways of trade and finance, of clerical and managerial tasks. These talents deserve not just shop or keyboard work a few hours a week but a comprehensive technical and commercial curriculum (drop the misleading term *vocational*), taught by seasoned practitioners. These options should be open for the last two years of high school, when adolescents become impatient. Those well trained in these capacities are in great demand too.

Likewise geared to “the real world” is the much-debated “sex education.” Its proper name is Human Sexuality; it should loom large in a thorough course in Hygiene. With Sexual Reproduction must go also the elements of nutrition, sanitation, and personal and public health. These topics need no moral preaching added, if the facts are made so vivid through description and pictures as to constitute strong warnings of natural consequences.

One more type of instruction should be expected of every teacher in every course: correcting mistakes in English, poor pronunciation, and jumbled thoughts in speech—and also demanding legible handwriting. To overlook these from laziness or fear of hurt feelings is the greatest disservice that can be done to the young. The correcting should be done firmly; not incessant nagging but timely and kindly severity. The power of self-expression satisfies an emotional need in the child and makes for self-esteem. And articulateness has a cash value in “the real world.”

The curriculum sketched here is by and large that of the American public school of the 1920s. Indeed, in a good many high schools it was even richer. A senior had had courses in physics and chemistry and was taking spherical trigonometry besides. In English class, he might be reading the shorter poems of John Milton under a teacher who knew how to make them interesting; and, having taken three years of Latin, he would be reading Virgil without strain. At the Oak Park, Illinois, high school that Ernest Hemingway attended, a room was reserved for the Latin Club, where students talked to one another in something like that language.

Even without these particular requirements, the typical American high school of that era graduated young people who deserved to be called educated. The only defect—and it was a disgraceful one—is that access to this schooling was largely denied to the black population.

The courses marked B after the identifying number cover the same span as those marked A but are for those who feel unequal to the full demands of a comprehensive course.

—History section of a high-school catalogue (1989)

After teaching and learning comes examining. This is a touchy subject. Pupils are nervous, teachers tyrannized, parents bewildered, politicians arrogant. *Fairness demands that examinations fit what has been taught.* They no longer do. Today, if children should join in a class-action lawsuit against present-day standardized testing, an upright judge would award them damages. To begin with, they are cheated of proper teaching time when the class hour is devoted to special coaching designed to outwit a prefabricated test made up by remote merchandisers.

Instead of check marks in a box, students' responses to essay questions show the teacher what each has learned and the student what he has forgotten. The multiple-choice test does neither. Instead, what it does is positive harm, because the so-called objective question does not call for knowledge: it calls for single-fact recognition. Just return to that town where you were a stranger seeking a post office. Time has passed and you wonder whether you could find your way again. What was the name of that wide avenue? Chestnut? No. You keep walking and there it is: Maple, of course! And soon comes the big shop—Jackson's, sure enough. Those names *seem* familiar; you have recognized them but *you could not summon them up*. You did not know them. *Knowing means the power to recall without any hints.*

Now let us consider a multiple-choice question that taps only our spacious ignorance. The statement reads: "The first man who drew down lightning from the clouds and showed it to be electricity was: (a) Patrick Henry; (b) Thomas A. Edison; (c) Benjamin Franklin; (d) Button Gwinnett." We have no idea—but we quickly reject Patrick Henry because we remember that all he ever did was to say "Give me liberty or give me death." Edison sounds plausible. Electrical power today often comes from an Edison company—but no, Edison is the lightbulb man, and that's not as far back as when electricity was first fiddled with. Edison is out. As for Button Gwinnett, who has ever heard of him? He doesn't sound real—nobody was ever named Button. So it's Franklin: the right answer, but by default, not knowledge.

The student who has wormed his way to Franklin in this fashion is clever, no doubt. But the test is not meant to reward cleverness; it is to find out who knows what. So his right answer should really be counted wrong. Nor is this all. Multiple-choice tests give the student a false idea of what knowledge is. They reduce it to bits of scattered information. Genuine knowledge consists of clusters of facts, *their relations and their significance*. It is this patterning that the mind needs to retain the whole; it is the answer to the question the astute Bil Keane puts into a child's mouth: "How can I remember everything I know?"

It should be added that the bits of information offered by the standardized test sometimes mislead the able student. Consider the question

noted earlier: the student who does know about electricity knows that the unit of inductance is called a henry, after the nineteenth-century physicist Joseph Henry. The presence of Patrick as an option is thus an unfair distraction.

Knowledge is properly tested through carefully framed questions which, by referring to a statement of fact in a sentence or two, direct the student's thought to the further facts that he is to provide. After the exam, the teacher will read some of the answers as particularly good and discuss the difficulties in the question the class found hardest. Examining is thus part of teaching, as "objective" testing is not. Of course, for a short quiz to see whether an assignment has been read, six or eight true-false or multiple-choice questions are convenient and harmless.

As for grading, it is best done on the scale of A to F or of 1 to 5. These marks are clear to students, teachers, and parents, whereas the verbal accounts favored in some schools are vague compounds of disparate judgments and amateur psychology. No comparisons across time are possible or between reports by the several teachers of a given child. Nor do the figures compiled from multiple-choice scores yield sound results: they are, as we saw, based on coaching and unrelated to genuine knowledge. Numbers can be precise without being accurate, and the national scores that go up or down a few points every few months are only make-believe.

What, then, is to be done? Some measure of performance is needed that will permit comparisons over time and space. The answer is suggested by the word *performance*: the student must perform an act of sustained thinking, which rules out the check-mark system of tapping a layer of scattered items. The best subjects for a reliable test of the kind wanted are English and mathematics. For the first, a given passage from a real book is to be read and questions on it answered in full sentences; this is to be followed by a brief essay on a related topic assigned. For the second, a series of problems, coupled with definitions to be supplied.

