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The State of Liberal Education

An Interview with Andrew Delbanco

No public intellectual in America is better placed or prepared to discuss the present state of liberal education and, beyond that, the modern university, than Professor Andrew Delbanco, named by *Time* magazine in 2001 as "America's Best Social Critic." An outstanding literary critic as well, and professor of humanities at Columbia University, he is very much in the Columbian tradition of Lionel Trilling. In addition to his many critical and interpretative works like *Required Reading: Why the American Classics Matter Now*; *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*; *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil;* and most recently my own favorite, *Melville: His World and Work*, Delbanco has written a formidable and widely influential series of essays on the state of higher education in the United States. He has especially focused upon how the material conditions and the social and political priorities of colleges and universities have shaped what and how students learn. And he has studied very carefully the growing gap between rich and poor and the problem of equal access to education. Currently, Delbanco is working on a book to be published by Princeton University Press, entitled *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*.

In an effort to learn about his own views of liberal education, I invited him to comment upon the present condition of the two distinct but related strains of liberal education as Bruce Kimball, another visiting scholar to the faculty seminar, has described them: the philosophical or critical thinking strain and the oratorical or "preparation for citizenship" strain.

Mark Schwehn: After he develops the distinction between the philosophical and the oratorical strains of liberal education in his book *Orators and Philosophers* (Columbia University, 1986), Bruce Kimball argues that if you go through the whole history of liberal education you frequently find some kind of synthesis of the two, as in most of today's college catalogues. They emphasize on the one hand character, citizenship, and service to society (orators) and on the other hand cultivation of the powers of the mind in order to be able to engage in self-critical reflection (philosophers). I mention all of this as background to my question, because I gather from your writing that of those two strains, given that we're thinking about liberal education in a liberal democracy, you would tilt a bit toward the oratorical tradition, toward formation and citizenship. If I remember correctly, in one of your essays, you argue that the critical thinking discourse, even as former Harvard President Derek Bok uses it in his recent book (*Universities in the Marketplace*, Princeton University, 2004), has been appropriated to

a kind of problem-solving, highly technical mentality, so that it's too easily co-opted by those forces in the university that want to see purely instrumental reasons to educate. Is that a right reading of your thought on this?

Andrew Delbanco: The operative term really is synthesis or at least the aspiration to achieve some kind of synthesis. If you scan some of the recent writings on the state of liberal education in the United States, you'll find, I think, a rising call for something like the former idea; that is, the philosophical, introspective cultivation of the powers of the mind. One of the books I was responding to in that piece you alluded to is by Donald Levine from the University of Chicago, *The Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America* (University of Chicago, 2007). One associates that kind of education, for which I have the highest regard, with a kind of willed withdrawal from the world and with contemplation in a community certainly, but a community committed to *collective* contemplation, operating with ancient texts at the center of the discourse (at least for starters) and compelling, inviting, encouraging young people to devote their attention to age-old questions. That's a very appealing model of what an educational community should be all about and I'm much committed to it. It's more or less what I try to do in my own teaching, though in part because of my provincialism and in part because of my ignorance, I mainly use texts from an English language tradition as it has evolved in America over the last three or four hundred years, which by now is a pretty rich tradition too. I think also of a recent book by Anthony Kronman (*Education's End*, Yale University, 2007), the former dean of the Yale Law School who has stepped out of his former role as a legal scholar and is now teaching in the Directed Studies Program at Yale, which is a Great Books program—different from ours at Columbia and the one at Chicago because it's purely voluntary. Students apply for it, and something like ten percent of the Yale undergraduates participate in it. According to Kronman, interest is growing. Anyway, in that kind of context, the first model to which you refer is the dominant one. I think, however, that most versions of that model with which I'm familiar imply that the cultivation of the individual mind also has a social good as one of its aims—not just the value of individual cultivation, the development of the ability to enjoy life more fully, more richly, and to contemplate the questions that we all face as we go through life.

