Where to Begin in Changing Undergraduate Education

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Where to Begin In Changing Undergraduate Education

The keynote address for the Annual Meeting of the Association for General and Liberal Studies at Colgate University, October 30-November 1, 1969,

By Charles Frankel

Where to begin in improving undergraduate education seems to me a large question with a number of answers. I think the place to begin is the reorganization of the academic community. It involves putting organizations like this one at a much higher level of visibility, arranging that you know one another, that the important academic organizations in the country know of you and listen to you, and that people in the government be aware of you. There is not likely to be a large-scale improvement of American higher education without substantial forms of government support. The question of how to get that support under conditions that do not compromise the colleges and universities, how to get it for central matters rather than fringe matters in education, is a question to which our government certainly doesn't have the answer. It needs a great deal of advice and pressure. From this point of view, we in the academic world have been amateurish, even lazy. We believe in politics until we get right up close to the process. We like demonstration at a distance from the people against whom we're demonstrating. The academic community, in pushing its own immediate professional interests, seems to me to have been doing a second-rate job.

A second problem is closely connected, but I'm not sure I know the solution to it. I come from a busy and happy day at Columbia, where I did nothing from nine o'clock until four but talk to students. I felt I earned my salary, and I also felt the University was living up to the understanding on which I came to it. But on Wednesday of this week
I spent the whole day on the phone lining up votes for the University Senate; and tomorrow I shall spend the whole day on committees, finishing with a University Senate meeting, all affecting the government of the University. In the United States now, and around the world, we are in deep trouble with regard to the internal politics of educational institutions.

The issues are important. Some of them are even educational or quasi-educational. There is a good educational case to be made, I believe, for extending the amount of participation by students and faculty in the government of the institutions to which they belong. But it is a limited case. The fundamental educational renovation that is long overdue in this country is probably going to be delayed until these political problems inside universities die down just a bit, and we can give the time to education that we should.

Unhappily, that question isn’t entirely up to the universities. Once again, we come back to the government and to national policies which the government is following. So long as these policies are followed I am pessimistic about peace on the university campus. The turmoil on university campuses has relatively little to do with education, and we are all suffering—students, teachers, and administrators—from this fact. To the extent that we can discipline ourselves, to the extent that we can talk sense with our students, I think it is important for us to emphasize that there are some things we are better able to do than other things. We are better able to start renovating our own houses, which badly need it, than to use the university to solve major problems. I’m not advising anybody not to be a citizen; I myself left the university for awhile to do what I think a citizen should do. But I think it is important to distinguish between the individual’s responsibilities as a citizen and his responsibilities as a member of the university community. I am fearful that energy and intellectual attention are being dissipated and turned aside from important educational matters by the difficulties that now confront most campuses.

But now let me get to the specific problem of undergraduate education. Let me begin by giving you my own very general views as to what liberal education is. To the extent that we are not doing the job we should be doing in American colleges, we are not, I think, giving students the liberal education they have a right to have, and which, I think, most of them, in their heart of hearts, really want. The trouble with the campus today, educationally speaking, is the decline of the practice and indeed of the very theory of liberal education.

Liberal education is not, in my view, a particular curriculum or course of study. It is a way of approaching the curriculum or any course of study. Its first purpose is to try to help students to imagine alternatives. Its function, in a word, is to widen, broaden, the imagination of the student. When I speak of alternatives, I mean alterna-
tives to what students normally think or normally feel—alternatives to the status quo, to the habits, to the routine, to the social arrangements, to which they have become accustomed, alternatives to existing premises of thought and conduct in their society, alternatives to the established theories and intellectual routines of the disciplines in which they receive their instruction.

Thus, on one side, the function of liberal education is therapy. Its function is to acquaint people with what may be merely arbitrary, with what may be purely the product of historical accident, or perhaps of prejudices and superstitions. Montesquieu, in writing The Spirit of the Laws, said that he had one supreme intellectual purpose, and that was to help his fellow men overcome their prejudices. And in speaking of prejudices, he said that he did not mean the false views which prevent them from understanding others but the false views which prevent them from understanding themselves. Liberal education, at the very least, is an effort, whether in physics or sociology or philosophy, to bring to the level of conscious awareness the premises which are employed, and to acquaint students with the possibility that alternative premises could be used and might even be better. Liberal education is in this sense liberated education.

