

The Paradox of Mortimer J. Adler: Revisiting the Distinction between Liberal and General Education

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When asked about his desires for his legacy, an aging Mortimer J. Adler (1902-2001) paused, pondered, and replied, “The books I’ve written . . . *and the Great Books*” (Adler 1990).¹ But, perhaps there is a third element of his legacy: A paradox of sorts, and one that reveals much about the tension between, and the conflation of, the paradigms of liberal and general education. This article explores this very paradox and its possible ramifications for the American undergraduate curricular enterprise.

It may be safe to say that Adler considered himself to be liberal education *personified*. Throughout his career, Adler saw the Great Books as the path to and the core of a liberal education (Lacy 2008, 398). Shortly after Adler’s death, Casement (2002) wrote, “The pioneer of the great-books movement remained as an inspiration into the twenty-first century, and will be remembered as its weightiest figure” (36). By championing the teaching of the Great Books to generations of undergraduates at Columbia University and the University of Chicago as well as “popularizing” the texts themselves through an extensive relationship with *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Adler sought to bring what he felt was highbrow culture to the masses (Chaddock 2002; Mulcahy 2008; Lacy 2013). In doing so, he positioned himself not as a modern-day Prometheus, but rather as the foremost expert of the Great Books, even going so far as to oversee and participate in the production of an index of 102 ideas crucial to the Great Books entitled the “Syntopicon” (Beam 2008).

But Adler, who claimed to have been “at the top of [his] class” at Columbia, never earned a bachelor’s degree (Adler 1990). Adler refused to attend the university’s required military exercises, swimming classes, and general courses in physical education. “Nonattend-

ance resulted in a series of F’s on my record.” He recalled in 1977, “At the end of my senior year in 1923, after I had already been awarded a Phi Beta Kappa key and had paid twenty dollars for my diploma, I received a note from Dean [Herbert E.] Hawkes saying that I might attend the commencement exercises but that I would not get my bachelor’s degree because I had neither passed my swimming test nor fulfilled the physical education requirement for graduation” (Adler 1977, 20-21). It was not until 1983 that Columbia would allow Adler to participate in the graduation ceremonies and receive a degree (Grimes 2001). Though Adler was pleased with the honor, he went through his career acknowledging that he held “the rare distinction...of being quite possibly the only Ph.D. in the country without a master’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, or even a high school diploma” (Adler 1977, 21; Adler 1990).

The entire affair raises an interesting paradox. Adler, who was obsessed with obtaining and disseminating *liberal* education, could not claim to have obtained a *general* education. The irony seems to have been lost not only on Adler himself but also on those who have studied him. This paradox also raises a number of questions for scholars of both liberal and general education as well as those interested in reforming the undergraduate curriculum. What is the relationship between liberal and general education? What are the differences between the two? This article briefly explores each of these questions by focusing on the conflation of liberal and general education and the subsequent attempts to delineate the differences between the two paradigms. One body of literature contends that the main distinctions between the two can be counted as differences between aims and curricular structures. After summarizing this literature, the article extends this argument by maintaining that we must also explore the ways that

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research methodologies are applied to general and liberal education. I posit that a significant trend in recent years is the tendency of research on general education to be carried out using quantitative methods and to have a narrow focus on evaluation/assessment. On the other hand, qualitative methods have come to dominate research on liberal education and this genre tends to provide personal narratives and philosophical discussions.

The Conflation of Liberal and General Education and Attempts to Distinguish the Two

It is likely that many see the attempt to distinguish between liberal and general education as a task that is both thankless and ineffective. The consensus appears to be that the conflation of the two is so widespread that any attempt to delineate would be hopeless. As Conrad (1978) notes, "Most attempts to distinguish between general and liberal education are futile because the words have been used interchangeably by too many people for too long to lend themselves to useful distinction" (48; cf. Glycer and Weeks 1998). That said, a few authors have—while acknowledging the difficulty of the task—attempted to distinguish between the two.

