

# Selected Quotations about the Goals and Contexts of General Education in the United States

This is a work in progress, a compilation of quotations from my recent, incomplete, and somewhat random readings on the aims of general education, the history of general education, and the constraints on achieving the aims of general education programs in the American college and university today. It is offered as a background resource to members of the General Education Commission, not as a draft of anything that would become part of a report or an official statement of the commission.

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## I. Goals of general education

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1. acquaintance with several and mastery of at least one method of inquiry; understanding of techniques of reason and analysis.
2. an understanding of languages: one's own, foreign, that of computers
3. an understanding of contemporary issues and their historical, social, political, and economic background
4. an understanding of relationships between people and people, between people and nature, and between people and their occupations.

*Ernest A. Lynton, "A Curriculum for Tomorrow's World" 89*

"Education should aim to cultivate humanity. "Three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity in today's world. First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions – for living what, following Socrates, we may call 'the examined life.' This means a life that accepts no belief as authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification. Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgment....

"Citizens who cultivate their humanity need, further, an ability to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern. The world around us is inescapably international....Cultivating our humanity in a complex, interlocking world involves understanding the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances;. This requires a great deal of knowledge that American college students rarely got in previous eras, knowledge of non-Western cultures, of minorities within their own, of differences of gender and sexuality.

"But citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from

oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have....

“Intelligent citizenship needs more than these three abilities. Scientific understanding is also of the first importance. My excuse for not dwelling on this aspect of a liberal education is that others are far better placed to describe it than I. The same is true of economics, which I shall approach only in its relationship to philosophy and political theory.”

*Martha Nussbaum (1997) 9-11.*

“Our campuses are producing citizens, and this means that we must ask what a good citizen of the present day should be and should know. The present-day world is inescapably multicultural and multinational. Many of our most pressing problems require for their intelligent, cooperative solution a dialogue that brings together people from many different national and cultural and religious backgrounds. Even those issues that seem closest to home – issues, for example, about the structure of the family, the regulation of sexuality, the future of children – need to be approached with a broad historical and cross-cultural understanding. A graduate of a U.S. university or college ought to be the sort of citizen who can become an intelligent participant in debates involving these differences, whether professionally or simply as a voter, a juror, a friend.”

*Martha Nussbaum (1997) p. 8.*

“A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement.”

*Constitution of the State of California, Article IX*

“We will...use the term liberal education to refer to the full range of efforts that pursue some version of the overarching goal of preparing students for lives that provide personal satisfaction and promote the common good, regardless of particular approaches or institutional arrangements.”

*Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, Jason Stephens (2003) p. 24.*

“I believe the purpose of an undergraduate education is to develop a person of judgment, discernment, and balance, with professional competence in some specific area. That will mean that our graduates will not only be well informed but knowledgeable enough to have a sense of relatedness and implication of one area in relation to another.”

This goal suggests seven specific attributes:

- the ability to listen, read, and analyze with comprehension and to write and speak with precision and clarity in the expression of disciplined thought;
- the ability to reason effectively in quantitative and formal terms;

- the ability to engage people of different cultural perspectives;
- an appreciation of the modes of thought and expression of the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts;
- some sensitivity toward the ideas, values, and goals that have shaped society and some sense of the moral implications of actions and ideas;
- skill in one chosen area of knowledge, with an understanding of its assumptions, foundations, relationships, and implications;
- some active participation in the life of the campus community.”

*Frank H. T. Rhodes, 1994, p. 182*

“Students who have been educated in American universities and colleges should be well prepared to encounter the world’s complexities and to contribute something of worth in their chosen fields. Post-secondary education should continue not only to convey information, but also to inspire curiosity, to encourage critical thinking, and to elicit the most important questions – the ones that, as of yet, have no answers.”

*James Perley and Mary Burgan, (AAUP president and secretary) “Comments and Recommendations Submitted to the Office of Postsecondary Education, Department of Education, Dec 17, 1996” AAUP (AAUP Web Page)*

General education is “the breadth component of the undergraduate curriculum”

*Arthur Levine 1978, (cited in Miller 1988 p. 3)*

General education is “the thread that ought to weave a pattern of meaning into the total learning experience”

*Earl J. McGrath, 1974, cited in Miller 1988 p. 4)*

“Liberal knowledge is not a formula; it is a point of view. The essence of liberal education is the development of mental power and moral responsibility in each individual. It is based on the theory that each person is unique, that each deserves to have his own powers developed to the fullest possible extent.”