Thus, on the positive side, liberal education has an imaginative purpose. If it works, it functions to enlarge the student's capacity to envisage new options, and to look behind the foreground of his experience to larger structures of explanation and to the larger moral and intellectual themes that lie in the background. To be liberally educated is to have an intellectual capital that enriches one's life. It permits one to approach his experience and see a richer texture of meaning in it. It is to have a kind of experience of life that moves on a number of levels. It allows people to mix the normally antithetical moods of engagement and disengagement, of passion and dispassion, of commitment and tolerance, of participation and observation. Albert Camus once remarked that an intellectual is a man who watches himself while he works. In that sense, the function of a liberal education is to produce people, no matter what the field in which they work, who will be aware of themselves, will be observing themselves, will be critical of themselves as they work.

Now, if I am at all on target in this view of the nature of a liberal education, it would follow that there are few subjects, perhaps no subjects, that cannot be taught liberally. What counts is not the subject that is taught, but the way in which it's taught. To teach a subject liberally is to see it from the outside; to raise critical questions about its underlying concepts and presuppositions; to explain the development of the subject as an event in time and society; to judge the subject from the point of view of the light it throws on themes of passionate and perennial concern and on the basic moral and political
issues of the student’s own time. The student who has been liberally educated has been taught to build his intellectual and moral home in a live cultural tradition or in a set of active intellectual disciplines that transcend his own private concerns and that can sustain him in times of crisis and trouble. From this point of view, a liberal education need not be practical in the narrow sense of the term; but it is extremely practical in a broad sense. If I may use a much overused word, it might even be said to be a generally relevant education.

I think most of us will admit that the colleges of the country are not doing the job they should do in this respect. We are not providing liberal education of a kind that satisfies either our own or our students’ views of what we should do. Why?

I have a simple hypothesis. We don’t have the teachers who can do it, or the teachers who care to do it. We can sit around and plan curricular reforms from now till Doomsday, but they will die aborning because we simply don’t have enough people on college faculties or in universities seriously interested in putting such reforms into effect or genuinely able to do so. I want to quote a remark that was once made at the meeting of the Association of American Colleges:

“ I feel that there has been entirely too much of a tendency toward highly specialized study in the graduate schools. We in the colleges are looking for men of broad, sound training in their fields with enthusiasm for the general subject and a wide generous interest in related subjects, rather than for men of a highly specialized training who express a lack of interest or even contempt for other phases of their own subject, to say nothing of the related fields of knowledge.”

This remark was made not in 1969, and not even in 1960. It was made in 1925, at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges. Last year, as a consultant to Vassar College charged to develop some new notions on graduate liberal education, I had the opportunity to go through the records of major educational organizations like the Association of American Universities and the Association of American Colleges. What was striking and depressing was the litany of complaint about the failures of liberal education. It stretches back year after year for forty years, yet nothing, or very little, has been done about it. The hypothesis that I offer to explain this is that we don’t have the teachers in adequate number who are willing or able to put into effect the reforms that are badly needed.

Why is this so? If we can say why, we may be able to do something about the problem. My own view is that we are in the grip of graduate schools that are badly organized intellectually and educationally. We are in the grip of a system of education which gives prestige for the wrong reasons, which accords domination of the edu-
cational system to separate, quasi-autonomous departments concerned mainly with protecting the walls of their disciplines, but not with education except tangentially; and we accept as the qualifying certificate for the profession of college teaching a degree which requires young men and women at the richest and most fruitful periods of their lives to spend their time, most of them, writing or studying matters of minor concern scientifically or humanly. I'm speaking, of course, of the dissertation. The key question in reforming undergraduate education is what can be done to reform the graduate school, so that it might begin to come to grips with the problem that I have broached.

If we look at the problem in this way, we have, I believe, a number of possible approaches available. At least three of these approaches have been tried in one way or another. I am going to call them by the following names: the encyclopedist approach; the higher synthesis approach; and the interdepartmental approach. I don't have a special name for the fourth approach that I am going to describe. It is mine, so I shall call it the “right” approach.