But are these objective tests? Answers of this kind can only be graded by a person—another mind—hence teachers in groups of various sizes, a great many all over the country, must each read a number of papers. Again, is this objective? As shown earlier by the example of manipulation in making multiple choices, no test can be simultaneously valid and objective in the sense of being judged mechanically. But persons can be trained to be careful and quite uniform graders. This was proved by the College Entrance Examination Board when it was first established to conduct examinations in a dozen or more high school subjects, all written work. In a full-day session, teachers, active or retired (or at times graduate students) were given rules and examples to follow, plus a list of points to look for and values to assign for each particular examination.

A notable advantage of this system is that the quality of the student's

work receives attention and credit, instead of the quantity of indifferent, fungible data. For example, the student who clearly knows all the steps for solving a problem but has made a mistake in the last line when copying a number does not get a zero for “wrong answer” but partial credit for what he does know. Similarly, evidence of understanding the English passage, the organization of the ideas in the essay, and the level of the vocabulary used—these signs of lessons well learned and well taught are taken into account and reflected in the grade. It is closer to its object, more “objective” than a bare number.

“The most important figures needed for the management of any organization are unknown and unknowable.”

—Lloyd Nelson, Director of Statistical Methods, Nashua Corporation (1989)

Perhaps the character of a school has begun to emerge from this inventory of essential parts, and offhand one might think that the only remaining topic to take up is the preparation of good teachers. But there is one other matter to settle first: Who runs the school?

“Run” must be taken in a loose sense. Teachers are not employees in a business; they are professionals, and like the doctor, lawyer, or engineer, they must be largely self-directing. The school administrator, similarly, is neither a corporate executive nor the head of a government bureau. The leadership style that goes with these two types of management—rigid rules, much paperwork, frequent staff meetings, and a fear of initiative—will not run a school; it will ruin it. Strictly speaking, those who *administer* the dose of schooling to the young are the teachers. To do so at their best, they must feel and be free. For duties beyond teaching, such as guiding extra-curricular activities and establishing good relations with parents, their help must be enlisted, not coerced.

The person to lead them is the principal. He should choose his teachers (and a librarian), know them as individuals so as to guide them well, retrain them if necessary, and praise them in no routine way. He should encourage the teachers to know one another, to exchange information about pupils, and to discuss ideas arising from their subjects. Such is the professional at work.

In that capacity, principal and teachers together should choose the textbooks, with particular care for those in science, history, and grammar. In science, watch for mistakes and unclear wording; in history, for political and social propaganda; in grammar, for linguistic theory, the renaming of familiar terms, and excessive bulk. At a Midwest university, the director of the remedial program in English rescues the high-school failures using a text of thirty typewritten pages.

The principal must also see to it that the school building is kept in

proper condition. Neat and clean is a lesson too. The library must be well supplied with books, the classrooms with writing materials, and the science labs with their due requisites. There should also be a “language lab,” where the learners of a foreign language match their pronunciation with the correct one on a recorded tape. Years spent in foreign-language classes that leave the students unable to read, write, or speak what they have “learned” is a common American experience.

“Living with the old and broken furniture, poor soundproofing, and the lack of basic amenities like lighting, heating, cooling, and telephones was what I found most appalling.”

—A teacher who wrote to the press after he left (2001)

The children also should feel that the school is a common enterprise of which they are the reason for existence. Their sense of belonging is sustained by regular assemblies of the whole school, where announcements of all kinds create a sort of public opinion that includes a friendly regard toward teachers

and respect for the principal. Likewise for the sake of atmosphere, a neighborhood school is best. To the small child, its being nearby makes it an extension of home. At no time should there be, as at present, twenty-four million pupil-commuters. This vehicular attendance is due to the elimination since 1930 of some 150,000 schools; or to put it in official words, “consolidation” has reduced the number of “attendance areas” by not quite half.

To be sure, many of those lost units were rural, one-room, one-teacher schools. They were classed as inefficient. But in many of the new “mega-schools,” inefficiency has been replaced by ineffectiveness. Huge buildings where hordes of students jostle one another at class-changing time, where discipline hardly exists and teachers fear physical attack, where truancy is rife and dropouts may be thought fortunate—these are no improvement on the schools deemed too small to keep alive.

From the natural conditions of the truly local and modest-sized school, teaching and learning benefit. This is not a guess. In the several surveys of inner-city schools, going as far back as the pioneer study by the Council for Basic Education in 1970, the conclusion is that *success depends on capable teachers with good morale and a principal who leads with authority*. He was a teacher to begin with, not simply an educator; his title is a shortening of the earlier name: “principal teacher.” The word *authority* makes some people nervous. What is it, actually? Authority is a claim to obedience and deference. It is based on the right to direct according to accepted norms. Authority anywhere is the only alternative to force. In a school ruled by authority, you do not need armed guards roaming the halls and metal detectors at the doors. In class, the authority of the teacher maintains discipline without violent words or violent punishment.

The atmosphere of a school should be studious calm. The visitor

should experience hospital quiet. And physical calm should be matched by mental. It is a bad habit of academic people to say that their work is *exciting*. When it goes well it is *absorbing*; excitement would spoil it. True, school-children are human dynamos, and when their interest is aroused, it leads to wild waving of arms and cries of "Teacher, Teacher!" But the excited boy or girl is likely to tumble out words incoherently. The teacher is there to bring order out of eagerness, to encourage the timid and calm down the ebullient.

There are, of course, proper occasions for excitement. Athletic events come to mind first, but others such as the school play, the band concert, the debate team, among other extracurricular activities, foster learning and companionship and give the school community the feeling of a full life. Outdoors, the principal is responsible for decent behavior on the playground. To tolerate bullying to the point where the state legislature considers passing a law is a disgrace. Will state troopers enforce it?

And to do the opposite under the slogan of "Zero Tolerance" is no solution. It leads to harshly punishing very small children for small mischief and alleged "sexual harassment"; it amounts to a policy of "No matter what happens, we won't have to think." The sports coaches and teachers of physical education are there to patrol the playground. As to punishments for the bullies and other miscreants, what better than extra hours of supervised work? Suspending the offender for a few days only extends his freedom to rampage and remain ignorant.

