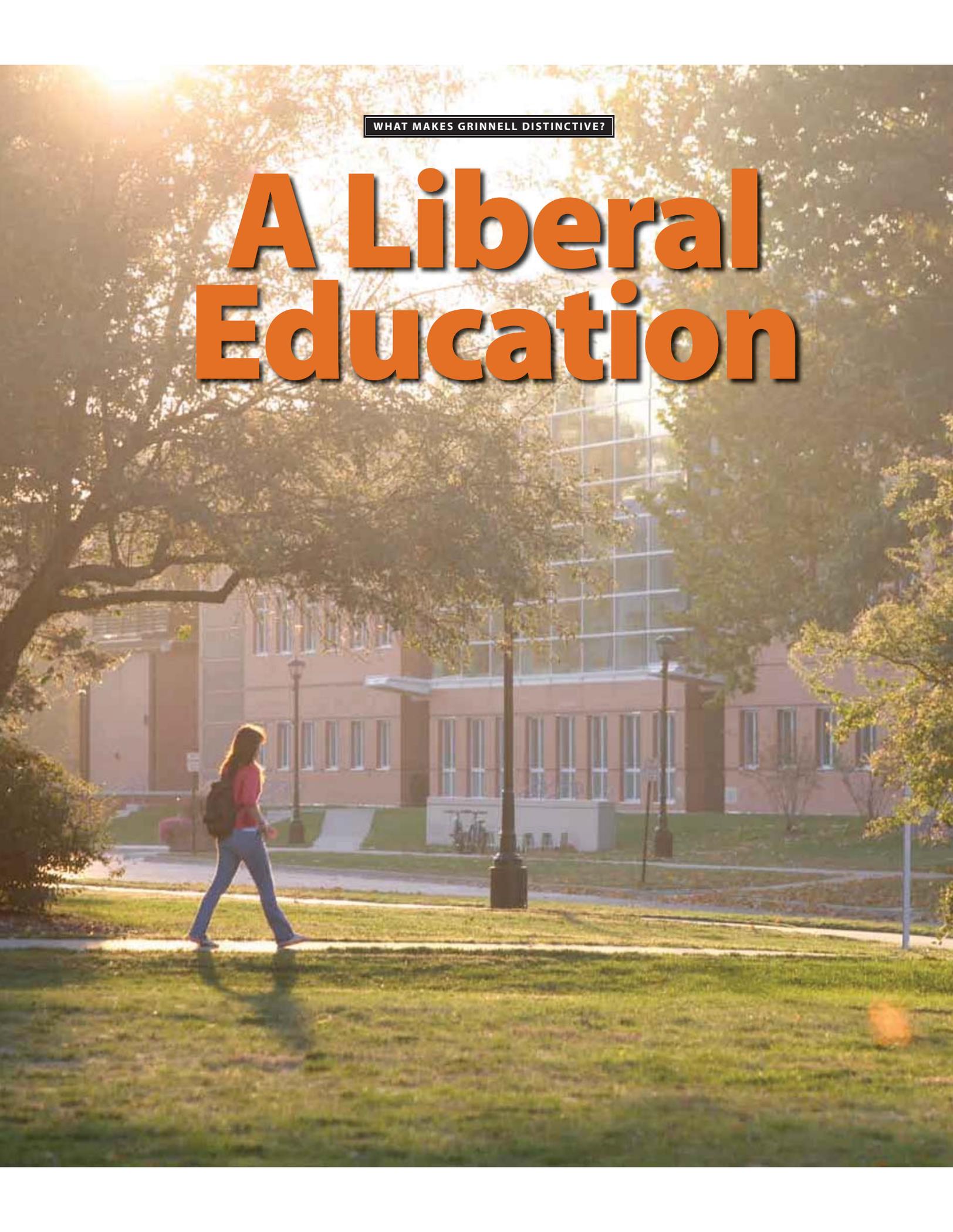


WHAT MAKES GRINNELL DISTINCTIVE?

A Liberal Education



The United States created a model of liberal education that's the envy of the world. So why is it increasingly rare now, when the world needs it most?

by Geoffrey Galt Harpham

In 2006 Danish researcher Jesper Eckhardt Larsen praised American colleges for what makes an American education unique. “The college institution,” he said, “tries to carry a large burden of leading to civic engagement, moral responsibility and lately also global and environmental awareness. ... There are quite a few good reasons to get inspired by the American model. At its best, the American liberal arts college facilitates a breadth of cultivation. ... It is relevant for life rather than just for work; it has a broader agenda than *Wissenschaft* [knowledge] alone; and it includes ethics, civic engagement, and the instilling of a global outlook in its students. Moreover, it seems to give back to the humanities their inherently educational function [of] inspiring all students.”