First of all, the encyclopedist approach. Certain conceptions of liberal education identify such education with a specific corpus of survey materials, or with definite programs of what are known as “general education,” like the famous Columbia program in the humanities and contemporary civilization. This is a program, by the way, in which I long participated and which I happen to feel is a fairly good program. However, I don't think it offers the only possible path to a liberal or general education. And it has certain recurrent problems built into it.

A general education program usually works by taking the graduate student and asking him to give courses in general education at the undergraduate level. The reasons are, in part, to provide him with financial support, but mainly to educate him—and, hopefully, his students. This approach seems to me to be sometimes a good one. The approach at Columbia produced among its products people like Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, Irwin Edman and John Herman Randall. Many of those who have been associated with these courses have become, in a certain sense, exemplars of encyclopedic knowledge. They have learned a great deal, and they have been able to talk with some understanding, though not with unfailing accuracy, on a great many subjects.

However, those who have been successfully educated by teaching in such courses are probably fewer than those who have not. Even more, it has turned out to be extremely difficult to continue this kind of education at Columbia because the professional, specializing pressures of the graduate school have grown so great that most graduate students who are asked to undertake this kind of program regard themselves as being forced to detour from their main career goals.
Most do it under some duress. It is for them a sacrifice. They do not gain professional prestige from participating in such work or from the credentials they can produce as encyclopedically educated people.

However, the still deeper fault in this approach to liberal education is not a practical one. It is intellectual. One does not automatically educate liberally simply by educating encyclopedically. One does not produce the kind of self-critical, civilized and ironical mind which it is the purpose of liberal education to produce simply by having people become masters of all there is to be known. This can produce its own form of pedantry, just as easily as narrow specialization. Even worse, it can produce a form of dilettantism, a simulacrum of knowledge; it can lead to the failure to understand the difference between solid mastery of a subject and skimpy conversational acquaintance with it. So there are dangers in this approach. For this reason I would regard it as a plausible approach only under fairly exceptional conditions.

Let us turn to the second possible approach. I call this the higher synthesis approach. It is represented in what was once the Chicago experiment in liberal and general education, and in the so-called "Great Books" tradition. This is not quite an encyclopedic approach; rather it argues that there is a certain continuing and a perennial conversation out of time, out of history, that characterizes civilization. And a liberal or general education consists in introducing students to these great and unchanging themes of conversation from the great and unchanging points of view that occur and recur through the history of thought. This point of view, it seems to me, is one which can be sustained in its pure form only if one wishes to ignore what seems to be a fairly evident fact—that at least in certain fields of inquiry there has been definite progress, and the themes being explored today are not the themes which were of interest at the time these disciplines were in their infancy. Physics is an example, biology another. Unless I am mistaken, physicists and biologists are not just going around in circles today, discussing the same themes that Aristotle discussed in his books. Aristotle's views on physics are extremely interesting as an introduction to his remarkable mind, and as an introduction to the educated common sense of the Greeks. But as an introduction to physics, they are, I think, an historical digression. The same thing applies to his biology.

I do not believe that, from an intellectual point of view, the idea of the Great Books stands up. I myself find it hard to pick out the hundred or the thousand books knowledge of which constitutes an education. This approach, to be sure, has certain manifest merits. There is a great deal to be said for a program of study which invites people to acquaint themselves with the work of genuinely first-rate minds. Not many books, perhaps none, raise the issues now debated
on American campuses about the meaning, purpose and proper nature of education as trenchantly or urbanely as Plato's Republic. There is a good deal to be said for the Great Books approach in this quite simple sense. It is true, I think, that a man is not capable of teaching well in a liberal arts college unless he has more than a passing acquaintance with figures like Plato, Aristotle, Montaigne or Dostoevski. But while this is essential, it is not sufficient. Learning does not consist simply in the mastery of the main themes of an eternal dialogue; it also involves a comprehension of the tradition of reasoned inquiry conceived as a progressive effort to relate our thoughts accurately and effectively to facts that lie outside the human dialogue.