The second (the oratorical tradition or the emphasis on preparation for citizenship) I think is in a severely bad way right now in America's colleges and universities. In one of the pieces I wrote, I quote Derek Bok, who says in one of his books that "faculties currently display scant interest in preparing undergraduates to be democratic citizens" (*Universities in the Marketplace*). I found this statement really startling, and even more startling for the fact that he puts it in a footnote, as if everyone knows it's true and he's just mentioning it along the way as a matter of common knowledge. You can be sure that faculty who show scant interest in preparing students for citizenship show even scanter interest in preparing students to be introspective and reflective human beings along the lines that we were just discussing. So the question arises, if Bok's statement is true (which I think it all too often is), what, exactly, are faculties interested in? And we all know the answers to those questions. I'm wary of slipping into a sort of Manichean discourse— you know, "you and I are good people because we care about these things and our colleagues are bad people because they're doing something else." It's not like that. But the incentive systems within our universities and increasingly our colleges, the tone of the whole culture, and indeed the appetite of the students whom we're encouraged to think of more and more as consumers—all of that pushes in a direction that goes against both of these two ideals, which I take it you would agree, have always been interconnected.

MS: Yes, and Kimball himself argues that the two are and have been interlaced and often complementary even though they are based upon premises about human nature and the nature of the good life that cannot be wholly reconciled.

AD: Even so, I would think we are not talking about two different things. We're talking about maybe two different emphases. But those two emphases are subordinate and increasingly minor in, at least, the university world that I'm most closely familiar with, which is more and more dominated by a utilitarian idea of education and more and more concerned with rankings in the consumer surveys. I guess another text one might bring into the discussion, which I'm sure most educators are familiar with, is Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*. Newman's definition of liberal learning has to do with the notion that knowledge (from the perspective of the liberal ideal) is its own end— knowledge for its own sake. But Newman's ideal—even though most institutions still pay lip service to it—occupies a smaller and smaller place, and is being crowded out by the putatively practical imperatives of modern society. Newman was writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, when England led the way towards industrialization and was already pretty far along that path compared to everybody else. The functions that citizens of an industrial and now post-industrial society have to perform

are increasingly specialized. The requisite skills require years of training and rehearsal and testing—all the things that we do through schooling—and become more and more necessary for the purpose of putting bread on the table. So the educational institution that exists in such a society and that says, "wait a minute, for *x* number of years with young people, we're going to put our emphasis on knowledge for its own sake, and we're not going to acknowledge the utilitarian imperative," that institution seems to be announcing its resistance to and withdrawal from the actual world in which we find ourselves living.

There are some institutions that do this proudly—St. John's College, my own college, Columbia College, to some degree, because we say that for the first two years of college, most of what the student must do is going to be a sort of self-cultivation through encounters with the Western classics. The institution that says this raises a lot of questions such as, "for whom is this possible?" As many students have said to me when they read Newman, "this is an idea that seems possible only for the leisured classes." I mean, if you're not worried about how you're going to make a living after college, it's fine to spend four years improving your Latin and Greek. And, after all, when Latin and Greek were at the center of the curriculum in our venerable institutions in this country, the students attending those institutions were members of the privileged class almost exclusively, and pretty much knew their pathway was charted out, and for whom there was actually a utilitarian value to the Latin and Greek, because it served as a class marker—something they carried with them into the social world for which they were preparing themselves. I'm merely trying to gesture toward some of the obstacles that lie in the way for those of us who do still believe that the place for liberal education in Newman's sense is still critically important. And we're all trying to find ways to keep it alive.

MS: Absolutely. I think that it's kind of a miracle that Newman's book still remains so much alive and is still quoted favorably by educators, given its own context and given that most of them wouldn't recognize the kind of context that Newman presumed in order to articulate that vision. For instance, Newman fervently believed that the university should provide a kind of *encyclo-paideia* or a "circle of learning" for all students that encompassed all of the various studies and disciplines as they complemented, corrected, and enlarged one another. And it always occurs to the reader, this is great that you've put together in one place and have jostling about all of these different approaches, but finally where does the fully orbed view take place? Just through a kind of osmosis? This is actually something like what Newman thought, because he was envisioning the collegiate system where you go back after a day of study to your college, and you have dinner with people in history, in English, in physics, in many fields of study. The job of integration really gets done over meals. I think people reading him often don't understand how vitally important that vision of the collegiate system (which Newman had in his bones) was to his argument. We have a whole different set of social formations here in this country within which education is done in our remarkably variegated and plural system. We therefore have to think about these questions anew, connecting them up (as you are doing in your writing) to material conditions and the political and social priorities of universities and colleges.

