



What Can I Do With a Degree in . . . ?

A Review of

Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters

by Michael S. Roth

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Reviewed by

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My first psychology chair was a statistician who was presiding over three doctoral programs in a newly formed urban university with a rag-tag arts and sciences college grafted to three prestigious professional schools of art, medicine, and social work. The institution's history and culture celebrated applied programs. During my hiring interviews, he said he valued my Jesuit baccalaureate humanities degree more than my American Psychological Association (APA)-accredited doctoral program transcript, and he wanted to build a liberal arts major for a multigenerational, multiethnic, day and night student population. He took seriously the question that titles this review, and put me on a faculty meeting agenda to assess others' responses. Clinicians diagnosed students' obsession with this question, "What can I do with a degree in . . . ?" as "perseveration" and a first-generation-to-college neurotic anxiety. Experimentalists groaned about "pandering" to immature students' aversion to science and "dumbing down" the department to offer applied courses.

Michael S. Roth's *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* finely illuminates how those arguments at my first faculty meeting 40 years ago echoed historical debates about workers who think, between Benjamin Franklin who sneered at the colonial colleges' elitism and Thomas Jefferson's vision: "the habits of mind and methods of inquiry characteristic of the modern sciences lend themselves to lifelong learning that would serve one well—whether one went on to manage a farm or pursue a professional career" (p. 33). The clinicians and experimentalists expressed similar fears voiced at the turn of the 20th century by W.E.B. DuBois in behalf of liberal arts education versus Booker T. Washington's advocacy of vocational training as the means to advance the economic futures of young African Americans. The question itself — *What can I do?*—was first asked as — *Who can I become?*—in Emerson's muscular image of a self-reliant American scholar/citizen who "welcomes labor because it enhances vitality and can feed thinking. . . [and is] careful not to take on work just because others think it important" (p. 51). Roth describes how Richard Rorty connects us, today, to Jefferson's and Emerson's primary goal of human freedom, offering an antidote to any loss of purpose in higher education: "help students realize that they can reshape themselves—that they can rework the self-image foisted on them by their

past, the self-image that makes them competent citizens, into a new self-image that they themselves have helped to create" (p. 181).

Reading Roth's analysis of why liberal education matters had me savoring my first department chair's prescience. An introductory statement synthesizes this book's value-rich themes and topics, followed by four superb chapters on the liberating ideals and pragmatic quandaries embedded in American higher education from 1636 to the present. Roth navigates his lucid arguments from an inherited medieval university tradition for male elites in the colonial colleges, into the 19th century's Morrill Act vision of educating a full democracy of peoples for a democracy of vocations, and evaluates the German research university model that prioritized specialized knowledge throughout the 20th century. Personal reflections on teaching a massive open online class (MOOC) on "The Modern and Post-Modern" to a global audience demonstrates his creative infusion of traditional learning ideals into our brave new world's technological delivery systems.

Roth challenges the careful reader as he writes with passion about complex nuances, intellectual debates, and the pragmatic depth of my title's original question. This is *Why Liberal Education Matters*:

The mission of liberal learning in higher education should be to teach students to liberate, animate, cooperate, and instigate. Through doubt, imagination, and hard work, students come to understand that they really can reshape themselves and their societies. Liberal education matters because by challenging the forces of conformity it promises to be relevant to our professional, personal, and political lives. That relevance isn't just about landing one's first job; it emerges over the course of one's working life. (p. 195)

Psychologists will appreciate the generalizability of the value statements in this text. They may discover how better to frame their responses to legislators, deans, and provosts who are reframing the question as "Do we have too many psychology majors?" (Halonen, 2011).

Contemporary practitioners of the scholarship of undergraduate teaching and learning (SoTL) are without equal in building out a disciplinary paradigm of best practices. A recent APA-sponsored national conference (Halpern, 2010) crystallized this paradigm, and major field guidelines (APA, 2013) created a blueprint for its outcomes, curricula, and assessment on diverse campuses. The guidelines emphasize "the advantages of studying psychology as a strong liberal arts preparation for attaining a position in the professional workforce" (APA, 2013, p. 1).

More than 100,000 students, annually, receive a baccalaureate in psychology. The questions "What can I do with a degree in. . .?" and "Why does a liberal education matter" continue to be salient. The authors of the APA guidelines wove students' concerns and faculty priorities deftly into five comprehensive learning goals: knowledge base of psychology, scientific inquiry and critical thinking, ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world, communication, and professional development. They operationalized the concept of a "psychologically literate citizen" (Cranney & Dunn, 2011; McGovern et al., 2010) as an overarching outcome of the baccalaureate degree.

Charles Brewer (editor *emeritus* of the journal *Teaching of Psychology*) and I evaluated how disciplinary psychology remained steadfast throughout the 20th century to a liberal arts

understanding of our undergraduate major (McGovern & Brewer, 2005, 2012). Cacioppo (2007) called psychology a “hub science” because of its achieved connectivity with other research sciences. Could psychology become a “hub discipline” in undergraduate education in the arts and sciences? To accomplish a similar connectivity, we need to consider what Roth calls the philosophical and rhetorical DNA strands of higher education, or what Kimble (1984) labeled as “psychology’s two cultures.” Brewer and I argued that synthesizing both paradigms and narratives into undergraduate programs could transform a 20th century discipline into a 21st century course of transdisciplinary study.

Roth offers psychology a pragmatic strategy to truly matter as a liberal arts “hub discipline” for undergraduate education. He affirms the scientific paradigms of critical inquiry in tandem with the wider narratives of human interdependence created by arts and humanities scholars. We can guide students with Emerson’s hopes, W.E.B. DuBois and Jane Addams’s empathic pluralism, the teaching ideals of William James, and John Dewey’s synergy of democracy and education as a lifelong pursuit. Roth concludes that “the university should not be a cloister; it should be a laboratory that creates habits of action through inquiry laced with compassion, memory, and fidelity” (p. 193). After 55 years as a University of Michigan faculty member, my friend, Bill McKeachie, witnessed all the post World War II, successive generations of new students to higher education and the curricular responses to their changing expectations. In an article comparing James’s (1899) *Talks to Teachers* with his own multiple editions of *Teaching Tips*, he summarized psychology’s task succinctly: “our job as teachers is to teach our students how to learn and think and to be motivated to continue learning” (McKeachie, 2003, p. 42).

Educating amiable skeptics elevates the common good.

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