

Empowering Citizens for the Twenty-First Century

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Modern American society tends to view higher education as a means unto itself, as a machine whose inputs are students and money and whose outputs are educated graduates ready for work in their chosen fields of study. Instead of viewing the university's task as one of training students in their respective areas of inquiry, however, the emphasis should instead lie upon giving students broad tools of analysis and interpretation that enable them to function effectively across disciplines, regardless of whatever they happen to study while attending the university. The economic competitiveness of the United States in the twenty-first century will greatly depend upon the ability of the secondary and higher education institutions of our country to produce citizens with the ability to observe, reason, analyze, criticize, understand, and act upon information from increasingly diverse sources, using integrated methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis reaching across the social and natural sciences and the humanities. The demands of the twenty first century require the colleges and universities of our country to strive toward the development of globally-minded, fluid, analytical citizens able to effectively function in the context of an increasingly complex, pluralistic world order.

Since the onset of industrial methods of production in Western Europe over two hundred years ago, technology has worked to weave human societies closer and closer together, for better or for worse. These technologies have enabled both astounding leaps in human progress, as well as numerous unspeakable horrors from which we do not stand far removed. Modern technology has enabled Western society to feed, clothe, house, and provide for more and more of its citizens, yet such improvements have also been produced through incredible denigrations of human life, including the displacement and extermination of indigenous American peoples, the institution of African chattel slavery in the United States, and the Euro-American colonization of Africa, Asia, South America, and the Pacific. Can the current level of material and technological prosperity

enjoyed by so many serve as justification for such atrocities? Can our societies somehow work in the future to bring the nations of the “third world” into the material prosperity of the global marketplace? In order to work as students, citizens, and professionals to solve these and other questions of the new century, the educational institutions of this country must gear themselves to train our citizens across a wide span of intellectual disciplines in order to answer these questions in the most comprehensive manner possible.

The same scientific revolution that brought about the onset of industrialization at the beginning of the nineteenth century has confronted modern society with changes that are reshaping it more quickly and fundamentally than is easily understandable. Information and communications technologies, such as laptop computers, cellular phones, ocean-spanning fiber optic lines, satellites, and the internet, have resulted in the decline in influence of even the nation-state, which once stood as the primary social institution on the global level, second only to perhaps the nuclear family. Multinational corporations now operate across national boundaries, increasing the difficulty of the state’s regulation of economic activity and the rise of global terror networks has redefined the basic nature of our enemies away from monolithic nation-states toward well-equipped individuals not linked to any single country. These two cases represent examples of how technology is reshaping the world in profound ways; these changes demand citizens equipped with the ability to meet and respond effectively to these challenges.

By providing our students with a broad, empowering liberal arts education pulling from many diverse areas of social, scientific, and humanistic inquiry, they acquire the breadth of knowledge necessary for the understanding of the increasing complexity of our world. By developing the ability of students to analyze problems on both qualitative and quantitative bases, to continually test and reexamine what they know, we give them the tools to apply their

knowledge to the world around them. By teaching them how to communicate – to discuss, to argue, to write, to debate – we arm them with the crucial capacity of being able to take action based upon their knowledge. The goal of a liberal arts education in the twenty-first century must be to empower all citizens to make observations, draw conclusions, test those conclusions against the ideas of others, and to use their knowledge to make an impact upon the world. From the beginnings of the European scientific revolution onward, this system of liberal scientific inquiry has revolutionized the process of truth-seeking. A broad, liberal arts education represents the key to the richness of this tradition. By providing individuals with these fundamental capacities, a liberal education empowers individuals to act as fully effective citizens within the context of American democracy. The ability of the United States to adapt to the dynamic globalism of the twenty-first century greatly depends on the capacity of our populace to understand and adapt to the fluid context in which they live.

In addition to the social change brought about by the development of new, faster technologies, demographic and cultural changes also demand that individuals be equipped with the ability to respond to these changes. At the onset of the twenty-first century, our society has begun to finally listen to voices that have been silenced throughout our history, the voices of millions of African Americans, women, immigrants, LGBT individuals, and others. Overall, our country has worked continually to broaden the rights and privileges enjoyed by our citizens. Although some may claim that this has to do with some inherent quality of the American people, it only takes place due to the concerted efforts of individuals to understand difference in the face of bigoted adversity. A desire for simple, easy answers to social questions continues to lead too many of our citizens into the trap of single-minded rigidity that prevents the synthesis of innovative interpretations of social questions leading to social change. In order for this diversity

to serve as a source of national strength, as a source of social greatness, our citizens must be exposed to this diversity of individuals and their lives in order to gain a fuller understanding of the richness of manifold human experience. Racism, bigotry, sexism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and homophobia represent forces inimical to the maintenance of a healthy, functional society. Educated citizens must strive to understand the differences that exist between them and others in order for the expansion of individual freedom implicit in American ideals to continue. Only through the inculcation of tolerance for diverse peoples can we hope to build the bridges of understanding necessary for successful, meaningful citizenship in an era of increasing national diversity and global integration.

Towards the end of the twentieth century and at the dawn of the twenty-first, the establishment of global communication networks has worked to radically alter the nature of physical space on this planet through the progression of globalization. To face the challenge posed by this Information Revolution, American institutions of secondary higher education must maximally strive to provide our citizens with the skills they need to face these challenges and triumph over them. The challenge posed to our country in this century is not only to produce highly-educated doctors, lawyers, and college professors. The challenge, rather, is to empower the bulk of the American public with the tools of a liberal arts education. By empowering both laypeople and professionals, we can work to ensure the continued economic competitiveness of the United States in the global economy of the twenty-first century.