AD: I think that is a very good point. I was saying to some of my students the other day (in connection with Newman) that he is basically talking about an English idea. Maybe it has its roots in the school of Athens, or some other ancient precedent, but the idea of the residential college (which, of course, for many centuries was meant for a small number of aristocratic men who gathered together to train for imperial leadership) really caught on in the United States more than anywhere else in the West. I was reading the other day a document by Cotton Mather from the early eighteenth century where he remarks that at universities on the continent students live around town in rooming houses and the like, but here in America, in this college we've just started (Harvard already had been going for fifty or sixty years) we believe that students should live "collegiately." Time has shown that organizing undergraduate education this way is extremely expensive. Only a very small number of institutions have really tried to replicate the Oxford/Cambridge system in all their features—resident tutors, a separate library for each relatively small cohort of students, a dining hall, etc.,—but we still have a thriving and very diverse number in this country of residential liberal arts colleges that are basically modeled on the Oxbridge idea, which implies that students have a great deal to learn from one another as well as from their books and their teachers. We all know the financial pressures they're under and the struggles they're engaged in to survive, but the idea of collegiate education still has great power. This gives us another way of thinking about the question of liberal education—how to preserve it or how to adapt it. There are some people who believe that it can be replicated or approximated through the internet. Students in some of my courses now, my teaching assistants who are adept with technology,

create discussions groups online, so that presumably my students are talking to each other about common issues online even when they're not sitting in the same classroom together. I'm a little dubious about how well that works, but that may just be pure old fogeyism on my part.

MS: I'm a little dubious about that too. With respect to the liberal arts college in this country, however, some experts are optimistic. For example, Frank Oakley in his book *Community of Learning* (Oxford University, 1992), is quite sanguine finally, because what makes him so much a lover of American higher education is its pluralistic character, the fact that it's *not* highly centralized, and the fact that we therefore have different centers of vitality at different times, and that when the system as a whole gets worrisome, some enterprising group of educators in different institutions will introduce new things and these will filter out and so forth. So he would say liberal education is flourishing at liberal arts colleges. The other side of this is that it is conceivable to argue that the character of today's students is shifting radically, not least because we're having a lot of non-traditional returning students. You might argue that liberal education is flourishing more in extension programs like the University of Chicago's Great Books extension where you have adults coming back and reading the Great Books. Or consider the work of state humanities councils, which have all kinds of folks reading books outside of the university. Many of the conversations that take place under the auspices of these councils would pass muster as liberal education, so that what we might be looking at is not a decline of liberal education but a kind of renaissance of it. It's just that it has new social locations. Is this possible?

AD: That's a very good point, and I would add the proliferation of reading groups throughout the country, all of which speak to the point that there's a tremendous appetite for reading, thinking, and sharing of thoughts. After all, human beings are communitarian creatures, and they are introspective creatures. They've been trying to figure out why they've been dropped into this world ever since they developed consciousness, as far as we can tell. The appetite that liberal education seeks to meet is not going to go away. Just anecdotally I know all kinds of young people who've been prepared for careers by our most prestigious educational institutions who achieve the goal for which they've been prepared and find themselves miserably unhappy and unfulfilled. So I think you make a good point. I don't have the statistics at my fingertips to be able to make the case. I know Frank is a congenital optimist and allergic to the kind of jeremiad view, and in this case I want to go along with him. But there is a place for a narrative of declension as well. I've always thought that narratives of declension are secretly optimistic—intended to be admonitory, to incite people to concern and upset and remedial action.

MS: I think you're quite right. That leads me to a follow-up that relates to Frank's sanguine views, which I don't altogether share either. We could still, even if we thought liberal education was flourishing outside of the academy in different places and even among nontraditional students within the academy, worry about what's happening to our young people, even if you take a strictly instrumental view of education. That is to say, you were talking earlier about skills and the need for highly technical skills to flourish in the society we have today. True enough. On the other hand, it's also proverbial (and this is basically the American Association of Colleges and Universities' take on this) that people are going to change jobs three, four, five, six, seven, eight times, and that most of the jobs people are going to go into don't yet exist. Who knew what a *webmaster* was fifteen years ago? So that therefore, in a kind of curious way, the more specialized and fluid a society is, and the more the velocity of history increases, the more you need basically the capacities to learn how to learn, to have that kind of creative resourcefulness and even practical wisdom, if you will, that are very near the heart of what a good liberal education can cultivate, rather than a set of technical skills that are fine today but may not be relevant tomorrow.

