

**The establishment of a republican government without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people is the most rash and foolhardy experiment ever tried by man.**

—Horace Mann [1796–1859]



**Robert Maynard Hutchins**  
1899–1977

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## **THE IDEA OF A COLLEGE**

**Robert M. Hutchins**

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I should like to try to make clear what I mean by a college and a college education. This I shall have to do chiefly by saying what I do not mean. Educational discussion in this country, like the discussion of everything else, is based on headlines. Hence it is possible for an educator who says he favors the abolition of football to be accused of being against health if he says that the aim of a college is intellectual, the rumor will spread that he is against morals; if he says that he is against making the college either a vocational school or a place where the young are adjusted to their environment, he is charged with indifference to the fate of countless millions who have to make their own way in the world; if he says that he is for liberal education, the conclusion is that he is undemocratic. Yet a moment's reflection will show that none of the consequences assumed to follow from these positions actually does follow from them.

For example, big-time, industrial football, the symbol of the non-educational aspects of educational institutions, confuses the public mind about what education is and contains elements of injustice, hypocrisy, and fraud that run counter to the high ideals that our educational institutions profess. It is perfectly possible to be against football of this type and to be for health and exercise. As for me, I am for exercise, as long as I do not have to take any myself.

It is not the object of a college to make its students good, because the college cannot do it; if it tries to do it, it will fail; it will weaken the agencies that should be discharging this responsibility; and it will not discharge its own responsibility. It is possible to say this and still be for goodness. A college can make a highly important contribution to goodness by supplying the intellectual foundations of morality in an atmosphere conducive to the maintenance of good habits. But the family and the church have the main burden of inculcating and developing these habits. I may say in passing that I am for the family and the church.

A college should not aim to teach its students vocations, because going through vocational routines is too easy and lulls the conscience of a faculty that does not want to face the enormously difficult task of educating the young; because an educational institution cannot do a good job of vocational training; because the shifts in technology and the migration of workers may make vocational training at one time in one place useless at another time in another place; because jobs are easier and easier to do and require less and less training of any kind; and because the great problems of our time are the right use of leisure, the performance of the duties of citizenship, and the establishment of a community in this country and the world, to none of which vocational training makes the slightest contribution.

I shall never tire of telling the story of that Dean of Christchurch at Oxford who was asked by a student what was the use of studying Greek. The Dean replied, "It is not only the immediate language of the Holy Ghost, but it leads to positions of great dignity and emolument." The study of Greek now leads only to positions in the teaching of Greek, which, though of great dignity, are not of great emolument. It was a mistake to seek to justify Greek on the ground of its vocational value, for that has now disappeared. And in a world of rapid change the same fate may at any moment overtake any subject that is taught because of the emoluments achieved by those who have studied it in the past. It is possible to

say this and at the same time feel concern for the economic future of college graduates. The question is not whether it is necessary to learn how to earn a living, but where it is desirable to learn it. In general the way to learn how to do anything is to do it; and industry is the place in which the young should learn how to work in industry.

A college should not seek to adjust its students to their environment, because it cannot tell what their environment will be. It cannot predict where they will live, or what social, economic, or political conditions will prevail when they have reached maturity. The world is now changing so fast that current information has little value because it will not remain current. What the father knows of the facts of life is almost useless to his son. If the present demand for instruction in current events succeeds, it can lead only to one result: it will fill the students with miscellaneous dead facts. The college that wishes to adjust its students to the environment is likely to teach facts miscellaneous in the highest degree, for adjustment to the environment may mean anything, from how and when to dress for dinner to how and when to vote for president.

And certainly our object must be not merely to prepare our students for any possible environment, but also to induce and prepare them to try to get a better one. To do this they must chiefly have some standards of judgment, some idea of good and bad. If it is charged that the effort to prepare students to bring about a better environment will lead to a crop of maladjusted, neurotic youths, I reply that Socrates and Gandhi are worthy ideals for the rising generation, and that I have little fear that America will ever produce too many men of this type. The charge is in any case absurd, because I am urging nothing more than what is inherent in any democratic system, namely, that by the exercise of the intelligence of the population the community should struggle forward toward a better world. To struggle forward to a better world you have to know what kind of world would be better.