To the law-abiding, the conduct of the school teaches morals by example all day and every day. But where "social promotion"—which lets those who fail

and those who do well both go on to the next grade—is the rule, the opposite is taught: it does injustice to the rest of the class and to the teacher of that next grade. The same holds for the Certificate of Achievement given to those who have not graduated from high school but have "done time" there. Again, unfairness is added to temptation when the school board offers payment in money or in kind to regular truants. And, worst of all, when teachers are ordered to inflate grades so that the principal can falsify the school's test scores and receive more state or federal money, the school becomes a showcase for dishonesty.

Several French companies are now offering "bully insurance," reimbursing parents for stolen items as well as for their kids' hospital bills resulting from attacks by other children.

—News item (2001)

If an able principal exerts his due influence, what role is left for the superintendent? He is what is called abroad a School Inspector. He visits the

school in order to verify; he stands toward the principals as these do to the teachers. A second duty is to lead the school board to enact his proposals. What is to be taught in each grade? Should classes be limited in size? Shall special provisions be made for gifted students? Shall high school seniors take a comprehensive examination in order to graduate? And again, what length the school year, in how many sessions? The legislature is ill-equipped to settle these matters. Different regions have different needs, for

“The designation of a failed school depends mainly on scores on reading and math texts. But there is no indication that the officials who make the judgment ever actually visit the schools or sit in on classes to evaluate teacher performance or look over students’ notebooks and homework or observe behavior and check attendance records.”

—Retired New York City teacher (1998)

example as to foreign languages. A good superintendent will teach the board certain truths: classes should not number over thirty young minds if the teacher is to square his or hers with theirs and know them as individuals.

The fate of “the gifted,” likewise in the hands of the school board, is not an all-or-nothing question. A system that prevents humiliating comparisons is

tracking. It allows the talented to go on ahead at a faster pace in one or two subjects, while sharing in others the average progress of their classmates. As for pupils with disabilities, special classes and teachers are a matter of course.

A school year of eight months is enough, preferably divided in half. The quarter system is boasted of because “it uses the plant” in full. But the choice it gives students to take any three sessions breaks up class unity, slackens the grasp on a subject, and requires the teacher to backtrack and repair the gap thus caused. A longer stretch of bad schooling is not improvement. Another expedient, classes in summer or after hours, is ineffective. And children need time of their own, in summer especially. Lastly, a comprehensive exit examination for high school seniors is desirable, at least for the college-bound. They receive their admission notice in early spring, and if accepted tend to stop all work. Such an examination incites effort from the first year and sustains it through the fourth.

More than 17,000 failing New York City students who were ordered to repeat work in summer school have skipped the classes, with their parents’ permission, so they can go to the beach, travel, or hold summer jobs.

—News item (2001)

The superintendent’s third task is to oversee the material base of the system—buildings and supplies, clerical force, and budget. He defeats himself if he does not insist on high salaries for his teachers. At present, teachers eke out a living by moonlighting or are subsidized by a working spouse; the able and ambitious seek other employment. A professional’s work is impaired when the public denies the respect that money automatically confers. Most often, the money is available, but spent on nonteachers. Just

recently the new head of the New York City school system cut 1,200 administrative jobs and saved \$300 million. This comes to a quarter of a million dollars for each job, not of course for one man or woman, but for them, their assistants, and *their* assistants. Over the years, the contribution to schooling of this bureaucratic mass everywhere has been the manufacture of regulations.

A responsible school board, one willing to think about other things than the prospects of the high school teams, is a product of the local population, which is to say the parents of those in school. The frequent cry: "Involve the parents" is reasonable, but its vagueness conceals dangers. The last thing teachers need is continual demands from concerned parents. "Involvement" belongs in the child's home, and to make it effectual, parents need guidance on a good many topics, including the timing and conditions of homework: a council on telecommunication reported in 2001 that each week, the average American child spends twenty-five hours watching television. Let the good advice be given by the best teachers at meetings of the Parent-Teachers Association. There, also, questions and complaints from both sides can be aired and resolved.

"I struggle daily with Byzantine regulations masquerading as standards."

—A Pennsylvania teacher (2000)

Last week [on] becoming chancellor of the New York City schools, he announced at a cabinet meeting that thirty volumes of regulations had been slashed to nine volumes.

—News item (2001)

"The school system of the Archdiocese of Boston, with a school population about equal to that of the City of Boston, has a central administration of twelve persons."

—The Chancellor of Boston University (2001)

Throughout this visit to a school, we have assumed that it is staffed by competent teachers, and that the principal and the superintendent are former teachers and qualified for their work. Where do these able people come from? How and by whom have they been trained? In general, teachers colleges and departments of education in universities award the degree that leads to certification by the state. The present shortage of teachers and criticism of those in place are attributed to lack of interest or of native ability, enhanced—one might say—by inadequate training. Some 30 percent of the present corps lack a major in the subject they teach, and many are uncertified, as are the substitute teachers who, as temporaries no better trained, bring even less substance to the classroom.

Dear Doctor: Hears the record of my Pressure You ask me to have the nurse to take. If you like to get in touch the Number during the day, — — Elementary School, 000-0000. Thank you.

—Note written by the remedial reading teacher, K-6, in a small New England town (1986)

Hence the prior question: What makes teacher training fail? The root cause lies in the outlook that has prevailed since what has been called “the transformation of the school.” In 1918 an influential committee of educators diverted American schooling from its one purpose and substituted “Seven cardinal principles of education: health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character.” In practice this meant no longer to instruct but to socialize the child, to cater to its emotional needs, and to help reform society by making the young wise to the evils of the present world. After 80 years of this program, society has not appreciably improved and the public school works less and less to remove ignorance.

During the 1950s and 1960s there seemed to be no deficiency in American life that could not be corrected by education.

—*The Organization and Control of American Schools* (1980)

By and large, two motives lead men and women to teaching: one is idealism—a desire to serve, often impelled by love of a subject and a fondness for children. The other motive is lack of any marked taste or talent. Thus the top and the bottom of the aptitude scale preside over the classroom. When loaded with nonteaching duties and held to low salaries, good teachers resign soon or retire early; the others stay.

