

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

November 2019 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* N° 1018

EVERYBODY' S BUSINESS, or REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

Part 2 of 2

WAYNE STATE, DETROIT April 1979

by
Mortimer J. Adler

IV. Now let us look at the system of schooling, especially undergraduate schooling, that now exists in the United States, and ask what must be done to reform it so that it aims at the right, not the wrong, objectives and so that it performs the function it should perform for all—all, not some -in our democratic society.

A. In the course of my long experience with efforts to reform American education, beginning with my experience at the University of Chicago when Robert Hutchins was its President, I think I have learned the changes that must take place before there is any possibility of restoring general, liberal schooling in all our undergraduate institutions. There may be more than the seven changes I am going to mention, but these seven changes are indispensable.

1. The acquirement of specialized scientific knowledge or specialized scholarship in non-scientific or professional fields (the kind of knowledge that is *not* everybody's business) should be *reserved* for the graduate and professional schools, and *kept out* of the undergraduate curriculum.

2. The Ph.D. should cease to be the *sine qua non* for the appointment of college teachers. Their competence should be the competence of generalists, not that of specialists. They should be Doctors of the Disciplines, or, if you will, Doctors of the Liberal Arts.

3. The members of a college faculty should not be professors of this or that subject-matter, or even members of this or that department in the graduate school.

4. The college faculty should be completely autonomous, completely emancipated from the influence and the authority of the graduate school.
 5. The elective system, with its majors and minors, should be abolished.
 6. Parents should be persuaded to send their young to college, and the young themselves should be disposed to go to college not, as at present, mainly to acquire highly saleable skills or to earn good livings, but solely for the purpose of becoming cultured human beings.
 7. Corporations should recognize that the most important posts they have to offer can be better filled by broadly trained generalists than by narrowly trained specialists.
- B. You know, as well as I do, that none of these things is likely to happen. The trend is overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. I think I can tell you why, and what must be done to stem the tide and turn it in the direction that would help us to restore general, liberal education for all—in all our undergraduate institutions. But first, before I do that, let me be sure you share my understanding of the primacy of general, liberal education and of its proper aims or objectives.
1. When I say general, liberal schooling is primary and specialized, vocational, and professional schooling is secondary, I mean *first in the order of learning, primary in the time sequence*, not necessarily more important, or more indispensable. Both are important, both are indispensable, *but the general should precede the special*.
 2. In addition, general, liberal learning is *for all* without exception, whereas specialized or professional schooling is *only for some*; and as for the non-learned vocations, the merely technical vocations, I would like to hope that most training for them would be done on the job, where it can be properly done, not in school.
 3. One other thing is *for all not just for the few*—and that is continued learning in adult life, for without this no one can ever become a truly educated human being, with some modicum of understanding in depth and some measure of human wisdom.
 4. The undergraduate school should be the place where culture is transmitted by a curriculum devoted to the humanistic learning of the generalist—philosophical in the sense that it deals with the basic ideas that are

everybody's business, as specialized science and scholarship are not.

- C. I said I think I know what must be done to turn the tide in this direction—to overcome all of the present trends that make it impossible for us to restore general and liberal schooling for all in all our undergraduate institutions.
1. The basic trouble lies in the time scale that we have adopted in this country—sixteen years of undergraduate schooling, begun at six and ending at twenty-two
 - at least four years too long*
 - at least two years too late at its beginning*
 - and so at least six years too late at its termination.*
 2. If the young are in undergraduate schools until they are twenty-two—between eighteen and twenty-two in what we call our colleges—it is much too late in their lives to ask or expect them or their parents to be totally unconcerned about how they are going to earn a living, or how they are going to become specialists or professionals in this field or that. *It is unreasonable and unrealistic—it can never be brought about.* Whereas it would be reasonable and realistic to say that, if undergraduate schooling, with the B.A. degree, were completed by age sixteen, as it certainly can be, then we should be able to ask and to expect everyone—students, parents, and faculties—to *have no concern whatsoever with future careers* of any particular sort, but to be concerned solely with the human vocation or calling that is common to all—namely, *the obligation to become a truly educated human being in the years of late maturity.*
 3. To this end, I propose the following radical reorganization of the whole school system (to make it accord with the school system that operates in most European countries, though, as it operates there, it is for the few, not for all).
 - a. *Start* at age 4, not age 6—to take advantage of the great potentialities of the young for early learning.
 - b. *Then* six years of elementary or grammar school—where the rudiments of the liberal arts are acquired. It is here that the sensibilities should be developed, the memory enriched, and the imagination cultivated.