*Frank Aydelotte, early 20<sup>th</sup> century president of Swarthmore College, quoted in Miller 1988 p. 233.*

“Premises of the general education paradigm that had emerged in the U.S. by the 1930s: it is based on two assumptions: (1) “General education is concerned with developing the relationship of the individual to the community in contemporary democratic society” and (2) that “the needs of both education and a democratic society require a unity between educational aims and educational methods.” Other premises follow—

“general education is concerned with a specific society at a specific time and place.”

“general education has a fundamental commitment to education through direct experience”

“general education is concerned with the present and the future rather than with the past”

“general education begins with the individual and her or his needs and interests”

“general education is characterized by the fact that it does not have an end outside itself.”

*Gary Miller (1988) 106-109*

General education is “education for an informed and responsible life in our society that has chiefly to do with...the question of common standards and common purposes.”

*Harvard Red Book (Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society, 1945) p. 4 cited in Miller (1988) p. 135.*

General education is “education in the conduct and strategy of inquiry itself.”

*Daniel Bell, 1966 p. `88 cited in Miller (1988) p. 155.*

“Eight objectives for general education:

1. To retrieve a unity of knowledge for the student,...to assist the student to relate the part to the whole.
2. To enable the student to acquire intellectual competencies, such as skill in critical thinking and in communication.
3. To select the most significant knowledge that has accumulated through men’s past experience and thus assist the student in finding his way in the morass of available materials. In part, the objective is also to break away from the use of sequentially oriented introductory courses in specific knowledge areas as the units for a curriculum in general education.
4. To provide a historical perspective of our civilization and of world cultures; to get away from the past tendency of liberal education to confine itself to Western culture.
5. To acquaint a student with and to stimulate his interest in the environment, physical and social, in which he lives; to prepare him for effective living in a complex world, the events of which are increasingly influenced by the advances being made in science and technology.
6. To help the student relate his education to living today, to his occupation, his family life, his community activities, and his endeavors to lead a richer life; to make culture functional in relation to his living rather than leisure-time sophistication.
7. To provide the student with a framework of knowledge into which he can fit his special intellectual and occupational interests; to assist him in achieving a social conscience and a mature philosophy of life.
8. To make general education an essential part of the education of everyone in a democratic society rather than the privilege of a few, so that there may be some common understandings about historical directions and ethical bases for the conduct of individuals and the ordering of society.

*Algo Henderson and Jean Henderson, 1974 (Higher Education in America, pp 83-84) cited in Gary Miller (1988) 161.*

“We need to emphasize a form of humane education that helps students to establish a rich interior life and an enduring openness of mind. We need to enable students to maintain a sturdy private self where moral self-examination can occur, so that they can find sustenance in what Hawthorne called ‘the communications of a solitary mind with itself.’”

*James Freedman (2003) pp. 56-57.*

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## **II. Statements about the Constraints on Higher Education**

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“...the goals we have for higher education are unrealistic, and many of our images have only a tenuous relationship to reality. The humanities are important, but not nearly as important as some people believe. It’s nice to believe that a common curriculum produces a common identity, but there’s never been either in the United States. Reading Plato is a wonderful experience, one that everyone should have if they have the time and inclination. But if most people don’t read Plato, society as we know it won’t collapse, and people will somehow stumble through life, occasionally making mistakes and very often contributing meaningfully to society and their communities.”

*Zachary Karabell, 1998, p. 225*

“All his life, Trilling was a devoted member of the College faculty at Columbia, then still the heart of the university. His ideal reader was ‘the general reader,’ and even in his own time he was exceptional in maintaining a general outlook from within an academic base. The triumph of specialization during the past several decades has almost entirely eliminated such figures from the university, which is why (Allan) Bloom felt so lonely during most of his career. The clock cannot be turned back sixty years, even if that were desirable; what is likely to be more constructive is to ask how, if at all, something resembling the ideal of general education can be restored in the age of specialization.”

*David Damrosch (1995) p. 122.*

“As the plutocrats they – we – are, the tenured faculty have bought their way out of service, in much the way landed gentry once arranged for farmhands to fulfill their military obligations for them. The core is now taught mostly by graduate students and assistant professors.”

*David Damrosch (on Columbia) (1995) p. 126.*

“Four trends in society that should shape general education:

- Evolution of a national economy and national society with government as the major funding source for science and research.
- Knowledge revolution – its exponential growth, emergence of new fields of knowledge, new intellectual technologies, and expansion of R&D as organized activity of government.
- more future-oriented and planned society.
- increasing status and rewards to intellectual achievement.

All of this has led to university becoming “a quasi-public institution in which the needs of public service, as defined by the research endeavor...become paramount in the activities of the university.”

