GENERAL EDUCATION IN A FREE SOCIETY

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Report of the Harvard Committee

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

JAMES BRYANT CONANT

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THE COMMITTEE ON THE OBJECTIVES OF A GENERAL EDUCATION IN A FREE SOCIETY

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Introduction

The war has precipitated a veritable downpour of books and articles dealing with education. In particular the future of the liberal arts colleges has been a subject of widespread discussion both within and without the academic walls. There is hardly a university or college in the country which has not had a committee at work in these war years considering basic educational questions and making plans for drastic revamping of one or more curricula. Nor have larger group activities been missing. The Association of American Colleges has not only sponsored the publication of a book on the liberal arts but has also arranged important conferences dealing with various phases of college education. With this background in mind, the reader may wonder why the report of one more university committee should be presented to the public in book form. He may well ask, what merit, if any, resides in this particular treatment of a familiar subject – collegiate education?

The answer lies in the fact that, in spite of its origins, the book is not primarily concerned with collegiate education. Rather, it is an inquiry into the problems of general education in both school and college by a Committee largely composed of members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, – in short, men of distinction in special fields of learning. In other words, the report of the Harvard Committee on "The Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society," which is printed here in full, presents a view of the total American educational scene. The recommendations as to changes in the Harvard College curriculum (which in due course will be debated by the Faculty) were arrived at only after the Committee had spent months examining the entire problem of providing adequate education for all American youth. Therefore, in one sense this is a report of experts, in another sense a report of an impartial jury of laymen determined to find the facts.

That a group of men whose lives had hitherto been devoted

to university affairs should take great pains and spend much time investigating the current educational situation in the United States is, I believe, without precedent. That they were joined in the enterprise by colleagues from the Faculty of Education who knew the schools from long experience makes the case no less exceptional. The first four chapters of this book are, therefore, the product of a study unique in the history of American education.

A further unusual if not unique feature of the report is evident if one considers that the document represents a unanimity of opinion not based on compromise between divergent views. And when one adds the comment that the Committee was appointed from both the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Faculty of Education, such unanimity is recognized as not only exceptional but of high significance. To one who has listened for years with considerable dismay to the "educators and school men" belaboring the "professors" and vice versa, this unanimity seems like the dawn of a welcome day. The writer of the foreword is obviously a biased witness, but to him the first four chapters are a heartening sign that college professors and school teachers and administrators can come to understand each other's difficulties if they will put their minds upon the task. For I think the members of the Committee would be the first to say that if, as is often the case with academic committees, they had been forced to write a report after a few months of deliberation, both unanimity and understanding of the nature of the problem would have been conspicuous by their absence. The title of this book might well be "A *Study* of American Education."

The letter of transmittal mentions briefly the methods by which the study was conducted. But a casual reader may easily miss an important point if he fails to realize that the Committee was not only considering the problem for nearly three years, but spent the equivalent of many weeks of eight-hour working days in its investigations and deliberations. The assistance of numerous collaborators of wide experience and high standing, and the consultations with many school and college men who came to Cambridge required, of course, a budget for expenses considerably

beyond that which one normally expects a faculty committee to spend. It has turned out that the $60,000 appropriated by the Harvard Corporation for the expenses of the Committee was a fairly accurate measure of the monetary cost of the undertaking. The cost in terms of the time and energy of the members, while strictly speaking incalculable, is obviously of a different order of magnitude. Indeed, it is such cost that usually makes academic enterprises of this sort prohibitively expensive. But in the case at hand, the importance and the urgency of the problem appeared to warrant what was planned.

Readers of the document who share the writer's enthusiasm for the outcome will recognize the debt which Harvard owes to the twelve men whose names appear on the letter of transmittal, and above all to the Chairman, Professor Paul H. Buck, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Those who are familiar with committees will recognize the hand of genius in this work, for without a presiding officer who is both effective and understanding no such labor can ever be brought to a successful conclusion.

