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## The Meaning of the Baccalaureate

By Margaret A. Miller



When I was working for the state coordinating board in Virginia, a board member asked me what it meant to get a baccalaureate degree. The question was simple, direct, clear, and utterly unanswerable. So after stuttering and mumbling for a while, I retreated to my office to find three historic pronouncements on what a college education does:

Thomas Jefferson proclaimed the purpose of an education to be the development of "a knowing

head and an honest heart."

Mitchell Fromstein, president of Manpower, Inc., at a Wingspread conference a number of years ago, said he was looking for graduates with flexibility, the capacity to work with others, technological competence, global awareness, competence in a second language, and civility.

Harold Macmillan informed students at Oxford that they wouldn't have any useful skills when they graduated, but that they would know "when a man was talking rot" to them.

But the problem of what it means to be an educated person continued to haunt me. As I see it, the question is really three-fold:

- What are the characteristics of an educated person?
- What purposes do those characteristics serve?
- Who cares?

### **What are the characteristics of an educated person?**

People have been pondering this question for millennia, but at no time was it more hashed over than during the 19th century. And, despite the fact that they were talking about, and to, an extremely homogeneous group of people compared to the students in an American college or university today, the skills and knowledge the great 19th-century thinkers talk about are familiar. The general goals of higher education that these writers describe prefigure many general descriptions of the mental tools with which we should equip students to prepare them for the 21st century.

Consider the National Education Goal for collegiate education: Graduates should be able to "communicate, solve problems and think critically" at a high level of skill. These have been the remarkably constant aims of education over time.

### **A Capacity to Communicate:**

Rhetorical skill has been one of the most important marks of an educated person since the time of the Greeks. John Stuart Mill is the most eloquent writer on this subject. In *On Liberty*, he discussed the ability to engage in "free and equal discussion," which for him was the necessary condition of any person's capacity for improvement and self-correction throughout a lifetime.

What Mill called the "morality of public discussion" included the calm self-discipline to argue according to the rules of logic; to consider all facts and arguments, even those that tell against your case; to listen carefully to what is said and to represent it accurately in your responses; and to be willing to change in response to what you hear.

### **Problem Solving:**

Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of presidents, said of his Harvard education that, if he had it to do over again, he would study only French, German, Spanish and mathematics. He was looking for communication and problem-solving tools.

Adams discovered, when he began his life as a professional man on the verge of the 20th century, that his collegiate education had not provided him with the skills he needed; he said he was better prepared for the year one by his education than for the year 1900.

Contemporary students learn the problem-solving skills they need when they have a chance to use them to solve a real problem. Adams had to wait until the [start](#) of his career before that kind of education began for him.

### **Critical Thinking:**

John Henry Newman described "the formation of mind" as a habit of fitting new knowledge into what we already know, which we then adjust. That implies a set of principles that organizes our knowledge as it grows.

When we learn, we take information in and fit it into our [existing](#) mental structures; when we learn deeply, we adjust those structures as necessary to accommodate the new information.

A capacity for critical thinking is, if you will, the mental muscle we develop in the study of a variety of fields.

But critical thinking is not just a matter of mental skills. Cardinal Newman thought that true "formation of mind" could not occur without broad knowledge, a sense of the cultural and historical landscape and one's place in it. For an American living at the end of the 20th century, this includes understanding where one fits into a large and very complex cultural and historical American picture, and where that fits, in turn, into a larger and even more complex global picture.

So, in short, a college education should equip students with the ability to communicate and to solve problems, and it should help them develop the discipline and knowledge that will form the basis for a lifetime of learning.

But why are these things necessary? Why not just teach students to do jobs? The men I have quoted all shaped their cultures, as well as being shaped by them, because they had to a remarkable degree the qualities that they attribute to an educated person. All college graduates should be capable of shaping, rather than simply being at the effect of, the changes that will permeate their lives.

At a recent retreat of the American Association for Higher Education staff, we pushed ourselves to explain why we cared about the improvement of higher education. The answer, we decided, was because we cared about students and their development. But why did we care about those things? Because we wanted American colleges and universities to educate students for their responsibilities as individuals, as citizens and as productive contributors to society.

