

Reform Must Begin with K-12

Jeffrey Hart

The question before us here is whether higher education can be mass education. To put the question another way: At what point does the adjective “mass” make a joke of the adjective “higher”? Everyone here knows that intelligence is distributed throughout the general population on a bell-shaped curve. Therefore there are theoretical limits on the validity of distributing “higher” education along that curve. At some point, we would be fooling ourselves.

The desire to push higher education further and further along that bell-shaped curve is no doubt one source of the adulteration of higher education. The university industry does need bodies with which to stuff the classrooms. I myself am not sure about where on the bell-shaped curve useful effort fades away. Is it possible to discuss Plato’s *Symposium* with students who have an I.Q. of, say, 100? Maybe it is. Doing so might be an interesting experience. But how about I.Q.’s of 90, or 80?

At some point along the curve, wisdom would seem to counsel a tilt more toward a vocationally oriented program than toward what we normally call “higher” education. But I think higher education today is subject to dilutions that come from a variety of sources other than the “fit” of I.Q. with subject matter. I am a professor of English at Dartmouth, which is supposed to be one of the better institutions of higher education in this country. In those surveys that keep coming out, Dartmouth usually ranks something like sixth. The ranking goes, usually, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and somewhere, then Dartmouth. These rankings do not mean a great deal. They are in the area of apples and oranges. But my point is that Dartmouth is thought to be a pretty good institution.

And, indeed, students admitted do have combined SAT scores well above 1200. Yet the astounding fact is how little these entering freshmen know. The even worse and more astounding fact is how little they will know when they receive their Dartmouth liberal arts degree. As an institution, Dartmouth—and it is not the most egregious offender—does not require its students to become acquainted with the books without which one is intellectually naked.

In the year when Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* was causing a healthy fuss, I decided to spend a couple of class hours in my freshman English course discussing this book. (We were reading Milton, Frost, and Hemingway, and the students wrote eight or ten essays—my section being whimsically

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traditional.) The students read Bloom, and came in for the discussion. I began by asking them what they thought of the book. Well, they hated it. They thought it a rotten snobby book. They fully understood that Bloom was attacking *them*. Bloom was saying that they are *ignorant*.

Well, I asked them, who can say something about the Mayflower Compact? Silence reigned. Who can say something about James Madison? Nothing. About John Locke? Nahh. Patrick Henry? Nope. John Calhoun? Who's that? In fact the only student who could say anything at all, though not much, about such subjects was a young man of Chinese extraction who had been educated in South Korea.

I have read recently in the press about a poll conducted under the supervision of a professor at Penn State. A survey of some 3,000 students in the Ivy League revealed an abyss of ignorance. Many such students did not know that Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence; did not know the names of four Supreme Court Justices; could not name their two home-state Senators. The Penn State professor amazedly concluded that these Ivy League students could not pass the exam required of applicants for United States citizenship.

Dartmouth does have some vague requirements, easily fulfilled, but institutionally Dartmouth makes no effort to ensure that its students know the books and other human artifacts that constitute a minimum liberal arts education.

But Dartmouth is not the main problem. Judging by my experience with entering high-SAT freshmen, higher education has an enormous problem with American grade schools and secondary schools. Sometimes I feel like that cartoon character from my childhood. He strolls off a cliff and walks serenely on air, until he looks down and realizes that he is in fact walking with nothing below him. Then he crashes to the ground. We in higher education have nothing below us. There is no there there.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., spoke recently at Dartmouth, and said that in his opinion the universities would get over their current silly season, but that he was enormously worried about grade school and secondary school education. The necessary and important work just is not being done there. Thomas Sowell's recent and very important book *Inside American Education*, which received an intellectually dishonest review by John Brademas in the *New York Times*, carefully and responsibly fills in the dismal picture. Class hours deploring nuclear war and homophobia are much less work than teaching long division, history, or sentence structure.

Certainly everyone without a financial or political stake in the school system supports the idea of "choice" or vouchers. But the mere privacy of private schools is not going to solve the problem. The rot has spread to many elite private schools.

The situation seems to be even worse than these remarks indicate. I have been advised that it would do little good to sit down and design a sensible

high-school course on, say, "Introduction to American History." There exist decent texts, and of course the obvious assigned readings. But the problem is that our secondary school teachers are not equipped to deal with such elementary materials. They produce students who do not know anything, because the teachers do not know anything.

What I am hearing from people who know how bad the situation is are remedies such as the following:

1. Work hard at the local and state level to improve education in the grades kindergarten through twelve. Try to change the rules so that teacher certification requires an academic college major in a field of substance—history, English, math, science—rather than an "education" major. Teachers should come to the classroom with *something* to teach, rather than a background in teaching *methods*.
2. We must have grade-level testing on substance. Probably—despite our beloved federalism—this should be a national test of knowledge and skills at each grade level.
3. Brown University president Vartan Gregorian, in conversation with me, had a promising idea, but so far nothing has come of it. President Gregorian thought that the Ivy League and other prestigious schools should administer their own entrance examination as a supplement to the SAT. Such an entrance exam would test historical and literary substance. Reading lists might be agreed upon. Since many students desperately want to attend these prestigious schools, such an exam would exert pressure back down the line in secondary schools to prepare them to do so.
4. A political fight must be waged to break the lock of the teachers' colleges on the requirements for teacher certification and promotion. What is taught in the teachers' colleges is vacuous and has little to do with education. This fight can be pressed energetically at the local, state, and national level. The fact is that the bad news about K-12 is becoming widespread among citizens of every political persuasion. A mobilized citizenry can be much more powerful than the organized education monopolies. This is a nonpartisan issue, and cuts across all of the usual lines of disagreement.