AD: That's all true. I feel more than once a day more or less fraudulent, because I myself am not liberally educated. I'm not liberally educated in the old sense of having sound classical learning. I had a little bit. Just as I was beginning to get pretty good at Latin, I stopped it because I had passed an exam. It would have been much better for me if I had flunked that exam. And I'm not liberally educated in what I think should be the twenty-first-century sense of the term, either, because I know practically nothing about science. I guess what I do know is that I don't know, and maybe that's a step ahead of some people. My ignorance is largely my own fault, but it's partly also the fault of the institutions I attended. I mean, I went to Harvard College, and the science requirement that I had to satisfy was a joke. There's all this high-flown talk about meeting our educational responsibilities at the fanciest places, but I don't know of a single one that has a serious general science

requirement for undergraduates—although we have just started experimenting with one at Columbia. Some people make the argument, such as one I heard recently from a biologist at Brown, that science courses should not be required. He wants his course to be something that students take voluntarily and therefore attracts those who really want to learn. Maybe he's right—I personally prefer to teach courses that are not required, so I don't have to contend with unwilling conscripts in my classes. Still, at Columbia, we have an experiment underway, a compulsory course called "Frontiers of Science," which is (at least temporarily) part of the required core curriculum.

What I'm getting at here is that surely if you take the second view, the instrumental view of education (and I take your point that the more versatile and adaptable you are, the better off you're going to be in this dynamic economy), some competence to travel in the conceptual universe of science is a desideratum if not a requirement. And we're not providing that competence very well for most undergraduates. My son (and this is not meant to be boastful because a lot of things about his performance as a student are not to be boasted about—as he would be the first to admit!) went to Harvard, and he knew he wanted to go to medical school, though he also discovered pretty quickly that he didn't want to do all the pre-med requirements while he was in college, so he actually finished that afterwards and managed to get a general education while in college. Anyway, he did a history major. And he took Michael Sandel's class on justice, among others, which helped him gain a general sense of how the world was put together in the past, and gave him some exposure to philosophical discourse, and yet by now he really knows a lot about biology, genetics, physics, computer science, even a certain amount of math and statistics. In that sense, he strikes me actually as one of the better-educated people I know. But he had to do it voluntarily or for an instrumental reason. He had to take those science courses so he could get himself into medical school. So this two cultures problem that has gotten totally out of control since C. P. Snow first described it is one that, as far as I can tell, our educational institutions are not addressing at all. We leave it up to our students to get themselves educated by instinct or accident or just plain luck.

MS: That's right. It may well be the key question that ought to be on the front burner of people who want to take careful thought about liberal education. Part of it, to get really to the roots of this quandary, would force us to face what happens to the character of science in the seventeenth century, such that it's simply invested in the questions of the how, not the why, and can't give an account from within its own vocabulary of the meaning of its own enterprise, which it once could, whatever you might think of medieval and ancient science. And so in an odd way, linking literary study rightly done and historical study rightly done with scientific study isn't like just taking three different subject matters with different purviews, but similar methods. It's yoking radically different modalities of thinking about that which you're thinking about. So a full incorporation of scientific study into a liberal education, something I think every reasonable educator would want, would create its own new problems. For example, you have said that among the deficiencies of the humanities from time to time has been their aping of the sciences, or wanting to be more like the sciences, which is a whole problem that the social sciences faced in the earlier part of the century. People like Clifford Geertz and others have started to help us think our way out of that by now construing cultural anthropology, for example, as a kind of semiotics, or as he himself puts it, as "an interpretive science in search of meaning, not a positivistic one in search of laws." So he tries to relocate the social sciences in the neighborhood of the humanities. So now for the humanities to be trying to ape the sciences deepens this problematic, because then when you want to have somebody liberally educated you're really making it impossible for them to see life steadily and whole, because you've married things together that are at some deep level not marriageable.