To make teachers out of those who are not born to the craft, it is not necessary that they should love children or burn with zeal to serve humanity. *But it is necessary that they possess a certain temperament, that they master a subject, and that they acquire by practice some special habits.* In action, teachers are public speakers who must know how to arouse and hold the interest of their audience and see to it that its members, young and restless, retain the message. Would-be teachers must therefore learn to speak well; they must exercise their imaginations so that “squaring of the mind” is effortless; and they must be so at home in their subject that they convey it clearly, in small doses, with striking details that the textbook rarely supplies and that show the links to other subjects and to the “real world.”

For example, the teacher can explain how the subject came to be—geometry out of surveying land, algebra out of weighing bales of goods and marking them plus or minus a standard weight. History and English offer endless opportunities to arouse curiosity about the past and the effects of change and permanence in culture, to say nothing about lessons in morality and its opposite. Teacher training need not make scholars, but it must make practitioners who are fond of their work and still learning about it. Students say about a good teacher that he or she “made the subject come alive.” What they mean is that the teacher did not kill it, by dull delivery and feeble interest in it, which reduce knowledge to a pointless string of facts.

Teachers must know how to maintain ordinary discipline—their words are wasted when their charges distract one another by talking or passing notes or acting rowdy, while at home the parents wonder at their offspring's hatred of school. The reason behind both of these is that some class hours are so endlessly boring that an adult would rush out and hang himself; some truants and dropouts are simply showing good judgment. Sustained interest takes care of discipline and hatred of school in one operation.

The teacher should correct mistakes without harsh words, sarcasm, or shows of temper, but will punish disturbance, taking care in so doing not to confuse the children's sense of fairness, as one teacher did, who boasted of it in print. He was about to call down an eleventh-grade girl who was failing in American literature and was passing notes to her neighbors, when he found the notes to be a poem. His annoyance, he says, "turned to delight"; what she did was "cause for pride and joy." The lesson given here is: Pass notes in verse and distract your neighbors and it will make up for failing in American literature.

Clearly, the requisites of the capable teacher go with a type of character: strong, definite, impressive—an impress is what is wanted in teaching. A large part of the technique can be learned only from pointers and warnings. There is properly speaking no list of methods, no system of teaching. Nor are there definable problems with solutions to be applied. There is only Difficulty, recurring and permanent. Teachers-in-training should therefore practice teaching early in the course, not in front of an actual class but before a group of their own teachers, who can give pointers and warnings about both the contents of the lesson and the manner of it.

Teaching calls for such quick responses to what happens from moment to moment that the current demand for a "lesson plan" to be filed with some official two days ahead is sheer oppression. If the plan is rigidly adhered to, it makes for bad teaching; if not, it is pointless. Some teachers may want to draw up a list of topics for each period, though ready to diverge from it; *but the best guaranty of a good lesson remains mastery of the subject coupled with easy handling of any unexpected difficulty.*

To require teachers to work at tasks from which they see no meaningful results is to encourage discontent and apathy.

—*The Bell Rings at Four: A Black Teacher's Chronicle of Change* (1978)

In subjects that depend much on drill, such as writing essays or book reviews, the teacher must know how to do what, as everybody can testify, is almost never done. What is done is to say, "I want at least five pages," and later the teacher corrects the mistakes. This is not to "teach composition." The poor child can hardly manage to extract five lines from his suddenly frozen brain. The teacher must show the young writer how to start the flow of ideas—and not by saying "make an outline" when there is nothing in the

mind to arrange. How to find the central point and make it lead to others, how to keep on track and then revise—these steps need to be illustrated more than once. As for the book review, since it has a tone and a form of its own, these must be stated and explained from the outset.

Given the requisites of good teaching, a college or department of education should dismiss with regret candidates who after a semester show that their make-up as a whole is unsuited to the profession. No disgrace attaches to this judgment. People who faint at the sight of blood would not make good surgeons.

Freedom for the teacher and use of the imagination should not be a license to think up “special projects” of an entertaining kind. To turn a high school group into shipyard hands who build a sizable replica of one of Columbus’s caravels is fun compared to a month of classes, but only loose talk can call it “learning about Columbus and the discovery of America.”

“From laying our own rail system for steam engines to studying the houses of Frank Lloyd Wright to designing amusement park rides—that’s how the physics curriculum flows in my classroom.”

—Pennsylvania school teacher (1999)

As for the devices called teaching aids, they are of dubious use. Too often, films, projections, discs, and field trips are an excuse for evading work. True, these provide for teacher and taught a change of pace, a relief from routine; and as shown by the legendary “Hawthorne experiment,” variety in

work increases output. But if in class the variation takes up time adjusting equipment and adds little or nothing that fits the current lesson plainly and closely, precious time is wasted. It is rather the teacher who should change the pace and vary the action—going from description to drill to recitation; asking a sudden question in the middle of lecturing; discussing exams past and to come; summing up; and not being afraid to comment like a student or an outsider on the classroom action itself. If a greater break is needed, it would be better to declare a “holiday under guidance” and go to the museum or the zoo or the canning factory and see and hear about their offerings. After which, the teacher makes the point that the outing was a lesson in the use of leisure time.

The same objection holds for the pretense of “doing research” in “team work” fashion in the library or (as I have seen it) with paperback books on the classroom floor. As for the attempt to bypass teaching by using computers, it is but another delusion. Like the now discarded “teaching machines,” they require from the teacher so much intelligent adaptation of the program to the rest of the work that they must be ranked with other time-wasting devices. Teaching is a person-to-person encounter; it is a form of conversation, even though at times silent on one side. Classroom technology consists of a piece of chalk and a blackboard eraser.

It may be asked, what of child psychology? Should teachers learn it? Well, so far as it is science, it states only general truths. For example, the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget tells us that the young child is self-centered and does not think in causal terms, that is, does not understand that *if* you do that, *this* will follow. A parent or teacher comes to know this without reading a book. William James, the master psychologist, said long ago that the science had nothing to offer pedagogy. The fruits of his experience as a teacher he set down in a small book, *Talks to Teachers*, which is still in print and worth reading.

