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# ROBERT M. HUTCHINS ON POLITICAL MATURITY

November 1974

**I**t is not necessary for the people of this country or for the world to agree upon anything or to agree with one another. That would be too much to expect and it could also turn out to be very boring. But it is necessary, I think, if we are to survive, that we understand one another. At the moment it would be very difficult to say...that we have a political community in this country. We can't communicate with one another, inside the academy or out....

I have always thought that the basic requirement for the formation of a political community is a common liberal education, an education that is appropriate to a community of free men. This has nothing to do with vocational training or with what is now called career education, whatever that may mean. The liberal arts are the arts of communication and the arts of using the mind. They are the arts indispensable to further learning, for they are the arts of reading, writing, speaking, listening, figuring. They have a timeless quality, for they are indispensable no matter what happens in any state of the world. They are, in fact, the arts of becoming human. The object of liberal or basic education may be said to be the transformation of young animals into human beings.

I believe in liberal

education for everybody. Nor have I ever seen any evidence that it is beyond the reach of everybody, nor any evidence that educational institutions are incapable of imparting it if only they will. But often they don't.

I became an academic administrator in 1923. For more than 51 years, I have seen educational institutions from the kindergarten up settle their programs by logrolling, by public relations, by political pressure, and most of all by asking where the money is. I have met with committees of great universities to discuss education and research, and I have found them talking about those mystic initials ADA and FTE, average daily attendance and full-time equivalents. This is what they wanted to talk about because manipulating these letters produces the revenue, through a kind of mystical algebra, derived from the state. What this led to was public relations as the determinant of policy. They tried to think of courses that would attract students. It mattered not whether these courses had any intellectual content. Things have not changed.

In these meetings, there was a general fear expressed that courses with intellectual content would for that reason alone frighten students. Hence it would defeat the economic purpose the university had in view.

The purpose of the educational system as a whole is to form and main-

tain the political community and to equip the citizen (I emphasize the word "citizen" because citizens are what we seem to lack) with the means of going on learning all his life. This is an enormous task. And the job of educational leaders is not to think up educational gimmicks that will deceive the public into supporting things not worth doing, but to explain to the people what education is, why it is important, why it is as important as the founding fathers thought, and even more, why in a technological age the rapidity of change makes current fads the least effective of all educational programs. The trouble with current fads is that they won't stay current for very long....

I cannot reconcile myself to the notion that the purpose of graduate study, any more than the purpose of undergraduate work, is to get a credential, a certificate, a diploma, or a degree that will satisfy an employer and expedite the labors of a personnel officer, that will lead to a better job, or that will give one a leg up the social ladder. I cannot find any way of reconciling this position with any rational, defensible conception of education at any level. I suggest, on the contrary, that credentialism is the curse of American education. We should award, as I suggested years ago, all educational credentials to all Americans at birth. We could then get

on with education....

I have heard it said at Berkeley that the idea of an intellectual community is no longer possible—that it is, in fact, dangerous and misleading. We are here, some say in Berkeley, as a group of technical schools teaching people to do research and to teach in university departments like our own. This overlooks the losses that go with the loss of the intellectual community. I am prepared to assert that no university discipline either in teaching or research can flourish by itself or can even grasp what it is doing in the absence of a common liberal education and an intellectual community in which liberal education and advanced study based on liberal education are carried on. If the object of a university is understanding, these requirements must be met. Specialization, in other words, if it is to succeed on its own terms, must rest on liberal education, and it must be illuminated by the light of other disciplines in the intellectual community.

Barring this, our young will never know and be at ease with the intricate interconnectiveness of modern life, without which knowledge the act of citizenship will remain an empty exercise.

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*Robert M. Hutchins (1899-1977) was chairman emeritus of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions when this article was written.*