AD: Well taken, but on the other hand, some of the most distinguished scientists I've met (I'm thinking of Eric Kandel, a neuroscientist at Columbia, or Steven Hyman, also a brain scientist and physician, who is the provost at Harvard) are people who have had extremely strong liberal educations. They work in the life sciences, but these are people who are able to put science together with what we call the humanities, and I'm sure we all know many people in the sciences who have a highly developed aesthetic sensibility—who also are musicians, artists, readers.

MS: Mathematicians, too.

AD: Mathematicians maybe more than anyone. It's often remarked how many good scientists are musicians. So, you're quite right. Science doesn't pose or begin to answer the "why" questions, but it does have an aesthetic dimension. One of the things a good literary critic is supposed to do is look at the technical structure of works of art. That's not an altogether

different enterprise from what the scientist does. So there are areas of marriageability between the two enterprises I think. And then to go back to the instrumental, surely because of the power of science, and the immense intellectual success of modern science, it has put into the hands of human beings the power to transform the natural world in ways that could never have been dreamt of even seventy-five years ago. We're all beginning slowly to wake up to this reality, whether it's nuclear proliferation, or the degradation of the environment, or the more subtle (and in many ways perhaps positive) changes in the rhythm of life that technologies bring with them. Surely, we need to have thoughtful, educated people thinking about these consequences of science.

MS: I couldn't agree more. And if I thought that the great push in our culture right now for scientific literacy were driven by either the sense that in order to be a responsible citizen, you've got to be able to understand science, since most of the decisions you are going to face involve that basic literacy or by the sense that in order to really have a liberal education you need to know something about the sciences, I would be deliriously happy. But I fear that what is in fact driving the renewed quest for scientific literacy is, "we're behind the Chinese, we're soon going to be behind the Germans." If that's the driver, you can bet that's going to have a deep effect on how science is taught, how it's understood. So it's the right end but the wrong motive.

AD: I agree. That's where educational leadership comes in. I see my role (because I have access to some public forums that enable me to amplify my voice) as kind of a gadfly to the leadership of our educational institutions. Somebody needs to be saying, "wait a minute," as in this most recent example. Everybody's talking about globalization and competition and so on, but where are the educational leaders saying that we need to provide an integrated education? My president (like the president of virtually every institution) is talking constantly about how we are going to get more international students. All the schools with more money, and I'm sure practically every school that can afford any degree of innovation, are thinking about getting bigger. They're thinking about getting bigger so that they can stay loyal to their present constituencies—their alumni, their athletic rooters, the local community from whom they draw students—while at the same time adding students from abroad.

What is often not remarked is that many students from abroad want to come here precisely because we have this tradition of liberal education they don't have. I mean, the cab driver that took me to LaGuardia Airport was a nice guy from Morocco, and he picked me up in front of the Columbia main gate, and he said, "do you have something to do with Columbia University?" I said "Yes," and he asked, "Can you tell me how I can find out about how I could continue my studies there?" He had a BA in finance from a university in Morocco, and he said to me, "You know, wow, Columbia University, I'd love to be able to study here." What is the prestige of Columbia University rooted in? It's rooted in its tradition of liberal education more than anything else. If this young man were to come to Columbia (or some other fine institution), he would experience something closer to the ideal of liberal education, very likely, than he got at his university in Morocco. Anyway, that would be my guess. What did I read somewhere? Not the Chinese Premier, but somebody high up in the Chinese government with responsibility for the education system, has been talking to Harvard and saying, we want to import and replicate the Harvard core curriculum (not knowing that there is none to speak of, that it's all smoke and mirrors). I guess he could pay airfare for Michael Sandel to come over and give some lectures about justice, but that's about where it begins and ends in the Harvard core curriculum, I'm afraid.

MS: It's kind of the revenge for our getting lead toys, you see. And then we import contaminated core curricula over there and ruin their educational system.

AD: Right (laughter). We're worried about China and India, but they recognize (probably for instrumental reasons, because they worry that their engineers are not creative enough and too lockstep-ish in their thinking) that there's something about the Western tradition of critical thinking and skepticism and individualism that's valuable. They want more of it, even as we're giving less of it to ourselves. It's a strange situation, isn't it? ✠

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