

Liberty and Judgment: A Defense of Liberal Learning in American Democracy

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In recent years the question of higher education has taken center stage in the landscape of American political discourse. The university has quickly become a forum for larger debates over questions of identity, authority, and truth. My research this summer focused on the question of what, if anything, a defensible account of liberal education might look like within a mass democratic regime such as our own. The project proceeds from a civic frame, taking root in our fundamental American principles of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and asks whether liberal learning can both remain true to its intrinsic ends (freedom of mind, the formation of judgment, and the cultivation of the individual) and remain publicly justifiable to political equals without collapsing into pure utilitarian ends or culture-war mobilization.

To explore this question, I organized my research around three central figures: Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott, and Hannah Arendt. Through close readings (Strauss’s “Liberal Education and Responsibility”; Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics* and *The Voice of Liberal Learning*; Arendt’s “The Crisis in Education,” “What Is Authority?,” and *The Human Condition*), coupled with an examination of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom’s American extension of Strauss’s themes and an engagement with John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* as an ideological counterweight, I mapped the central tensions any democratic defense of liberal education must address, these being excellence vs. equality, intrinsic goods vs. instrumentality, conservation vs. renewal, and teacher–student asymmetry vs. political egalitarianism.

In reading these texts, I came to formulate what will become the foundation for my honors project in the Government department where I will divide each of my three main authors from this summer into three separate chapters. The first chapter will reconstruct and evaluate Strauss’s claim that liberal education is a counter-poison to mass culture: an initiation into the highest things that cannot be justified by utility without ceasing to be liberal. Read alongside Bloom, this chapter will test whether islands of aristocratic formation can be publicly defended in a democracy and under what institutional conditions (canon, authority, leisure) they avoid mere elitism. The second chapter will turn to Oakeshott’s vision of the university as a “place of learning,” a conversation of distinct voices pursued for their own sake. Here I will assess whether non-instrumental practices of attention can be sustained by democratic institutions pressured by outcomes, metrics, and policy agendas, and whether Oakeshott’s conservative temper risks quietism or instead disciplines politics. The third chapter will develop Arendt’s account of education as fiduciary “world-introduction,” grounding the legitimacy of authority, selection, and judgment in the adult task of preserving a common world for newcomers. I will extend Arendt’s framework to the university to argue that cultivating judgment through exemplary works supplies a public rationale for standards that neither reduces education to workforce training nor weaponizes it for activism.

The project’s significance is both civic and institutional. In a moment when higher education is drawn into polarized conflicts (intensified by recent administrative interventions, legislative campaigns, and populist critiques on one side and technocratic managerialism on the other) recovering a defensible account of liberal education bears directly on the American promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. By clarifying why and how liberal education can be publicly justified without capitulating to the leveling and mechanizing impulses of mass democracy, my project aims to articulate principles for protecting authority, sustaining judgment, and designing curricula that conserve a shared world while enabling its measured renewal.

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