

# A Future for the Liberal Arts, If...

*Jacques Barzun*

*Editor's Note:* The following is the text of a letter written by Jacques Barzun in January of 1994 to a journalist in Texas.

I welcome your request for a copy of my remarks at the first annual meeting of the American Academy for Liberal Education.<sup>1</sup> There should have been a tape and transcript of my *extempore* remarks, but it seems that, during the technician's momentary absence from the room, that particular tape was stolen. Whether this implies suppression of my views by a ruthless opponent or a flattering gesture by an enthusiastic fan is an open question; what is certain is that I cannot fulfill your wish except by an improvised résumé of the couple of points I tried to make.

They were hinted at in the suspensive title: *A Future for the Liberal Arts, If...* The "if" referred to two conditions, without which, I am sure, the future will be as bleak as the present, if not bleaker. It is all very well to gather together at conferences batches of people who are "interested in," "concerned about," or "dedicated to" the liberal arts, but, when these people leave the hotel or conference center, the state of affairs has not been changed one iota. Those who return to campuses go back to their day-to-day business empty of any new plan, or even of a single new idea, that might revivify the ideal they have been cheering at the conference.

This has gone on for nearly a hundred years, ever since William James and Woodrow Wilson spoke out against what they saw as the start of erosion in the liberal arts within the American college. No need to go into causes and consequences here; let me only sketch the two *IFs*.

The first is this. There will be no future for the liberal arts unless those who profess to be concerned make their case on grounds that have so far been totally neglected, namely, that a course of liberal studies is intensely practical. Forget about educating the whole man, enriching the mind, and providing elements for self-cultivation during leisure time. Everybody has heard these thought-clichés a thousand times, and everybody no doubt believes them. But they are by now mere pieties, like those of the Sunday churchgoer whose Christianity on weekdays is invisible. For proof of their futility, notice what the medical and law schools regularly do about admissions: in their talk and print they express a desire for "a good liberal background," but the pre-med applicant whose record is chock-full of chemistry and biology and the would-be lawyer who has majored in economics or accounting are invariably preferred.

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What, then, is the practicality of the liberal arts? (Skeptics will add “in a world of science, a world of global this and of technological that.”) They are practical because they develop general intelligence. In truth the phrase is redundant: intelligence is general; its essence is to work its way out of difficulty and take action. Precisely “in a world of” whatever you name—rapid change, instant communication, glut of information—intelligence is the prime requisite, and today, everywhere, it is flagrantly lacking.

It is needed from the top to the bottom of our society, from the smallest-scale business or professional firm to the biggest and richest, through every level of government, in non-profit and charitable institutions, and especially in the morass of public-school and college instruction and administration. Wherever we look, we find people in charge who are baffled, incompetent, often stupidly dishonest, and who, after manifest failure, are replaced by their own kind; all this despite the fact that by current standards all are “highly qualified.”

Why the paradox? Because they “qualify” by showing that they have been trained to take seriously and to perform some one particular thing, a thing well laid out in the textbook jargon of the moment and ably taught in both the regular professional schools and the innumerable programs that “prepare” for even more specialized jobs. The best students work hard and get high marks; they have been made into expert routineers.

Those who, once out of school, use their imagination and see beyond what they have been taught either give up and try something else, or live lives of quiet desperation, or get into trouble and, as likely as not, end up in jail. Meanwhile great industries and institutions collapse, or, if they manage to survive, do so despite internal discontent and the anger of the public outside—doctors, lawyers, judges, the police, school teachers, academics, CEOs and their aides, bureaucrats, Congressmen all are objects of hatred and contempt. In the wings, but not notably helpful, are clever, self-appointed, self-employed men and women who make a living as “consultants”—coaches who charge high fees to show the fully qualified how to do their job, from designing a work plan and choosing help to writing a readable memo and “speaking friendly” to the janitor and “impressively” to the board of directors.

Now the only remedy for conditions such as these is the use of intelligence. Not psychological tricks to “evoke loyalty” or hollow management “concepts” like “strategic thinking,” but the endlessly varied use of intelligence. For every situation is in some way unique—and so is every director, colleague, employee, or customer. He or she or it must be “addressed” on the spot in a particular way, a way that *fits*. No textbook, no consultant, no guru can supply a formula. Intelligence alone finds the right word, answer, arrangement, solution.

This conclusion brings us to the second *IF*. A liberal arts curriculum—assuming to begin with that it is coherent and sustained through four years of college—will develop intelligence only if the component subjects: English, literature, history, philosophy, a foreign language, one or more social sciences, mathematics, and physical science are all taught in a “liberal” way, that is, as humanities.

What does this mean? It means, first, that the teacher is a humanist (yes, even the scientist and the mathematician), and, next, that the lectures, readings, and exercises are not designed, as they are mostly at present, to make professionals in each subject. The curse of the liberal arts has been that, on pretext of scholarliness, the students are treated in every class, hour after hour, as future professors of literature or anthropology or mathematics or some other discipline. Liberal teaching is the exact opposite—and much harder for the teacher: subjects must be presented (and mastered) both for their substance and for what they tell us about the ways in which the human mind has faced difficulties, practical, intellectual, and emotional. The conditions and the results of human effort the world over must be brought out of the readings in social and political theory, in history and philosophy, in the sciences and their history, in literature and the arts. Carried into the present, this survey points out what is to be done in the world today, with and for the endless variety of its national and individual units.

In giving such a perspective, a truly liberal education, far from being self-regarding and elitist, is “all-purpose” and democratic. It sweeps away prejudice and provincialism; it inspires and directs the mind to cope with workaday predicaments, while it also supplies the good things promised in the usual clichés. It can even accomplish the miracle of eradicating the mutual disrespect among the professions and disciplines.

But, it will be asked, how does this ability to deal with particular situations and individuals come out of a program whose whole tendency is generality? The answer is the same as that which one would spontaneously give to the question how does practicing scales on the piano give the ability to play a particular piece, so different from scales? Or again, how do physical exercises that develop the whole body indiscriminately enable the athlete to score in a particular game? That answer is simply that general training makes ready and puts at command all the resources of the person. Besides, in studying the liberal arts, the flexing of the mental muscles has been associated with particulars from the outset, and with so many varied particulars that the fatal habit of using formulas for all occasions is ruled out. In its stead, there comes into play that residual adaptability which marks the limber athlete and the intelligent human being.

## Note

1. The Academy is a newly formed accrediting agency for liberal-arts colleges and for humanities programs within universities. The meeting took place on 2 March 1993 in New York City.