

Book Review

Roth, M. S. (2014). *Beyond the university: Why liberal education matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
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Will there forever be a rift between workforce education (career and technical (CTE), technological, and vocational) and liberal arts education? Will American society ever reach consensus over the daunting question regarding education's purpose: "Does one attend college or university for the sake of learning in-and-of-itself, or in pragmatic preparation of a future career?" Will we ever reach a mending of what Rose (2008) dubbed "the hand/brain divide"? Dr. Michael S. Roth does not think so. Roth is a champion of "traditional" liberal arts education. That is not to say he totally discredits the value of vocational education. Yet, in *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, he not only relegates workforce education to second-class status, but misrepresents historical figureheads.

Organization

Roth assumes the role of historian and provides a poignant argument for his readers. All is informative, personal, elegant, witty, and non-academic; it is written to appeal to a mass audience of both scholars and lay persons alike. Roth captures the reader's attention by sharing his personal testimony and concern that stems from his experience as president of Wesleyan University, the institution he attended as an undergraduate. A chronological comparison of conflicting ideals from monumental figureheads follows.

Roth's Ideas

Beyond the University does not advocate an eradication of workforce education. For the most part, it is a celebration of the historical roots of the liberal arts and its offerings to students. Roth defends the virtues of liberal learning as both a developer of better people and useful in preparation for future success. That said, according to Roth, liberal education is "under siege."

Changes to the American social, cultural, and economic landscape have challenged the notion that venturing off to a four-year institution is something impractical. In an era of economic instability, liberal arts is once again being attacked for its elitism and irrelevance. Parents and students wonder if higher education is a worthy investment. Modern-day pupils' focuses include: return on investment, résumé building, employment opportunities, and employers' expectations.

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Roth champions the benefits of a liberal arts education. Liberal, humanistic learning promotes personal development and, therefore, is an integral component of optimal success. Its [liberal arts education] broad context with its emphasis on inquiry and critical thinking is needed now more than ever. Such undertakings enhance capacities for the shaping of the self by instilling the ability to think for oneself, the successive reinventing of the world, and the unleashing of creative potential. Finally, a liberal education benefits all regardless of occupation by developing intellectual capacities, which has been revealed through the ages.

Liberal Arts vs. Vocational Education: A Historical Debate

The debate over the usefulness of education has a long history in America. *Beyond the University* serves as a superficial survey and comparison of influential figureheads from our collective past at odds with the purpose of education. Roth begins with the educational ideals of Thomas Jefferson, contrasting them with the practical approaches promoted by Benjamin Franklin. After an analysis of Emerson's views on education and the self, Booker T. Washington's opinion of education as a means of economic inclusion are compared with that of W.E.B. Du Bois. Jane Addams', William James', Richard Rorty's, Martha Nussbaum's, and John Dewey's educational philosophies follow.

John Dewey and a Shared Vision

Roth's understanding of Dewey mandates possible correction. Dewey argued vehemently against Snedden's philosophy of a narrow focused vocationalism, which transformed itself into industrial arts. At the opening of the 20th Century, Prosser and Snedden argued for the development of targeted skills for specific occupations, while Dewey advocated for a broader approach and application of career education to satisfy basic human fulfillment, which included vocational-adaptability and self-sufficiency, to best prepare students for life (Petrina, 1996; Rojewski, 2002). John Dewey desired education of the whole person through occupation, emphasizing the experience, active learning, and a connection to the learner's interests and activities. Dewey is one of the fathers of modern-day workforce education.

Differentiations need to be made regarding career education and respect for multiple options, pathways, and choice championed. Dewey's philosophy of learning through career, created an ever-widening schism in vocational education and the establishment of current occupational and technical studies. The aims of modern-day career education, career and technical education (CTE), and technology and engineering literacy are not far removed from that of liberal arts. Some individuals desire specific careers that require said vocational preparation. Beyond that, all parties concerned in specific subgroups within workforce education argue against "narrow, technical forms of teaching

intended to give quick, utilitarian results” (Roth, 2014, p. 10) for curricula that requires learners to develop literacy and thinking skills, soft skills, and the like. American liberal education is not the only path to life-long learning. Different options exist, as diversity is the norm. Truthfully, a skeptical and cynical spotlight has been cast by Americans on our education system in totality (Johnson & Duffett, 2003).

All educational institutions, regardless of focus and offerings, face the same student recruitment and retention issues. Malaise, pessimism, and general apathy are the zeitgeist of the current era. The majority of Americans focus on return on investment, and rightfully so. Rising tuition costs and stories of college graduates either unable to find employment or being underemployed are routinely in the media. So too is information about high-wage, in-demand occupations that require education and training below the baccalaureate level. Many of my peers have informed me of their choice to attend community college to obtain a certification and start a career to become financially stable and independent, with the goal of ultimately returning to college at night and further their education. Does this not speak to independent and problem-solution thinking? Is this not an exemplification of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where safety and security are a natural priority?

Final Analysis

Though there are ample reasons why the material in *Beyond the University* would not be agreeable to those in career and technical education, technology and engineering education, career development, and those that cannot afford the luxury of higher education, many vehemently agree with Roth. In short, though I reviewed this work because I felt it needed a critique, all was well written. Dr. Roth should be commended for his ideas and bringing them back into the social consciousness, opening up all for debate and hopefully moving education out of its current quagmire, to a new era of inspiration.

References

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