Perhaps the first sustained attempt was by Baker (1947). Largely disturbed by the attempts of contemporary educational theorists such as Robert M. Hutchins, Stringfellow Barr, and others to conflate liberal education with general education; he set about tracing the concept of general education through the ancient and modern world. He argued, "General education is the theory of education evolved to fit all students—not just the upper ten per cent—to live in their time. It is not precisely liberal education, because liberal education as often defined and practiced, will not fit all students" (347). In attempting to define general education as separate from liberal (and vocational) education, Baker noted six distinguishing characteristics. He referred to general education as "Universal Education," "Practical Education," "Education for Citizenship," a paradigm that "Educates the Whole Man," "Individualized Education," and a "Unifying Force." To be universal and practical, Baker contended that general education would

need to be focused on citizenship, the "Whole Man," the individual, and the society.

Though Baker was interested primarily in the aims of general and liberal education, later scholars focused on the differences in how the two paradigms were implemented. Morse (1964, 11) echoed Baker in suggesting that general education was "manifestation of the democratic spirit in higher education, for it admits a wider scope of abilities and a far broader clientele." By doing so, Morse reified Baker's stated importance upon the differing aims of the two paradigms. However, Morse complicated the dichotomy by introducing a fuller discussion of the pedagogical differences between liberal and general education. He argued,

Liberal education is considered to be subject centered, with a fairly fixed body of content material, logically organized. Its goal is also the stimulation of reflective thinking, with less emphasis on behavior, and it draws its clientele from the intellectual elite...General education, on the other hand, is more concerned with the learner than with the content...Its goals are individual development in its various aspects, and it places emphasis upon behavior and social usefulness as well as upon intellectual development as an outcome of learning (11).

Despite Morse's attempts to incorporate the pedagogical and curricular manifestations of each paradigm, Miller (1988) noted that such a distinction created its own problems. Though he did not grapple with Morse directly, Miller maintained that "The confusion between liberal and general education . . . rests on two basic problems. One is a tendency to define both general and liberal education too superficially, for instance, to look only at the structure of the curriculum or only at the subject matter in making one's definition. The other is the wide variety of practice that exists within both paradigms" (183-184). In arguing this point, Miller seemed to be suggesting that the two paradigms needed to be understood as unique entities all their own, rather than defined against each other.

Though provocative, this argument was not taken up by the next scholar to address the dichotomy: Erick-

son (1992). In providing a discussion of the dichotomy Erickson further complicated the notions of aims and curricular manifestations. He argued, "It is important to note that general education differs greatly from liberal education in its underlying assumptions, ideological orientations, pedagogical methods, curricular structures, and ultimate aims" (16). By noting that aims were influenced by assumptions and ideology, and that curricular manifestations were made up of structures and pedagogy, Erickson expanded the discourse surrounding the dichotomy.

The issues surrounding the dichotomy between general and liberal education were also faced by numerous scholars across the several campuses that comprise the City University of New York (CUNY). In their first collaborative attempts to discuss and reform the system-wide undergraduate requirements, these scholars noted a list of about two dozen comparable terms that made it difficult to proceed. However, they soon recognized that these terms sprung from the dichotomy between general and liberal education. A major leader of this group recalled, "it became clear that we would not be able to get on with the process unless we clarified what we meant by these two key terms...we agreed that General Education was the more neutral, less value-laden term of the two, and for our purposes, it represented a set of *organizational structures* that could be quantified... What we mean by liberal education and how we define the term is less determined" (Summerfield 2007, 10-11). In the end, the group attempted to combine the two terms, just as others had done before.

Through these varied attempts to grapple with the dichotomy between liberal and general education, there is a tension faced by each of the authors. How can the aims described as liberal education be codified and either infused or separated from the structures of the undergraduate curriculum often distinguished as the measures taken under the guise of general education? Though Baker, Morse, Miller, Erickson, and Summerfield provided excellent insights from their attempts to grapple with the varying degrees of difference between aims and curricular structures, they ultimately provided limited discussions on the research informing and undergirding these aims and curricular structures. A fur-

ther development that has taken place in the years since these publications is the trend toward a split between largely qualitative methods applied to liberal education and predominantly quantitative methods applied to general education. The methods applied to these paradigms have influenced the content of the research produced on them, though not deterministically so. Discussing this development will supplement the insights gained from the earlier authors referenced.