For me the chief value of my education has been delight. I love the perspective that comes from seeing where I fit into a larger picture - astronomical, historical, biological and social. I love the strength that comes with learning new things and using my mental muscle. I love the sense of expansion and [connection](#) that comes from seeing and hearing things not accessible to my own eyes and ears, and in having lifelong conversations with people long dead or far away.

But we also are citizens, and our ability to act rationally in that capacity is one of the hopeful premises on which democratic [citizenship](#) is based. This ability includes, but is not limited to, the capacity to vote intelligently. It also includes the disposition and skills to balance individual good with the responsibilities that we have to our communities.

The original goal of the colonial college was to provide moral education for society's leaders. As Robert Putnam has most recently observed in his book, *Bowling Alone*, we are all much poorer when we lose a sense of civic responsibility. What we lose especially is the enlarged sense of self that comes from understanding that we are a part of something beyond the self.

And that sense of civic responsibility does more than simply promote the good of the community: The capacities to communicate and solve problems are also our best hope of ensuring harmony among communities. In *Three Guineas*, written in 1938, Virginia Woolf addressed the question, "If I want to stop war, where should I donate three guineas?" Her answer: to a college.

When asked why they go to college, most students put "getting a good job" high on their list. And indeed, insofar as higher education enables people to use their mental strengths in useful work, it contributes both to their good and to the good of society.

But are the tools I have mentioned - the skills of communication, problem solving, critical thinking - really what's needed in the workforce today? And if they are, do colleges provide them?

Many colleges, and many majors, today focus on providing their students with an education that prepares them to do a specific job. But consider this: The Bureau of Labor tells us that a person should plan on having between five and seven careers in a lifetime. All people coming out of college need the advanced capacity to do something in particular, but they also need general intellectual skills and dispositions.

In Virginia, we interviewed a group of manufacturers about the characteristics of the people they wanted colleges and universities to send them. They were glad to be able to count on the technical competence of the engineering graduates they hired. They were a little less certain that they could count on general workplace skills, such as the capacity to use the near-ubiquitous new technologies. And they were not at all convinced they could assume that the college graduates they hired would have the communication and problem-solving skills to move from task to task, job to job, and from group to group.

Finally, since engineering knowledge these days has a half-life of less than five years, they wanted graduates who were prepared to continue to learn new things and who possessed the curiosity that compels them to do so. These were the skills and dispositions that they considered to be in shortest supply.

A baccalaureate education should provide these skills, but too rarely does. Most American colleges and universities still run on an agrarian calendar with industrial production methods, and the product is much as one would expect it to be.

But Mitchell Fromstein tells us that higher education needs to change, ironically, back to something closer to the ideal articulated by the people I have been quoting. Even temporary workers (most of us, soon) need to be independent thinkers rather than compliant order-takers in the new global economy. Practically speaking, in the post-industrial age - the information age - human beings are no longer "hands" but "heads."

This brings me to my final question: Who cares what the undergraduate degree actually certifies about a graduate? Increasingly, everyone has choices to make, for which that information would be useful. In choosing which college graduates to hire, captains of industry (to borrow the 19th-century term) could use information about what skills and abilities are certified by a given diploma and which diplomas ensure that the bearer has the intellectual nimbleness this age requires. Legislators and state policy makers, who need to choose which higher education initiatives to support, might find helpful an understanding of the kind of learning that is likely to result from each. Students and parents, facing rising costs and a bewildering variety of institutions, might prefer to choose among them on the basis of what their graduates know and can do, instead of on other bases such as reputation, price tag, first impressions and hunches.

A college or university should define clearly, succinctly and publicly its criteria and standards for graduate attainment. It should organize the

resources it has, and everything it does, to generate as effectively and efficiently as possible the kind of learning I have described. And it should gather and communicate evidence about the curricular and co-curricular strategies and pedagogies it has implemented [to enable](#) that learning, as well as the results of those strategies.

Higher education's "dearest friends and severest critics" are telling us that we are not holding ourselves to a high enough standard in ensuring that their sons and daughters are prepared fully for the fullest kind of life. We cannot continue to disappoint them if we are to have their continuing support.

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