- c. *Followed* by six years of secondary school (akin to the lycee or the gymnasium) in which the curriculum completes training in the liberal arts and provides an acquaintance with the basic ideas that are the controlling or governing principles in all disciplines.
- d. *Then*, so that adolescence can be cured, so that the young can grow up, which they cannot do while they remain in school, four years of compulsory non-schooling for all—work in the private and public sector of the economy and vocational training on the job for many.
- e. *Finally*, for some and *only for some*—the university at age twenty, for specialized, professional, or highly technical training.
- f. *And for all* a lifetime of continued learning, preparation for which has been laid in the general, liberal schooling that all received in their youth.

D. Let me say in conclusion that unless something like this change in the time scale and something like this radical re-organization in our institutions can be brought about, I do not have the slightest hope for succeeding with any of the reforms that must take place to restore general and liberal education for all in all our undergraduate institutions.

V. *Conclusion: the alternative that remains open*

- A. I began by explaining why schools and teachers, even at their best, are only secondary and instrumental factors in the process of becoming educated.
 - 1. I pointed out from my own experience that it is the learning that we do mainly by ourselves, or at least without teachers, the learning that we do long after we have completed schooling, that makes the most important contribution to the improvement of our mind in its highest development—the achievement of some measure of deeper understanding and a modicum of wisdom,
 - 2. It would, of course, be better for all of us if schools and teachers gave us in youth the help that, at their best, they might be able to give us to prepare us for the life of learning that we must engage in after we have finished school.
 - a. It would be better if we acquired early some skill in the arts of learning.

- b. It would be better if we had some early acquaintance with, the whole world of learning and some abiding incentive to explore it.
 - 3. But if schools and teachers fail us in our youth—if in our lifetime we cannot hope to see the present deficiencies and misdirections of schooling corrected by the reforms I have proposed—all is not lost.
 - a. You may not be able to avoid a profound pessimism about the future of formal education if it continues in the wrong directions in which it now has headed.
 - b. But you need not be pessimistic about the future of your own education, even if the schools have failed you so far, or have not done as well for you as they should.
 - c. That future is in your own hands.
 - (1) You are responsible for the development of your own mind.
 - (2) It is never too late to learn how to read well good and great books; never too late to learn how to discuss ideas with friends.
 - (3) These opportunities are never foreclosed, and if you make good use of them over the long pull, you can overcome the handicaps of poor schooling.
 - 4. The accumulated culture and wisdom of mankind is available and accessible to you in the great books. You need only learn how to read them well and, turning the television set off, read them again and again, ferreting out the basic ideas they discuss, and discussing these ideas with anyone you can persuade to read the great books with you.
- B. I am not saying that we should not blame schools and teachers for all their faults. I am not saying that we should not continue to do everything we can to reform our educational institutions from the bottom up. But, in the last analysis, if we do not succeed in becoming educated human beings, each of us has only himself to blame, for no matter how adverse the character of our early institutional training or preparation for education, there is always enough time left in our lives for us to do what must be done to educate ourselves.

1. We would have to do that for ourselves anyway, even if schools and teachers were at their best.
2. It is only a little harder for us to do it with schools and teachers not performing the functions they should perform.
3. I hope you agree that this is an optimistic view of the future of education—at least of your own opportunity to become educated.



THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501) (c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.