Essay on the new book 'Beyond the University'

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In 1869, Charles W. Eliot, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote an essay in The Atlantic Monthly entitled “The New Education.” He began with a question on the mind of many American parents: “What can I do with my boy?” Parents who were able to afford the best available training and did not think their sons suited for the ministry of a learned profession, Eliot indicated, sought a practical education, suitable for business “or any other active calling”; they did not believe that the traditional course of study adopted by colleges and universities 50 years earlier was now relevant. Less than a year later, Eliot became president of Harvard. Among the reforms he initiated were an expansion of the undergraduate curriculum and substantial improvement in the quality and methods of instruction in the law school and the medical school.

The debate between advocates of traditional liberal learning and partisans of a more “useful” education, Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, reminds us, has deep roots in American soil. In Beyond the University, [1] (Yale University Press) he provides an elegant and informative survey of the work of important thinkers, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, W.E.B DuBois, Jane Addams, William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, who, despite significant differences, embraced liberal education because it “fit so well with the pragmatic ethos that linked inquiry, innovation, and self-discovery.” At a time in which liberal learning is under assault, Roth draws on the authority of these heavyweights to argue that “it is more crucial than ever that we not abandon the humanistic frameworks of education in favor of narrow, technical forms of teaching intended to give quick, utilitarian results.”

Most of Beyond the University is devoted to claims by iconic intellectuals about the practical virtues of liberal learning, which Roth endorses (with occasional qualifications). Exhibiting a “capacious and open-ended” understanding of educational “usefulness,” Roth indicates, Thomas Jefferson opted for free inquiry at his university in Charlottesville, Va., to equip citizens in the new republic to think for themselves and take responsibility for their actions. Ralph Waldo Emerson resisted education as mere job training; but, he indicated, it should impart knowledge to develop individuals willing and able to use what we now call “critical thinking” to challenge the status quo.

Acknowledging that different people need different kinds of educational opportunities, W.E.B. DuBois nonetheless insisted that the final product of training “must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man.” Liberal learning, Jane Addams emphasized, inculcates “affectionate interpretation,” which prepares individuals not only to defend themselves against those with different points of view, but to empathize with others and act in concert with them. And John Dewey, the most influential philosopher of education in the 20 century, looked to a liberal education, according to Roth, to help students learn the lessons of experience and experience, by trying things out and assessing the results, by themselves and with others, and, then, if appropriate, revising their behavior.

Roth’s approach – a reliance on the authority of seminal thinkers – is not without problems. As he knows, the nature of higher education – and its perceived roles and responsibilities – has changed dramatically since colleges focused on liberal learning. In 1910, only 9 percent of students received a high school diploma; few of them went on to college. These days, about 40 percent of young men and women get a postsecondary degree. Undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees, moreover, are now required, far more than were in the days of Emerson and Eliot, for entry into the most prestigious, and high-paying, professions. Jamie Merisots, president of the Lumina Foundation, is surely right when he asserts that “to deny that job skills development is one of the key purposes of higher education is increasingly untenable” – and that integration of specific skills into the curriculum can help graduates get work and perform their assigned tasks well.

Roth does not specify how liberal learning might “pull different skills together in project-oriented classes.” Nor does he adequately address “the new sort of criticism” directed at liberal learning. A liberal arts education, many critics now claim, does not really prepare students to love virtue, be good citizens, or recognize competence in any field. As Roth acknowledges, general education, distribution requirements, and free electives are not effective antidotes to specialization; they have failed to help establish common academic goals for students. And, perhaps most disturbingly, doubt has now been cast on the proposition that the liberal arts are the best, and perhaps the only, pathway to postsecondary degree. Undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees, moreover, are now required, far more than were in the days of Emerson and Eliot, for entry into the most prestigious, and high-paying, professions. Jamie Merisots, president of the Lumina Foundation, is surely right when he asserts that “to deny that job skills development is one of the key purposes of higher education is increasingly untenable” – and that integration of specific skills into the curriculum can help graduates get work and perform their assigned tasks well.

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President Roth may well be right that liberal learning “will continue to be a fundamental part of higher education” if (and, he implies, only if) it rebalances critical thinking and practical exploration. The key question, it seems to me, is how to rebalance, while preserving the essence of liberal learning, at a time in which higher education in general and, most especially, the humanities are under a sustained attack by cost-conscious advocates of an increasingly narrow vocationalism, who are certain to be unpersuaded by the testimony of long-dead intellectuals. The task, moreover, is all the more daunting, moreover, because it will have to be carried out by proponents and practitioners of the liberal arts, many of whom, unlike Michael Roth, are now in despair, in denial, or have lost faith.

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