The uniquely American model of mass liberal education goes far beyond job preparation, furthering research, educating civil servants, or certifying a social class. It did not evolve by accident. It was deliberately crafted to educate the kind of curious, creative, independent citizens who could best take advantage of the privileges and responsibilities of a free democratic society — one in which one’s aspirations are ideally limited only by one’s merits. This model was funded by philanthropists who believed in placing within their reach, in Andrew Carnegie’s words, “ladders upon which the aspiring can rise.”

Today, grant-funded research and philanthropists with more profit-minded agendas have eroded the liberal education model at most American institutions of higher learning, leaving small liberal arts colleges with an increasingly rare and valuable cultural and educational mission — and one that continues to prove its unique worth.

Liberal Education

In 1945, Harvard published *General Education in a Free Society*, perhaps the most important document in the history of American higher education. It is a book-length argument that the entire educational system should encourage “certain intangibles of the American spirit” — a spirit that encouraged people not to define themselves through their jobs or stations in life, but as human beings free to explore

all that it means to be human. *General Education* held that the ultimate goal of education was not abstract intellectual ability or vocational skills, but “mastery of life; and since living is an art, wisdom is the indispensable means to this end.” It also held that such an education was not a utopic ideal, but a practical necessity if the United States were to continue to lead the world in the decades following World War II as a country made strong by an educated, enlightened, productive population.

General Education’s principles were translated into national educational policy by the six-volume “Truman Report” of 1947 titled *Higher Education for American Democracy*. It defined a distinctively American educational system as a “means to a more abundant personal life and a stronger, freer social order.” It placed the humanities at the center of the liberal education, as the curricular instrument for inculcating American identity. The 25 or 30 years that followed are commonly referred to as the “Golden Age” in American higher education.

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The Rise of Research

Things changed rapidly during the 1950s. The newly established National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health began pouring federal funding into university science and mathematics, which quickly became dependent on grant-funded research projects. The rapid rise of scientific research transformed American higher education from an innovative combination of educational processes and research activities to a professionalized and research-oriented activity — and not only in science, but in every field, including the humanities.

In his 1963 book *The Uses of the University*, Clark Kerr, president of the University of California system, described the university as a “knowledge industry” geared to production, research, technology, and industry; to productivity and profits; to the extension of human life; and to military and scientific supremacy. By his death in 2003, Kerr was dismayed by some of the changes he’d forecast: Liberal education and its ideal of moral citizenship had suffered greatly; and although the United

States had become the unchallenged leader in research, the university had become even more fragmented, and both public and private forms of funding less reliable, than he had anticipated.

Form Follows Funding

Ah, funding. Beginning in the late 19th century, wealthy people in the United States were accustomed to making long-range investments in academic and cultural life. The founding document of philanthropy, Andrew Carnegie's 1889 essay "The Gospel of Wealth," argued that if wealth was wasted on luxury it could easily lead to decadence, waste, and corruption; but such corruption could be avoided through the deliberate reduction of wealth through a progressive estate tax and especially through philanthropy.

Traditional forms of giving had not permitted Carnegie to distribute his wealth quickly enough to suit his impatient nature, and had failed to address the root causes of social ills. So, he invented a new mechanism, the private foundation, to do "good works in gross," as one writer put it.

Carnegie concluded "The Gospel of Wealth" with a list, headed by universities and libraries, of seven areas in which philanthropy could be most effective. "The best means of benefiting the community," he wrote, is for philanthropists to "place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise."

Carnegie's example was followed by fellow capitalists John D. Rockefeller, John Danforth, Henry Ford, Henry Luce, William Randolph Hearst, and by the descendants of Andrew W. Mellon. All targeted higher education in their philanthropic giving.

Now a new generation of "philanthrocapitalists" favor agility, impact, measurable results in a short time, an attention to immediate problems rather than root causes, and exit strategies for the investor. The bare-knuckled capitalists of an earlier time sought the betterment of mankind by supporting institutions they trusted. The new breed wants a quantifiable return on a "social investment." Compared to the old-school philanthropists, the new order is cold-blooded, rational, and largely indifferent, if not hostile, to liberal education and the humanities, which could never command anything like the same support as scientific, technological, or medical fields.

A Step Backward?

The result of these shifts in higher education function and funding is the evisceration of the idea that virtually defined

American culture after World War II: mass liberal education. With venture philanthropy focusing on donor-defined projects, scientific funding overwhelmingly committed to research, and the National Endowment for the Humanities supporting only a tiny amount of research and little else in colleges and universities, the nation is tacking away from creating more abundant personal lives and a stronger, freer social order through higher education. The ligatures binding American higher education — a system that earned the respect of the world by innovatively coupling liberal education and research and by its expansive vision of human flourishing — are being stretched, frayed, even ruptured.