The third approach is one that has become increasingly popular lately, and is beginning to develop in many graduate schools. This is the interdepartmental approach. Here again, the story is not black and white. I believe in interdepartmental studies; I certainly have committed enough of my own time to interdepartmental studies to have to believe in them. But I retain deep suspicions about them. They can perhaps be put in the following way: (1) Interdepartmental studies are sometimes simply adjacent studies. They are not genuinely interdepartmental. They are rather courses in which people for three weeks study economics, and then for three weeks sociology, and then for three weeks study political science. They are a collection of short courses in separate disciplines. I am not sure exactly what is gained, although it is perfectly true that there are many courses in our colleges and universities which have very little to offer after the first three weeks. (In that sense, there is a gain in making a person teach what he knows in three weeks rather than in three months.) But I think that we have all had experience with interdepartmental studies in which people never really have a meeting of minds, in which there is no such thing as coordinated inquiry or even systematic debate on a common issue in terms of common standards. You simply have, as I said, courses in the same intellectual neighborhood, given to the same students consecutively.

(2) The second objection to interdepartmental studies is that they frequently aren't even what I've described. They are simply studies that don't belong to any department of learning. They are not interdisciplinary but nondisciplinary studies. They lack any discipline at all. They're bull sessions. This kind of effort seems to me to be retrograde. At the undergraduate or at the graduate level the one thing that has to be communicated is the idea that study of any problem is something that has to meet certain standards of logic, of argument, of evidence. To the extent that interdisciplinary studies make the very concept of discipline seem evanescent and too fluid, I am suspicious of them. For this reason I would not myself be inclined to say that people at the graduate level should be prepared for undergraduate teaching
by being given a heavy dose of so-called interdisciplinary studies. And yet I have some sympathy for them, as you will see, when I begin to describe what I would consider the “right” approach.

Let me make one prefatory remark before I suggest to you what I would like to see tried as the “right” approach. The English language is often very difficult, and the definite article “the” causes a lot of trouble. I offer you a model of what I think is the “right” approach. But the particular model that I offer you is not the only possible model. Conversations and discussions like the one in which we are now engaged may in fact generate other possible approaches; moreover, we are fortunate in this country that we have a pluralistic system of education. I would deplore the absolute disappearance of the Great Books tradition or style of education. I would deplore the absolute disappearance of the encyclopedic ideal. What I am talking about is simply the development of still another approach, and an approach to which I would hope major emphasis would be given by way of serious experimentation.

What, then, would this approach be? It seems to me it would be possible to organize, in major graduate universities, sets of graduate colleges. The faculty of some liberal arts colleges might also wish to organize a graduate college, for example, as an adjunct to their activities. The graduate college would have a faculty of twenty to twenty-five people who are chosen from, say, ten to twelve disciplines or departments. However, they would function not as a collection of departments, but as a single faculty. The first problem in reorganizing graduate education, if I’m right, is to take the education of the future college teacher out of the hands of departments and put that education in the hands of people who see themselves as conducting an educational enterprise aimed at producing people who will themselves be educators.

I am not talking about courses in pedagogy; I am talking about something else quite simple. If a Man from Mars took the education of the average sociologist in America today and looked at the amount of time he spends on various things, he would infer that the student was going to spend three-quarters of his working life polling or doing market research or something of that kind. I think it’s essential that sociologists learn these methods by using them. But the fact of the matter is that most sociologists spend most of their working lives teaching in colleges. Yet they learn relatively little about the history of their own discipline, about the sociology of sociology, about the philosophy of sociology, and the like.

I feel strongly about this because I have had to sit on many examining committees for doctoral dissertations in my discipline and others. Usually, the subject is of infinitesimal importance, and of meager intellectual value. It seems to me cruel to ask a person to spend three
or four years of his life doing this sort of chore. We have much in
our educational system, undergraduate and graduate, that's penologi-
cal: I mean that we appear to act on the assumption that if people
put in a certain amount of hard labor—or, with undergraduates, if
they accept detention for a hundred and twenty-four hours—we will
let them out. We do this in graduate schools: the student produces a
hunk of work—you sometimes can't call it a piece of work—and we
give him a degree. Sometimes it's because we can't bear the sight of
him any longer. These are open secrets; I'm not a cynic, I'm only
saying what everybody knows. It seems to me that to deal with this sort
of problem, we have got to reorganize the work of graduate profes-
sors, so that, in addition to their quite proper loyalty to their dis-
cipline, they will be required to consider their impact, along with that
of their colleagues, on definite human beings, namely, their students.
This is why I would organize graduate colleges.