It is possible to say all this without being a reactionary, or a medievalist, or a theorist. In fact, if he will only think, the contemporary, practical, democrat will see that he cannot say anything else. The power we want our graduates to have is power in and over the unpredictable future. The power the college is best equipped to help them gain is intellectual power. It is the power of understanding and judgment.

The object of an educational system is to supply this power. It may, perhaps, do many other things that are interesting and useful;

but it fails to the extent to which it fails to supply this power. Its contribution to the moral, physical, and spiritual natures of its students and to their “success” in the world is made by way of this power. No other agency in the community has the responsibility of supplying the intellectual power that the community requires. If the educational system does not discharge this responsibility, it will not be discharged.

In a democratic community every citizen should have as much power of understanding and judgment as he can develop, because every citizen has a voice in the management of the community. The progress, and even the safety, of a democratic community depends in part upon the intelligence of the citizens, and by this we cannot mean the intelligence of some citizens, but the combined intelligence of all. For this reason democrats since the earliest times have advocated universal free compulsory education.

In the last fifty years a remarkable reversal has taken place among democrats. They are still for universal free compulsory schooling. They seem to feel that it would be undemocratic not to be. At the same time the demands of labor unions and the ambitions of parents have raised the school-leaving age to heights undreamed of by our democratic ancestors. As the President’s Commission on Higher Education and the GI Bill of Rights suggest, the policy of this country is to the effect that schooling is a good thing, that being in school is better for everybody than being anywhere else, and that the more schooling everybody has the better everything will be. But the hordes of students let loose upon the educational system by reason of this policy, the difficulty of obtaining competent teachers to staff so vast an enterprise, and the great differences in the ability of pupils to get an education in any definition of it that our democratic ancestors would recognize have led some of the most vocal advocates of democracy to propose, in the name of democracy, the most undemocratic educational ideas.

For example, in the report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education, presented by men who have the deepest democratic convictions, we are urged in the name of democracy upon a course that divides the population into the mass and the elite. The mass, we are told, since they are not really capable of being educated, should not be allowed to clutter up existing educational institutions, because they are not bright enough. Two-year community colleges will be established for them. They should go to these colleges because everybody should go to school as long as possible. But they should not be educated, because they are not capable of it. The two-year community college is therefore a kind of waiting

room, or housing project, in which the young are to be kept out of worse places until we are ready to have them go to work.

Perhaps we need waiting rooms or housing projects for the young. Perhaps we need the mass equivalent of those girls' finishing schools of the last century in which young ladies were accommodated with genteel occupations in that difficult period between the time at which they reached physical maturity and the time at which they could get married. But it would be helpful if things were called by their right names. To call a waiting room or a housing project a college or an educational institution is to cheat the student and his parents and to confuse the public still further about what a college, or an educational institution, or an education is.

The doctrine that educational opportunity should be open to all is the great American contribution to the theory and practice of education. But you will notice that the opportunity that should be open to all is educational opportunity, not the opportunity to spend two years doing anything that occurs to you in a place erroneously denominated a college. The advocates of the two-year community college either keep silent altogether about what its curriculum is to be or say that it is to be whatever the students would like to have it. This is based on the hypothesis, which I regard as wholly undemocratic, that these students cannot be educated, and therefore they might as well do anything they care to. It is assumed that their interests will be largely vocational and recreational. Hence those offerings of American universities which we have hitherto regarded as somewhat eccentric, offerings in tap dancing, embalming, cosmetology, and janitoring, would become the normal course of study in the community college.

Meanwhile it is supposed that those colleges and universities which now exist, freed of the burden of struggling with the vulgar mass, will go on educating the elite. It is suggested that the preexisting colleges and universities will assist the community colleges by supplying them with teachers and administrators. This is of course fallacious, since the preexisting colleges and universities are not prepared, and apparently do not intend to prepare, to turn out teachers of tap dancing, embalming, cosmetology, and janitoring.