*Daniel Bell, 1966, p. 88 cited in Gary Miller (1988) pp 142-154*

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### **III. Relevant features of the History of Higher Education**

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“The aim of the course is to inform the student of the more outstanding and influential factors in his physical and social environment. The chief features of the intellectual, economic, and political life of to-day are treated and considered in their dependence on and difference from the past. The great events of the last century in the history of the countries now more closely linked in international relations are reviewed, and the insistent problems, international and international, which they are now facing are given detailed consideration.”

*Announcement of “Contemporary Civilization,” Columbia, 1919-20*

“Generally speaking, all freshmen are either now or soon to be voters. Does not the University owe them a duty as such? If our tritest sayings are true these freshmen are destined to become leaders in their respective communities. They are forming the political, economic, and social ideas that will characterize that leadership. And they are forming them now while the air is full of strange doctrines and without waiting for a critical and scholarly insight. Can the University not render a substantial social service by providing a sound basis of elementary scientific facts and principles by which the validity of these doctrines may be tested?”

*“Reorganization of Undergraduate Instruction,” Stanford, 1920*

“You ought to obtain here the trained capacity for mental labor, rapid, intense, and sustained. That is the great thing to get in college long before the professional school is entered. Get it now. Get it in the years of college life. It is the main achievement of college life to win this mental force, this capacity for keen observation, just inference, and sustained thought, for everything that we mean by the reasoning power of man.”

*Charles W. Eliot (speaking to freshman) cited in Edgar E. Robinson, “Citizenship in a Democratic World” (1928) Stanford University Archives*

“I shall not be guilty of so much affectation of regard to science, as to be very willing to grant passports to Dupont de Nemours or any other French philosophers, in the present situation of our country. We have had too many French philosophers already, and I really begin to think, or rather to suspect, that learned academies, not under the immediate inspection and control of government, have disorganized the world, and are incompatible with social order.”

*John Adams, letter to T. Pickering, Secretary of State, Sept 16, 1798 (Adams, Works, vol. 8, p 596)*

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#### **IV. The American context of higher education**

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“In most nations students enter a university to pursue a single subject, and that is all they study. The idea of ‘liberal education’ – a higher education that is a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally – has been taken up most fully in the United States.”

*Martha Nussbaum, 1997, p. 9.*

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#### **V. Organizational Constraints on General Education**

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“...general education is the spare room of academia with no one responsible for its oversight and everyone permitted to use it as he will. It is not surprising that different people, at different places and in different times, have proposed different general education purposes....Like most spare rooms, general education is chronically in a state ranging from casual neglect to serious disrepair. Sporadic efforts at dusting, rearranging, and sprucing up absorb a great deal of effort and bring little in return. All in all, it is much easier to keep the door closed than to rethink the room’s uses.”

*Ernest Boyer and Arthur Levine, n.d., p. 3.*

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#### **VI. Education, Social Responsibility, and Democracy**

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“As presidents of colleges and universities...we challenge higher education to re-examine its public purposes and its commitments to the democratic ideal. We also challenge higher education to become engaged, through actions and teaching, with its communities.

We have a fundamental task to renew our role as agents of our democracy....We share a special concern about the disengagement of college students from democratic participation....

This country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision making. We must teach the skills and values of democracy, creating innumerable opportunities for our students to practice and reap the results of the real, hard work of citizenship.

Colleges and universities have long embraced a mission to educate students for citizenship. But now, with over two-thirds of recent high school graduates, and ever larger number of adults, enrolling in post secondary studies, higher education has an unprecedented opportunity to influence the democratic knowledge, dispositions, and habits of the heart that graduates carry with them into the public square.”

*Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education  
Campus Compact ([www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)) 2000*

“Although the future of moral education remains in doubt, the proper course for universities to take seems clear enough. With their classes, residence halls, extracurricular activities, and counseling services, colleges and universities create a world that dominates the lives and thoughts of countless young people during years in which their character and values are still being formed. Within this environment, students must get help from their universities in developing moral standards and civic responsibilities or they are unlikely to get much help at all. In these circumstances, even if presidents are overburdened and professors feel untrained for the task, they have no choice but to try to assist their students in learning how to lead ethical, socially responsible lives. One can appreciate the difficulty of the enterprise and understand if progress is slow. What is harder to forgive is a refusal even to recognize the problem or to acknowledge a duty to work at it conscientiously.”

*Derek Bok, 1990, p. 102*

“As for moral uplift, professors can certainly prod students to contemplate difficult moral and ethical issues. They can also, by example, show students that it is possible to have strong disagreements with other people and still sit next to them. Perhaps the most important lesson that humanities classes offer is that in a democracy that values free expression, disagreement is natural and healthy....(but) attempts to inculcate an explicit moral code usually fail.”

*Zachary Karabell, (1998) pp. 225-226.*

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