It is both moving and vexing, at a time when Americans themselves seem to be losing their way with respect to higher education and the larger goals it is intended to serve, to be reminded by the likes of Jesper

Larson how inspiring "the American model" — at least the American model that was — still is to others: a liberal education with the goal of fostering the experience of intellectual freedom that can and should be enjoyed by citizens in a mature democracy. The United States is not the only, or necessarily the purest or the fairest, democracy in the world, but it is the only one so far that has sought to inculcate democratic principles in its educational system.

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Best Educational Practice

Liberal education also has another benefit that may interest those concerned about American competitiveness in the new global "knowledge economy." There is now a good deal of evidence suggesting that liberal education produces the best educational results. Summarizing this evidence, Francis Oakley, former professor of the history of ideas and president of Williams College and an authority on higher education, notes that in the United States, the best outcomes are delivered by those institutions that offer the most concentrated form of liberal education to a select population eager to receive it: liberal arts colleges, and especially the best liberal arts colleges.

According to Oakley, those institutions educate best that adhere most closely to the classical ideal of liberal education: "The selective private liberal arts college, perhaps more than any other institution of American higher education, exemplifies much of what has come to be known as best educational practice in undergraduate education. . . . students who attend selective liberal arts colleges will enjoy unique educational benefits."

The very best liberal arts colleges can hardly be taken as a model or even as a plausible ideal for the thousands of

American institutions of higher education. By one account, only 8 percent of all institutions of higher education in the United States offer a program of liberal education, and of those that do, liberal arts colleges represent a tiny fraction.

But virtually all the institutions of higher education in the United States that enjoy broad and favorable public recognition are committed to some kind of liberal education, including Cal Tech and MIT. In the enormous and diverse context of American higher education, the results achieved by liberal arts colleges serve to underscore the value of liberal education in all kinds of institutions. Even the authors of the widely noticed recent book *Academically Adrift*, which offers a harsh critique of American higher education for its failure to improve the learning skills of its students, carve out an exception for students in liberal arts fields, who show “significantly higher gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills over time than students in other fields of study.”

The most boldly imaginative aspect of the post-World War II compact was its noble attempt to create a society unified by the common opportunity to rise through education to the level of one’s merits. This country was not built on the idea of inherited inequality, and immigrants did not come here dreaming that their grandchildren would comprise a permanent helot class, fit only to be trained rather than educated. In addition to its proven educational benefits, liberal education, which tries to “place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise,” as Carnegie put it, gives substance to the promise of democracy.

Higher education’s mission is to encourage people to reach higher than they might have thought possible. Education is not higher if it simply mirrors the preferences

and immediate desires of society. That perspective must be informed by a concern for the deeper, long-term needs of a particular time, place, and community. The challenge for higher education is to find a balance between a reasonable and rational willingness to adapt its own structures and premises in light of ever-changing facts, and an insistence that the real goals are not immediate, economic, or vocational, but goals of a different kind: the promotion of more abundant personal lives and a freer, stronger social order.

There is a hidden genius in these banalities. Indeed, we must make every effort to reclaim, reactivate, and reinvigorate our own clichés. They are the envy of the world, and rightfully so. ■

This article is an adaptation of a lecture entitled “From Eternity to Here: Shrinkage in American Thinking about Higher Education” by Geoffrey Galt Harpham in the Joe Rosenfield ’25 Center on Grinnell’s campus, Sept. 27, 2011. You can read the full text of the lecture at www.grinnell.edu/magextras. Harpham is director of the National Humanities Center (www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org) in Research Triangle Park, N.C., the only institute worldwide fully dedicated to the advanced study of humanities. Harpham is a literary scholar and author of several books on the role of ethics in literary analysis and the role of language in intellectual history. His lecture was sponsored by Grinnell’s Center for the Humanities (www.grinnell.edu/academic/centhumanities), which supports research, teaching, talks, discussions, and symposia that focus on scholarly work across disciplines and historical periods. The activities of the center focus on an annual theme; for 2011–12 the theme is “Humanities Now.”

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Rare — But Powerful

In 2010, the Carnegie Foundation counted 4,634 higher education institutions in the United States. These enrolled a total of 20,727,586 students in undergraduate programs. Of those, just 270 colleges — including Grinnell and its peer institutions — offered “arts and sciences” programs (a Carnegie Foundation classification that most closely aligns with liberal arts colleges) to a total of 458,753 students.

That means that Grinnell College and others like it educate only 2.2 percent of the baccalaureate-seeking population in this country.

Yet according to the Carnegie Foundation, that 2.2 percent yields 11.53 percent of society’s leaders, including 12.25 percent of the “Philanthropy 400” leaders, 12 percent of the U.S. senators, and 10.87 percent of the “Fortune 500” CEOs.