What *is* useful for the teacher to study while training is the history of the main educational reformers since the Roman Quintilian. It shows how again and again schools turn bad as practices get ossified. The proposed remedies repeat: use imagination to see and guide the pupil's thought; drill early in the main subjects without requiring mindless memorizing; emphasize *things*, not abstract words; relate subjects to each other and to life. Today, one must add: pursue no other goal than to remove ignorance—no *preposterism* such as Dick-and-Jane and the new math, no attempt at reforming society.

A digression by way of reminder is needed on this last point, because there is still among many people—educators especially—a not unnatural feeling that the young, fresh mind offers a kind of hard-disk-that-is-soft on which to write a program for taking care of current problems. This vision came long before computers, in the Progressive school created by John Dewey and his colleagues at the University of Chicago in the late 1890s. American schooling was to instill democracy and science. The doctrine was not anti-intellectual, though it turned so when adopted by teachers colleges. Dewey himself advocated the “problem approach” and hard work.

But when the theory transformed the public school, it became a militant prejudice against subject matter and a concentration on helpfulness, cooperation, the good will society. The scientific bent took the form of endless “educational research,” while the problem approach (which is belied by the history of science) generated the courses of the loose-bundle type. To this day, the impulse to switch the curriculum over instantly so as to deal with a crisis is exemplified by the call following the terrorist attack on New York City in 2001: the schools must “teach Muslim civilization.” A teacher competent in history (the subject relevant here) would at once see in the absurd phrase “teach Muslim civilization” the sign of an ignorance in need of removal.

And such a teacher would also be free of a besetting fault that is another legacy of the debased Progressive doctrine: the habit of thinking and talking

The school attempts to reproduce actual community life on a democratic basis, to establish social habits and attitudes, and in particular habits of scientific thinking.

—Rockefeller Foundation Report on the (Progressive) Lincoln School (1919)

in woolly words: “creative learning,” “the right to read,” “value clarification,” “the concept of lesson study.” With these goes the impulse to “innovate” by merely changing familiar terms: “facilitator” for teacher, “module” for class period, “language arts” for grammar, composition, and literature. Jargon begets mental fog. It was an evil day when the phrase “public instruction” was replaced by “public education.” The change let in the seven devils of verbal inflation. *Education cannot be given; it is something indefinable made by oneself out of experience and reflection.*

To bring out in each candidate teacher the talents surveyed here obviously requires a teachers college faculty itself made up of experienced teachers. Some will be theorists besides, but all must be able to say, “Watch how I do it.” This is the rule in all professional schools; teacher-training is a clinical profession.

A point or two more in conclusion: We are told that disappointed parents who have taken on the task of homeschooling turn out a good many boys and girls who are much better prepared for college than the best high school graduates. This is to the credit of parental care and intelligence, but it does not mean that private tutoring is inherently better than public schooling. It is true that whoever has charge of only one or two children can do a more continuous squaring of the mind than is possible with twenty or thirty, and thus teach more in the same span of time. But the larger group as such teaches lessons that the tutor never can—lessons in social behavior and in self-control. Being in a class fosters emulation and a knowledge of human character, including one’s own—to say nothing of the chance of lifelong friendships and the benefit of mingling with equals of different ethnic and economic backgrounds. All this, coupled with the influence during early life of several dozen adults who are not parents, makes young citizens, as tutoring at home cannot.

Other parents and concerned persons have followed other paths to reform. The number of councils, centers, and associations busied about the public schools is staggering. They hold forums, raise money, and keep publicizing their work. The amount of energy and goodwill expended is praiseworthy, but on the evidence the results at best are puny and local. One cause is the national mania for “studies” and “reports” and the passion for debating lists of “goals” and “guidelines.” Education is a topic that encourages verbalism, when what is needed is material help dedicated to action—to teaching and its optimum environment.

Such are the elements that, properly combined and kept in order, make up a school. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a good school, any

more than there is good government—good in the sense that everything works right, as in a machine. No school or government can entirely fulfill its promise to its constituents, but some perform far better than others. Why is complete goodness beyond reach? In a school, the reason is that its operation is in the hands of a large number of grown-ups *and of children*, who are, all of them, less than perfect. Mistaken decisions, accidental neglect, fatigue, laziness, and other failings are bound to occasion flaws in spite of earnest effort and sensible arrangements.

It is therefore wise for teachers, parents, and administrators to make firm demands but entertain reasonable expectations; to refrain from routine pieties and enthusiasms, from promises and slogans of the kind we hear from advertisers and candidates for office, such as “The Right to Read,” “Teach for America,” and “Goals 2000.” Educators and parents should seek satisfaction in each day’s conscientious work, rather than chase after empty abstractions such as Excellence and Innovation. The day’s work is manageable, and its results are cumulative. In schooling, it must be repeated, there are no organic problems to solve, no breakthroughs to look for that will revolutionize teaching and learning. There is only a steady, unchanging set of difficulties to meet head-on and overcome so as to remove ignorance. When that is done with fair success, then teacher and student deserve reward and respect: the school *is* A SCHOOL.

The Connection and the Missing Link

From the foregoing exposition it is clear that the present system of schooling visits its defects most damagingly on the children of what are called disadvantaged families. These are not necessarily poor, black, immigrant, or of non-European background, but any families in which the child is allowed to grow up without tutelage as to habits and without nurture as to the contents of the mind. Such neglect often occurs when both parents work or when they have adopted the sit-and-watch doctrine of childrearing. By contrast, in many families of recent immigrants, especially if Catholic, the child inherits a tradition, his mind absorbs a lore, which is the start of all learning. It is among those families and also within the black population that there is the most strenuous demand for schools that will truly teach and prepare the young for competence and a productive life.

To whichever group fate assigns a child, he or she is disadvantaged when hoping to enter college. The twelve years of indifferent schooling have left deficiencies, any of which is a handicap: bad habits of work or none at all, weak concentration, faulty techniques in the basics, lack of zest for learning, and as a result of these lacks, addiction to extraneous pursuits—sports, rock music, gang activity, Satanism, alcohol, and drugs. The colleges, having come to accept sexual promiscuity on campus, now face the task of controlling drug-taking and “binge drinking.”