Potential readers of this book may be divided into three classes: educators concerned with school problems, educators concerned with university and college problems (and I include in this category all professors of arts, letters and professional subjects whether or not they bridle at the designation), and laymen. The third group hardly needs to be reminded that a book — even a book which is an educational report — is designed to be read as a whole. With the school and college teachers and administrators, the case is somewhat different. Each group will be concerned primarily with the relevance of the report to their particular problems. Therefore, I may be permitted perhaps to issue a solemn warning: any judgment based on an incomplete or fragmentary reading is not only unfair to the authors, but almost certain to be false. The book must be taken as a unit. The fifth chapter dealing with the problems of one particular college, for example, may have significance for other colleges, but it is almost certain to be misunderstood if taken apart from the first four chapters; similarly with chapter four which deals with some aspects of secondary education.

There will be some who open the book with an initial prejudice against the contents derived from the title. "General education," they may exclaim, "what's that? I'm interested only in liberal education – that's what the country needs." For the use of the current phrase "general education" instead of "liberal education," the writer is ready to take his share of blame. Shortly after the Committee had been appointed (in January, 1943, to be exact) I reported to the Board of Overseers of Harvard University as follows:

". . . I am taking the liberty of appointing a University Committee on 'The Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society.' This committee, composed of members of several faculties including Arts and Sciences and Education, I hope will consider the problem at both the school and the college level. For surely the most important aspect of this whole matter is the general education of the great majority of each generation – not the comparatively small minority who attend our four-year colleges. . . .

"The heart of the problem of a general education is the continuance of the liberal and humane tradition. Neither the mere acquisition of information nor the development of special skills and talents can give the broad basis of understanding which is essential if our civilization is to be preserved. No one wishes to disparage the importance of being 'well informed.' But even a good grounding in mathematics and the physical and biological sciences, combined with an ability to read and write several foreign languages, does not provide a sufficient educational background for citizens of a free nation. For such a program lacks contact with both man's emotional experience as an individual and his practical experience as a gregarious animal. It includes little of what was once known as 'the wisdom of the ages,' and might nowadays be described as 'our cultural pattern.' It includes no history, no art, no literature, no philosophy. Unless the educational process includes *at each level of maturity* some continuing contact with those fields in which value judgments are of prime importance, it must fall far short of the ideal. The student in high school, in college and in graduate school must be

concerned, in part at least, with the words 'right' and 'wrong' in both the ethical and the mathematical sense. Unless he feels the import of those general ideas and aspirations which have been a deep moving force in the lives of men, he runs the risk of partial blindness.

"There is nothing new in such educational goals; what is new in this century in the United States is their application to a system of universal education. Formal education based on 'book learning' was once only the possession of a professional class; in recent times it became more widely valued because of social implications. The restricted nature of the circle possessing certain linguistic and historical knowledge greatly enhanced the prestige of this knowledge. 'Good taste' could be standardized in each generation by those who knew. But, today, we are concerned with a general education — a liberal education — not for the relatively few, but for a multitude."

Whether or not one wishes to equate the terms "liberal education" and "general education" at the college stage, the latter phrase has advantages when one examines in a comprehensive way the manifold activities of American schools and colleges. If the Committee had been concerned only with Harvard College, the title might have read "The Objectives of a Liberal Education." A minor annoyance, to be sure, would have arisen quickly, for many specialists in various faculties would have been ready to testify eloquently to the fact that their specialty if properly taught was in and by itself a liberal education. No such claim has as yet been made in terms of a general education. But quite apart from this quarrel over the meaning of a much used and much abused adjective, any serious consideration of the problems of American schools would have been difficult for a university group designated as a committee on liberal education. The reasons lie deep in the history of American education in this century and are evidence of the cleavage between "educators" and "professors" to which I have referred already. Phrases become slogans and slogans fighting words in education no less than in theology.

Therefore, I may express the hope that the reader of this book

will drop, as far as possible, his educational prejudices for the moment and forget the overtones of many hackneyed phrases as he explores through the eyes of a group of university professors – scientists, classicists, historians, philosophers – the present status of the American educational system. I hope he will proceed with them sympathetically as they consider ways and means by which a great instrument of American democracy can both shape the future and secure the foundations of our free society.