The second element in my proposal would be to select students,
and to sit down with them and find out what their interest is, what
their intellectual passion is. And I would not put the question to them
as, "Are you interested in economics?" "Are you interested in politi-
cal science?" "Are you interested in philosophy?" I would ask, "Why
do you want to go on studying?" And if the student then said, "I
love the romantic poets," we would then ask together, "What should
one know to be a serious specialist in the romantic poets? What, in-
deed, do you have to know so that you won't be taken in by those
seductive fellows, so that you will have some external powers of
criticism with respect to them?"

If you put the problem that way, you find that the divisions
between departments that now exist in our graduate schools are
bureaucratic devices, instruments of administrative convenience and
conservatism. Consider what you have to know to understand the
romantic poets. Certainly you have to read the romantic poets. But
one of the things they reacted to, one of the things they were re-
sponding to, was the great Newtonian scientific revolution of the
eighteenth century. How many professors of English understand any-
thing about this? How many professors of English have passed on to
their students, indeed, the ignorant prejudices of the romantic poets
about the eighteenth century scientific revolution? Why do we have
a conflict of two cultures? Why is our society paying for the continu-
ation of this polemic, based very largely on party interests and on
ignorance? The answer, in part, is that our graduate schools are
organized to produce just this kind of professional deformation, just
this kind of arrogant learned ignorance. If a person wants to under-
stand the romantic poets, he must certainly understand what the
romantic poets thought of Newton. But he also should understand
what Newton thought of Newton, and what the scientists of the period
thought. He doesn’t have to become a physicist to understand this, but he does have to sit down and have a chance to talk with some physicists or historians or scientists.

What else should one know if he wants to understand the romantic poets? The French Revolution—a minor event which had some influence on them. He should know something, too, about the Industrial Revolution. The romantic poets thought that the Industrial Revolution was responsible for the misery in the cities, that it was responsible for the people they saw dying on the roads. They were only half right. The fact of the matter was, as we now know, that there was a sudden upsurge of population in the eighteenth century. For a variety of reasons, the countryside of England was incapable of supporting the rural population. The people swarming into the cities were not simply the product of the expropriation that went with industrialization, although that was part of it. They were also the results of what was called in that period “overpopulation.” From that point of view, the Industrial Revolution was a boon, not a scourge. Without this Industrial Revolution, starvation in England would have been much worse. The romantic poets were nostalgic about the England that was lost. Their nostalgia may not have been entirely misplaced, but it was based to some extent on their faulty knowledge of their own situation. If you’re going to teach the romantic poets, if you’re going to teach about the things that they were concerned about, and if you’re a liberal scholar, you ought to know enough sociology or economics to say something more than they could say about which they spoke.

If what I have said is true, another point also follows. A well-educated man in his specialty will be a man who knows how to pull together material from other disciplines wherever they may be relevant to his subject, relevant to his problem. He is, if you will, interdepartmental, but he doesn’t fall between two stools. He is, if you will, synthetic, but it isn’t in terms of some abstract philosophy preformulated for him. The ultimate instrument for the integration of knowledge is the individual mind, and the ultimate condition for integrating knowledge is to define some problem with respect to which a variety of kinds of information are relevant. From this point of view, it would be possible, it seems to me, to organize a student’s graduate education so that he developed the habit of looking at the things that interest him from more than one point of view. He would then have, as it were, two intellectual strings to his bow, or three. He would be conversant with the kind of insight to be gained in fields other than his own. He would himself have an external point of view toward his own interests. In this sense, he would enact a model of liberal scholarship that might be contagious to undergraduate students. He might offer an approach to a subject matter which was in its own way liberal.
But now we must ask the question: "How do you give a degree to this sort of chap? How would you test him? Would you give him a Ph.D., and would it be in English or would it be in philosophy or would it be in what-have-you?" My own response would be that we should give a degree, a Ph.D., and a degree in a discipline. I don't think it's a good idea to have professors of English who don't know any science or history or sociology. But if their central interest is the romantic poets, their profession is English literature. Similarly, I don't think it's a good idea to have physicists who don't know anything about the relation of physical research to, let us say, the governmental policies of a given period, or who have no sense of the sociology of physics. But the physicist must above all know physics, and, in the end, that is the subject in which he would get his degree.