Meantime, a large number of quasi-untaught young people begin their college career not in joyful expectation of novelty in studies and social life, but in the sorry incapacity of “remedials.” They must go back to the old grind, the old subjects, the old textbooks. And since the task of rescuing them for “the college experience” is usually entrusted to assistants, themselves not specially prepared for the work, there is no guaranty that the renewed effort will succeed. The number of those who drop out or are dismissed at the end of one semester or one year varies with the type of institution and the rules of admission, but an average has been estimated at 40 percent—more time and money, hope and energy wasted.

On the strength of these and other aspects of the case, the situation may be described as contagion from below. Over the years, all the errors and neglects in the first portion of the plan to give schooling have crept up into the second. Not everywhere alike, but always distressing, the infirmity has beset the leading, “prestigious” colleges and universities and it is now seeping into certain graduate and professional schools. Poor teaching, cheating, grade inflation for popularity, disrespect and even violence toward those who do teach and make demands are reported privately and in the press. The students, feeling mature and thinking of tuition costs, cast themselves in the role of customers. On the one hand, they defy the institution to teach them; and on the other, they entreat their instructors to

equip them with the credentials they must have. The now compulsory computer has not made the relation smoother. The student uses it at any instant to get help or advice from his professor—office hours are out of date—and may serve him a term paper hot off the Internet; a New Jersey judge has ruled that plagiarism does not warrant expulsion. The “college experience” risks being “formative” in a lopsided way.

Noting this, some colleges now recommend that undergraduates take a year off in “the real world,” perhaps even before freshman year. This expedient may well make the student more mature, but possibly also more set in opinions and attitudes, less teachable. If the year off is urged midway, it is a confession of failure in college admissions. In an earlier day there were entrance examinations. Now admissions have become more and more selective about status and less and less about capacity. In our late era, it is no longer odd to take six years for a B.A.

In this disarray of schooling from first to last, the lack of permanent relations between leaders in higher education and authorities in the lower schools has played a large part. It has been snobbery from above, and vexation from below, where efforts are often made to satisfy demands that are unexpressed, variable, or perfunctory. A shameful sign of high academic laxity is that school textbooks are never reviewed in appropriate journals by top men in the discipline. No European country ignores the connection between secondary education and the higher levels of study for which it strives to prepare. Over here, at wide intervals, a group of university people get together and resolve to bridge the gap. They meet and issue a set of goals, abstract as usual; there are “cordial meetings,” and that is the end of the attempt to forge the missing link.

One element in this divorce has been the tyranny of research—not its demands on time and energy, but the mere idea, the ghost of research. Whereas in Europe many thinkers, historians, and men of letters make a career of teaching in secondary schools, in this country the distinction between teacher and professor is that the former does not “publish,” and does—or is supposed to—teach. On the campus, for the last half century or more, the badge of eminence has been “relief from teaching.” Presence in the classroom is the equivalent of the road work imposed on the medieval serf for so many days a year.

Latterly, it is true, financial stress has forced here and there a return to more equitable teaching loads for all. But the professor being a free agent, he has recouped some autonomy by offering only courses based on his “research interest.” The surveys and consecutive courses are taught by slave labor, the teaching assistants. This self-indulgence of the tenured accounts for the huge number of spongy courses that now swell the college catalogues, notably those called “————— studies,” which are conglomerates of fact and opinion with no structure, system, or progression from

point to point so as to impart a body of knowledge. Similarly pointless are courses that take a fashionable topic and pursue it into every corner of some work or author, or imagine its presence there: "Sexual ambiguity in the novels of George Eliot." Unlike a course on the English novel, this is an evasion of genuine thought, which at the same time spoils the reading of masterpieces.

Since such a questionable offering is most often tendentious in political or social ways, it has installed on campuses unending conflicts, not academic but vituperative, affecting administrative decisions and generating a charged atmosphere, written codes, committees with judicial powers, centers for compulsory "sensitivity training," lawsuits, and bad publicity for the once respected ivory tower. The level of scholarly acuteness in this state of floating hostility is shown by the use of the word *harassment*, which means repeated, relentless attacks and now stands for a single objectionable word or incident or even a deliberate stare.

The notable and fortunate exceptions to this rage for self-destruction are the small liberal arts colleges dotted all over the country, some under religious sponsorship and many unknown to the large public. Equally sober and worthy are the community colleges, mostly in cities, and the two-year colleges in towns and counties. There, good teaching is at a premium and its presence is monitored. There also the curriculum of solid, standard courses has been preserved. Modest resources prevent any seeking after academic gods and goddesses of research who would impose their exotic wares and cause envy of free-time privilege and high pay.

These three types of colleges do the great work of saving many a dropout or reject, rehabilitating young minds left uncared for by their early school or their curtailed "college experience." At the same time, these institutions are keeping alive for a future day of renewal the idea of a curriculum and the duty of teaching. For the rest, the places where campus quiet has turned into uneasy armistice, the only advice that suggests itself is not reform in the abstract and without guidelines, but: "Trim the college."

TRIM THE COLLEGE!

It is agreed that all who can more or less read and write and want to go to college should be able to. Lack of money should not be a hindrance. But as to what a college is, there is no agreement. It is not even discussed. But look at the facts. The undergraduate unit of an Ivy League university, whose dean boasts of offering "Fifty-some majors, thirty-some concentrations, and hundreds of electives," differs widely from an Ivy League college that stands by itself, and both differ from a small southern or midwestern college that started as a denominational school—or from the typical Catholic institution. The college of a huge mid- or far-western state university is another thing again, and so are the scattered parts of a state system that were originally teachers' colleges or normal schools.

This variety, it is said, gives everybody a chance to find the place that suits his or her talents and tastes. That is pious nonsense. The young have no idea what they are getting into and often have no choice. It is determined by geography and cost, as well as by current dogmas. The admissions officers nowadays admit or reject according to criteria that are incommunicable, and the rejected must shop around. The sole exception is the state university that must take all high school graduates—or some top percentage of the class. Four months later, a good many are disgorged, to find some other refuge, also called college. Most of the applicants to the well-known places, called prestigious on account of their excellence (whether it is still there or not), are also shunted about and find themselves in places quite unlike the one of their hopes.