JAMES BRYANT CONANT

Cambridge
June 11, 1945

Letter of Transmittal

PRESIDENT JAMES BRYANT CONANT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Sir:

In the spring of 1943 you appointed a University Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society, with members drawn from the faculties of Arts and Sciences and of Education. Your instructions to the committee were as expansive as its name was long. We were urged to consider the problem of general education in both the school and the college. We were cautioned that the general education of the great majority of each generation in the high schools was vastly more important than that of the comparatively small minority who attend our four-year colleges. You advised us that the educational process falls short of its ideal unless it includes at each stage of maturity some continuing contact with liberal and humane studies. The goals of these studies, you said, had been the topic of prolonged discussion; so much so that the peculiar character of the problem was in danger of being missed. "There is nothing new," you asserted, "in such educational goals; what is new in this century in the United States is their application to a system of universal education."

In short, we were directed not so much to make recommendations for general education in Harvard College as to venture into the vast field of American educational experience in quest of a concept of general education that would have validity for the free society which we cherish. This concept if found would be a true basis upon which to build such special contribution as education in Harvard College could make to American democracy.

The report we herewith submit to you should be read in the light of this, its main purpose. We hope it will provoke discussion and that it will lead to action. We would suggest that the recommendations for Harvard College have little meaning in themselves if divorced from the earlier chapters which deal with

background, theory, and philosophy. The report stands or falls as a unit.

We hope that our colleagues in reading through the report from beginning to end will share in the experience of mutual self-education which the committee itself underwent. Whatever else the report may be, it certainly is the result of joint effort. It is the product of twelve men living in close association for two years, grappling coöperatively with a complex and stubborn problem of major importance. The committee regularly met as a whole once a week, frequently more often, and periodically secluded itself for sessions of several days' duration. We maintained a central office into which memoranda poured and where daily groups smaller than the whole committee met informally to discuss our problems. We sought advice both from our colleagues in the university and from persons of various walks of life and sections of the country. We brought consultants to Cambridge as individuals and in groups. We operated through subcommittees and by conferences. All in all, we tapped so far as was in our power the rich and varied thinking and experience of American education. This procedure was made possible by a very generous grant from the President and Fellows of Harvard College for the expenses of the committee.

In emphasizing the joint nature of the report, we must also call attention to the unanimity of opinion reached by the committee. It should not go unmentioned that twelve men, whose teaching and scholarly interests lie in some phase of *special* education, could by this process of intimate collective study achieve so common an understanding of the basic philosophy and content of *general* education. The committee agreed on all matters of primary importance. In the application of general principle to practice the committee was able to resolve minor disagreement by compromise. On a few matters of minor detail there remained some unresolved difference of opinion.

Finally, we should like to remind you of the words you used to the Board of Overseers in your *Annual Report* of January 11, 1943, in describing your purpose in appointing the committee. You then wrote: "The primary concern of American education

today is not the development of the appreciation of the 'good life' in young gentlemen born to the purple. It is the infusion of the liberal and humane tradition into our entire educational system. Our purpose is to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans and are free."

You will find this theme dominant in the report now submitted to you. Such a concept of general education is the imperative need of the American educational system. It alone can give cohesion to our efforts and guide the contribution of our youth to the nation's future.

Respectfully submitted,

PAUL H. BUCK, *Chairman*
JOHN H. FINLEY, JR., *Vice-Chairman*
RAPHAEL DEMOS
LEIGH HOADLEY
BYRON S. HOLLINSHEAD
WILBUR K. JORDAN
IVOR A. RICHARDS
PHILLIP J. RULON
ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER
ROBERT ULICH
GEORGE WALD
BENJAMIN F. WRIGHT

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In preparing this report the committee consulted many colleagues. Some generously served on one of the following subcommittees: English and Literature, Mathematics and Science, Social Studies, and the Special Problems in the Higher Education of Women. Others met with the committee at its regular meetings.

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