The choice before us is clear: either we should abandon universal suffrage or we should give every citizen the education that is appropriate to free men. We cannot say that we are for democracy and at the same time protest the impossibility of preparing all the citizens to take their part in a democracy. In a democracy the people rule and are ruled in turn for the good life of the whole commu-

nity. If democracy is to work, every citizen must have the education that rulers ought to have. If we do not know how to give every citizen this kind of education, we shall have to find out.

Liberal education is the education appropriate to free men. Since it originated at a time when only the few were rulers, it was originally an aristocratic education. Hence the deeply convinced democrats who wrote the report of the President's Commission assume that you cannot be a democrat and be for liberal education. They most undemocratically assume that the mass of the people are incapable of achieving a liberal education—but they have no evidence for this, because the mass of the people have never had an opportunity to achieve it. It is true that, as large numbers have come into the American educational system, education has deteriorated and liberal education has almost vanished. But this is the result of the indolence and inattention of educators rather than the ignorance and incapacity of students. To teach a boy who does not care about being educated how to read, write, figure, and understand the ideas that have animated mankind is hard; it is far easier to forget that he is going to be a citizen and set him to learning, or to think he is learning, a trade.

We must applaud the notion of education for all; but we must deny that this ideal is achieved by having everybody in school. Everything turns on what is done there. To the extent to which the pupil is acquiring the power of understanding and judgment, to that extent he is being educated. It is impossible that too many people can be educated in this sense. We hear a great deal today about the dangers that will come upon us through the frustration of educated people who have got educated in the expectation that education will get them a better job, and who then fail to get it. But surely this depends on the representations that are made to the young about what education is. If we allow them to believe that education will get them better jobs and encourage them to get educated with this end in view, they are entitled to a sense of frustration if, when they have got the education, they do not get the jobs. But, if we say that they should be educated in order to be citizens, and that everybody, whether he is a ditch-digger or a bank president, should have this education because he is a citizen, then the ditch-digger may still feel frustrated, but not because of his education.

Nor is it possible for a person to have too much liberal education, because it is impossible to have too much understanding and judgment. But it is impossible to learn to understand and judge many important kinds of things in youth. The judgment and understanding of practical affairs can amount to little in the absence of experience with practical affairs. This indicates the limitations of

formal, institutional, liberal education in youth. It indicates, in short, the limitations of a college. Subjects that cannot be understood without experience should not be taught to those who are without experience. Or, if these subjects are taught to those who are without experience, it should be clear that these subjects can be taught only by way of introduction and that their value to the student depends on his continuing to study them as he acquires experience. Such subjects as economics, ethics, politics, history, and literature may be studied by young people, but they cannot be comprehended by them. Young people may enjoy them, and they may get something from them, particularly from literature and history; but they cannot understand them, because the full lessons of these disciplines can be grasped only in maturity. The tragedy in this country is that these subjects are studied in youth and never studied again. Therefore, our college graduates never understand them. Yet these are the subjects which in the present crisis the democratic citizen most urgently needs to understand.

The basic error is that of supposing that a college can give its students all the education they will ever need—that when they receive their degrees they are educated men and women and can stop worrying about getting educated. The effect of this on the college curriculum is to jam it with all kinds of courses representing the assumed needs of adults, without regard to whether or not a young person can comprehend them. A course in business, for example, is useless to a boy or girl who has never been in business. In the American tradition a businessman would never think of taking such a course; yet only to a businessman can such a course have value.

We are concerned here with the college and not with the education of adults; but we see that there is the most intimate relationship between the two. In fact the idea of a college depends upon our understanding this relationship. If we say that education is a process that is to go on chiefly or exclusively in youth, then we are likely to say that the object of the college is, as the cant phrase has it, to prepare for life. If we say that education is a process that must go on through life, then the object of the college is to give the student those habits, ideas, and techniques which he needs to continue to educate himself. Then the object of the college is to prepare the student for more education. In view of the impossibility of understanding the most important subjects in youth, the attempt to do more than initiate the educational process in youth is bound to fail in the most important respects.