What further complicates this complicated catch-as-catch-can is the price of the longed-for boon of a "college experience." In the colleges deemed best and near-best, a middling well-to-do family with three children must spend a quarter-of-a-million dollars in less than ten years. People who have not saved or cannot borrow such a sum may find institutions that cost a third or a half less. But given their lower income, the strain on the family budget is the same. Is anybody prepared to deny that this situation, though tamely accepted, is sheer unreason? All to college, but the hurdles are a mile high—and it turns out that half the entrants never graduate.

To be sure, the able student qualifies for scholarships, and the less so for loans. Both can also work for hire to defray the cost of books and food and lodging for four years. But with all these partial aids, another irrational situation comes about: the student who after college must do graduate work to qualify for one of the professions enters his first employment with a debt of \$100,000 plus interest. So well known

The cost of attending college outpaced the rate of inflation again this year, the jump in tuition and fees the largest in six years. Students at public institutions are paying 7.7 percent more this year than last; at private ones 5.5 percent more.

—News item (2001)

that it hardly needs mention is the laborious task of making application to half a dozen or more colleges and the searching invasion of privacy suffered when a request for student aid is attached.

All aspects of this social lunacy make up the first argument for rediscovering what a college is and trimming them all to that fundamental size. But what is the basic college? History suggests some answers. When the cathedral school decided in the twelfth century that more advanced teaching should be available, the medieval university was born. It took three directions, two of them professional: Theology and Law. The third was "Letters," the liberal arts, what we also call the humanities, with mathematics included as one of them. We have duly retained the phrase liberal arts and pay lip service to it. We even apply it as the designation of certain colleges, but the real thing is now hard to find.

Two other models of the college developed after the university: first, the English universities, at Oxford and Cambridge, took the form of small separate colleges. Those were founded by royalty, prelates, or statesmen and thereby led to specialize in their interests. But all were intent on introducing the young to traditional knowledge rather than a profession. A second type came in the sixteenth century, when the Jesuit order began to cover Europe with colleges designed to strengthen the Catholic faith in opposition to the Protestant. This goal was to be achieved not by indoctrination alone but by making well-educated minds. The proof of their merit is that nearly all the great thinkers of the next two centuries, from Descartes to Voltaire, went to Jesuit colleges—and repaid their mentors by combating with success their religious dogmas.

These colleges, like the English and the faculties of letters at continental universities, taught the liberal arts and the numerical sciences. Certain subjects such as logic no longer seem to us needful, but the lesson for the present is that the core of an all-purpose higher education consists in these "arts." They are fit for all minds, endowing them with particular and general abilities: to think, speak simply and clearly, express views rationally, own and use a body of facts and ideas that help communication because they are widely known, detect errors and fallacies, resolve intellectual problems, and possibly make discoveries in some branch of learning.

To this armament of powers, the last five centuries have supplied new materials to exploit: history and the social sciences and the hugely expanded substance of the physical and life sciences. This enlargement must broaden the curriculum of the basic college, but it does not change its character and role. These are set by its place and time in the life of the young.

In creating the high school, the United States failed to include the studies that in Europe belong to the last two years of the French lycée or German gymnasium. It is a question which system is better suited to the

normal growth of intellect in the young. But that is a detail rendered of no importance by the present failure of the American public school to enable its charges to carry college work. In these conditions, what ought the basic college, the longed-for heaven of ambitious youths and their parents, to be and to do?

1. Devote its energies and resources to the liberal, the formative arts as previously defined: the humanities, math and science, and the social sciences.

2. For as long as may be needed, run a remedial program in reading, writing, grammar, math, legible handwriting, and articulate speech.

3. Offer facilities on a modest scale for physical exercise and intramural sports and also for extracurricular activities of the traditional kind. In addition, keep a resident physician, an ambulance, and a regular connection with a nearby hospital.

But what of the student whose interest lies in the direction of film and theatre, art and music, photography and television, and who wants a "major" in one of them to "qualify" for a job in these industries the day after graduation? Those activities are preprofessional. Let there be a School of Applied Arts on campus or at the nearby university, similar to the Schools of Business and of Journalism. The applied arts are not college work; the very scheduling of long hours of practice makes for conflict with the other studies.

Concentrating on the liberal arts is not enough. They must be first introduced as a required group, a so-called core in the first two years. The alternative, free choice from the first year on, may lead to four years of freshman work, which evades the purpose, the very meaning of *curriculum*. In the last two years the guided choice of two or three subjects confirms the student's developing sense of direction. The young discover where their abilities lie, rather than know this as freshmen.

In ——— University, a student can earn her bachelor's degree without having to take history, literature, philosophy, or math. She can graduate by passing such courses as "Star Trek and Modern Man" and "Jewelry 1."

—News item (1998)

To be of any worth, the liberal arts must not only figure in the catalogue, they must be taught as arts, not as scholarly disciplines—and it must be done by teachers. The present system favors the opposite. Scholars known for their research or giving signs of such a future

are put in the classroom to do what they choose. Departments promote and give them salary increases, while barely tolerating the men and women who "merely" teach. These last usually do it well, are appreciated by the students, and often keep up with the advances in knowledge on a wider front than the honored specialists. This rooted academic tradition is a second show of Unreason. True, among the fine scholars some are excellent teachers, and there are also less good ones who nevertheless have a conscience

and work hard at the task. But the general tendency is to teach the liberal arts as professional subjects. Indeed, one may hear the teacher of an introductory course say that he hopes to attract some of the students into his field as scholars. The course thereby ceases to be a college subject. "Liberal" in liberal arts means precisely "free" of professionalism and pedantry, immediate use, and the business-like mood.

At the present time there is an even worse corruption of the college curriculum, in the form of topics masquerading as subjects. Whether meant to acclimate pop culture on campus or to get large classes, these pseudo subjects are antiliberal in their temporary appeal and their particularity.