Research on Liberal and General Education in the Undergraduate Curriculum

Reflecting on his attempt to provide a "disinterested account of the history of liberal education" in his book *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, Kimball (1995, vii) noted: "The way that professors have told the story of liberal education has tended to reflect their own interests, both intellectual and professional." Despite the recent appearance of a few "disinterested" histories of liberal education, Kimball's statement still holds true (Bloomer 2011). Research on liberal education can be broken down into the following categories: philosophical narratives, intellectual histories, institutional snapshots, and survey research related to outcomes of liberal education.²

Philosophical narratives have long dominated the study of liberal education (Anderson 1993; Carnochan 1993; Orrill 1995; Farnham and Yarmolinsky 1996; Nussbaum 1997; Boudreau 1998; Levinson 1999; DeNicola 2012). As a general rule, these works explore the intellectual underpinnings of liberal education as it relates to the ways in which such education would strengthen the mental and/or moral faculties of students. They often include reflections on university history and culture, the social applications of knowledge, and make recommendations as to the types of curricula that should be employed.

Institutional snapshots typically center on the author(s)' home institution (Wegener 1978; Levine 2006; Lewis 2006). In this line of inquiry, the author presents a vision of liberal education as it may be practiced at the institution, or rather a straight recording of notable achievements. The final line of inquiry related to liberal

education includes survey research spread across a number of institutions. These works focus on pedagogical techniques (often presented under the umbrella of liberal education) and discuss how well these techniques have led to specific gains in a desired outcome. Major outcomes that have been explored are civic engagement and moral efficacy (Colby et al. 2003; Schneider 2005; Colby et al. 2007; Jacoby and Associates 2009; Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011).

Research on general education disproportionately covers curriculum development, assessment, and evaluation techniques. Indeed, “A majority of scholarship devoted to general education reform,” Gano-Phillips and Barnett (2010, 7) suggest, “has focused almost exclusively on the *content* of the curriculum.” As the authors intimate, there is a strong connection between the focus on content and the ways in which it will be measured. Works on curriculum development tend to be organized as guides for faculties and administrators interested in reforming their general education programs (Kanter et al. 1997; Gaston and Gaff 2009; Gaston et al. 2010; Hanstedt 2012). A major element of these guides involves the presentation of possible approaches to assessment and evaluative techniques. Much of this work relies upon quantitative techniques to indicate how outcomes might be assessed and gains might be achieved (Nichols and Nichols 2001; Ewell 2004; Allen 2006; Banta 2007; Bresciani 2007; Walvoord 2010).

Conclusion

Ostensibly, this article has attended to the “what” questions. However, grappling with the “why” questions may prove ultimately more fruitful. Why is liberal education conceived and explored primarily at an abstract level in the world of ideas? Why is general education perceived predominantly as a curricular process that must be implemented and measured on a programmatic scale? One answer may be found in a recent study by Brint (2011) that described two movements that have been gaining traction in the last three decades: one to improve college teaching and another to measure student learning outcomes. By assessing general education,

there is the risk that assessment can be conceived in a narrow fashion and applied only to tangible undergraduate structures, while liberal education objectives will merely exist as broad and largely undefined aims. Perhaps this risk is exacerbated by the ways in which the terms are defined and distinguished from one another. Regardless of the tremendous work being done in these areas and the possible answers already offered, one cannot help but wonder whether examining general education through the qualitative lens often applied to liberal education, and vice versa, might not reveal insights heretofore unexplored and assist all who attempt to reflect and reform.

Notes

1. Italics added to reflect emphasis in Adler’s voice.
2. It should be noted that these outcomes tend to be broader and more abstract than the outcomes often assessed in general education.

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