How would you give him his degree? On the basis of what credentials, what showing? At this point, it seems to me, there should be no absolute rules. There would be cases where an original piece of research in the modern dissertation form is justified. But it seems to me that the dissertation as it is now undertaken in our great universities, and as it is now accepted in eighty per cent of the cases in our great universities, is so far away from the ideal which is supposed to justify it that we may as well give it up as a bad bargain in eighty per cent of the cases. What is it supposed to do? It is supposed to make a contribution to knowledge. Well, to begin with, this seems to me to get students off on the wrong foot for the rest of their lives.

An essential element not only in good teaching but in first-rate intellectual work is taste; and taste, whatever else it may be, certainly involves some sense of whether you're dealing with an important problem or not, or at least some sense of what is important in the small problem with which you are dealing. The lack of such taste is pedantry.

To give degrees to people by asking them to meet the demand of making a contribution to knowledge is, in an overwhelming number of cases, to ask them to destroy or forget taste. It is to ask them to make a contribution to knowledge of such a kind that few sensible men would devote their time to making such "contributions" unless they were obliged to. There are very few dissertations that actually make contributions to knowledge. And of these, the overwhelming proportion had better not have been written. The "contributions" are piddling and pointless. And all of us in "the Ph.D. business" know this.

Is there an alternative? I think so. If a young man wants to be a professor of classics, what is wrong with asking him to write a hundred good pages—not new, just good—on Oedipus Rex? I remember hearing a debate at the Aristotelian Society in England some years ago. A man read a paper and then the commentator stood up and
said, "There's much that's new and much that's true in the paper we've just heard, but what's new isn't true and what's true isn't new." It seems to me much more important that what a person says in his dissertation be true and important and worth passing on to students than that it be new. If a graduate student can add to our knowledge, fine. By all means, he should be encouraged to do so. But to ask him to master, to put in his own way, to bring to life, the best that has been thought and said on *Oedipus* is a possible, and equally important, intellectual task to put before him. It ought to be the kind of account that would implicitly explain why anybody who might be thinking of going to the movies would do better to read *Oedipus*. This is not plain to students usually, and if a teacher can't explain that to students, he's losing the game.

Could we, over the course of three or four years of study of the kind I have described, ask graduate students to produce four or five first-rate essays, first-rate intellectual performances, without asking them to produce an imitation book? Would this be a better use of their time? And would it help produce in their minds a better sense of what the creative intellectual life is? I believe so. Someone may say that this involves separating teaching from scholarship. I do not think so. I believe it might improve scholarship. If we improve scholarship, I think we will improve teaching. If we have better minds with more taste for what's important, if they know more than one thing, have more than one intellectual string to their bow, they can do the job that I would hope can be done in American colleges and universities.

Is this an impossible idea? At the moment, what with turmoil on the campus and a distracted and parsimonious government suspicious of education, the outlook isn't very good. But one has to assume that our present condition is not going to last forever. And in the meantime we have to try to make our own opportunities. It seems to me that there are places in America, a number of places, where experiments of this sort could be tried, and it also seems to me that there are many liberal arts colleges which would be extremely eager to have on their staffs the products of such an educational experiment.

In any case, whatever your views of this particular idea, all our talk and all our plans and schemes for a revival of liberal undergraduate education in the United States are likely to turn out to be empty unless we can find a way to manage the problem of discovering and educating better teachers, who will want to carry on the task of liberal education and will have the equipment to do so. The reform of undergraduate education has to begin at the graduate level.