After concentrating on such questions, it is no wonder that college students turn for graduation speakers "to the stars of TV News and the entertainment world." What, by contrast, are college youths to carry away from their study of the liberal arts and still possess when they have been swallowed up by career, parenthood, and civic obligations? Some of what they learned will be buried, but innumerable portions of fact, purport, reasoning, and significance will still be fresh for instant recognition and application to life uses. It is this "apperceptive mass" that makes them deserve to be called educated instead of ignorant.

Imagine that you have been invited to be a guest producer for one Oprah show. Develop a proposal for this show, including focus, guests, structure, etc.

—"Reading Oprah," English department, a Canadian university (2000)

Is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony a marvel of abstract architecture, culminating in a gender-free paean to human solidarity, or does it model the process of rape?

—"Music and Gender," a famed New England college (2001)

Besides fulfilling its intrinsic purpose, the college so conceived yields results that can be measured in money. First, saving: the college offers only courses that serve the liberal arts, instead of the hundreds of others of specialized scope that confront the undergraduate at large university colleges. Like the catalogue, the faculty of the basic college is small, and by seeking teachers it need not pay extraordinary sums to obtain the transcendent researcher that all are bidding for. Likewise, by limiting the campus amenities within reason, that is to say, on the scale of those current in middle-class homes, and by giving up all expensive outside attractions, the annual budget is disburdened. The endowment may begin to suffice. Living within its means, the college need not lower its standards to keep all students at all costs for their tuition.

Colleges nowadays feel compelled to do things that are no part of their role. They maintain a development (fund-raising) office, a government-relations office, a public relations (advertising) office, and an alumni

office, with in addition offices to deal with mental and social troubles on the campus.

Together, these have planted an expensive bureaucracy at the heart of the institution. A good administrator could reduce it to near invisibility. A college should not advertise its wares or compete except in the figurative sense of attracting good students. In fact, applicants cannot compare places until they are admitted and a year has passed.

Among the things a college may but need not do is to provide the students and the townspeople free entertainment. If the college orchestra or debate team or drama society, as extracurricular efforts, want to give one or two performances a year, open to the public and free of charge, well and good. But to incur expense to hire professional coaches and famous lecturers, to keep a resident quartet or a captive poet goes beyond the implied

Director of College Relations and Marketing: in College known for innovations, to direct marketing efforts.

—Advertisement by college in Midwest

Director of Equity and Diversity: to provide leadership and vision for, etc.

—Advertisement by university in middle-Atlantic state

LGBTQA Services Coordinator: for training students, staff and faculty [in program] specific to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Ally services and issues.

—Advertisement by state university in New England

Theater General Manager: manage budgets, bookings, box office, promotions and audience development, coordinate and schedule productions and supervise small staff.

—Advertisement by collegiate university in New England

contract between an educational institution and society. Such extras are said to be for “enrichment”; it is best to make sure first that there is something to enrich. As for entertainment, students profit most from providing it for themselves.

Students ought not only to entertain, but also unconsciously teach one another. For this reason the true college remains of modest size. Large numbers prevent familiar conversation on serious subjects, as well as jollity and camaraderie, not within little cliques but wider groups. College matures by the sense of belonging to a common society. That sense begins through the required core in the first two years; it is sustained by the unspecialized handling of all subjects, which leads to comparing notes and discussing teachers. These, by the way, must feel no need to seek popularity by watering studies or inflating grades, as in one Ivy League college where 51 percent of the student body make A's across the board and graduate cum laude. If the students care to publish their opinion of faculty members, they should do so informally in an issue of the campus paper, without a yearly canvass on a printed form that gives the result misleading and damaging statistical force.

One last provision: student aid is to free the recipient to be a student.

He or she should not have to work for money, especially when classmates don't. For one thing, it skews the individual academic record by handicapping the worker, who is also deprived of thoughtful leisure and the beneficial companionship just cited. "The college experience" should be more than a formal term.

With the nature of a basic college understood and respected, the cost of tuition comes down to a point where the middle-level family, now ineligible for help, will not have to go into debt. By the same economy, the full subsidy of the less well-off becomes possible. Seeing reason return to the academy, many people whose exchequer is now drained by tuition will gratefully contribute to the annual fund or give scholarship money, seeing that it all goes to support college *education*.

Not a word has been said so far about off-campus athletics. Nothing can abate the national passion for intercollegiate games. Where these are expected, demanded, and therefore unavoidable, it is mainly by the alumni, and only those of certain colleges. Of the 4,000 institutions of higher learning, a great many are free of the incubus. Elsewhere, let the paid heroes of victorious teams be the responsibility of those alumni. Perhaps in the burdened places part of the budget will have to be paid as ransom for the right to be only and wholly a college. With the management of the teams and all attendant costs, including the hire of players and coaches, in alumni hands, the recurrent hypocrisy, cheating, and disputes about enforcing the rules of academic standing for athletes disappear. Good student athletes earn their degrees, the others are guaranteed it absolutely—call it an honorary degree. Meanwhile, another expensive operation is eliminated.

Of course, none of what has been described here is possible. Too many vested interests oppose any such reasonable transformation of what we indiscriminately call colleges. The bureaucracy is entrenched on the campus as firmly as anywhere, and so is the faculty with its specialist bent and overextended offerings. Very possibly, even the beneficiaries of the change—the hypnotized parents of youth—might shy away from supporting it, sensing what a wild utopia it is and vaguely afraid of some unforeseeable disaster if it were attempted. So let them start saving for tuition at each birth (early marriage is recommended)—and with compound interest over seventeen years, that quarter-million is not unattainable.

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American Academy for Liberal Education

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Council for Basic Education

The Council for Basic Education is a highly recognized independent, national, non-profit organization that believes that all children deserve and should receive a challenging, well-taught education in the liberal arts. Founded in 1956, CBE quickly established itself as an impartial critic of education reform and as the leading proponent of rigorous academic standards for all students in the core subjects. For more information about CBE, visit the website at www.c-b-e.org or call 202-347-4171.

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