I have said that the great problems of our time are the right use of leisure, the performance of the duties of citizenship, and the es-



establishment of a community in this country and the world. The idea of a college that I have attempted to outline solves the problem of the use of our leisure by proposing that it should be used for the continuation of education in adult life. The idea of a college that I have outlined tries to solve the problem of the duties of citizenship by proposing that the college help its students to develop the intellectual powers of understanding and judgment in so far as it is possible to develop them in youth. I must now say a final word about the contribution of the college to the establishment of a community in this country and the world.

The college should have a common curriculum, prescribed for all the students. The common prescribed curriculum is at least a partial answer to those who say that a large fraction of the population cannot achieve a liberal education and must be relegated, for this reason, to vocational training. The elective system deprives the student of one of the greatest contributions that could be made to his education, namely, the contribution of his fellow students. Under a common prescribed course of study the education of the student proceeds through discussion with his fellow students throughout his waking hours; under the elective system it goes on only when he is in class, for it is an accident if he finds another student who is following the same program with whom he can discuss it. The disintegration of the course of study under the elective system, popularly called the "enrichment" of the curriculum, has impoverished the colleges by depriving them of any common intellectual life. Extra-curriculum activities have achieved their exaggerated importance partly because the students have only these activities in common. So an undergraduate of a great university wrote to the student newspaper not long ago and complained that the curriculum of the University had now reached such richness that one student could not talk to another unless they both happened to remember the score of last Saturday's game.


The accomplishments of college students under a common prescribed course of study are amazing to those accustomed to the listless performance that is the normal reaction of the young to the dreary fragments of the elective system. The multiplication of the power of the student is such that those who have seen it are entitled to say that it is possible to give the whole population a liberal education.

We cannot hope to build a community, collegiate, national, or international, without understanding. Of course we may not have a community even if we do have understanding, for men may determine to shoot one another even if they do understand one another.

We cannot hope for agreement on all the important issues of life. We must have faith, however, that understanding will minimize the areas of disagreement and moderate the passions of those who disagree. A common training that leads to a common understanding would appear to be the most promising foundation of a community of any kind. Hence our democratic ancestors established the common schools.

The advance of specialization in the last seventy-five years has brought with it great gains and great losses. The gains are more spectacular, but the losses are more important. The gains have come chiefly in our power over nature. The losses have come in our power to control ourselves and understand one another. Unfortunately we have recently discovered that we cannot be trusted to use our power over nature wisely unless we can control ourselves and understand one another. Specialized education has now reduced us all to the level of students who cannot talk together unless they both happen to remember the score of last Saturday's game. The human community has been split in a billion fragments, which the cults of nationalism, racism, or regionalism are constantly reforming into more and more dangerous combinations.

The responsibilities of the United States are heavier than they have ever been. No one would claim that they are being discharged. The misery and anguish of the world are intensified by that overhanging fear which the United States was the first to let loose upon the earth. There are no simple-minded solutions—the most simple-minded and the most irresponsible is that to which we seem committed, namely, that overwhelming force is the answer to every question. Military power is important if it enables you to do something to somebody else that he cannot do to you at about the same time to about the same extent. The day of military power ended when the Russians exploded their first atomic bomb; for then it became impossible for us to exert such power without suffering irreparable damage ourselves.

Now at last we shall have to think. Now, if we have the power of understanding and judgment, we shall have to show it. Now we must have intelligent citizens who know how to rule and be ruled in turn for the good life of the whole community. Now we must apply ourselves to the task of creating a community in this country and then throughout the world. The education that will help us toward these ends is liberal education, the education of free men. This education is the task of the college. 

Robert M. Hutchins (1899-1977) was President of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1945 and Chancellor from 1945 to 1951. This essay originally appeared in *Measure* 1 (Fall 1950): 363-371. Reprinted in *Engaging the Humanities at the University of Chicago*, ed. Philippe Desan (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

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