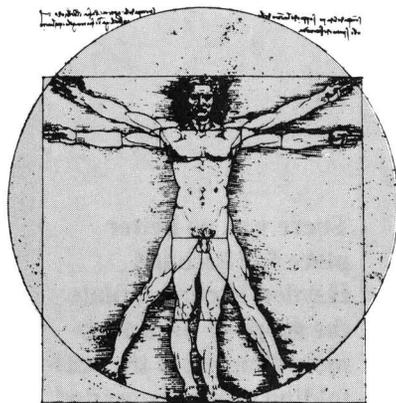


# THE FUTURE SHAPE OF EDUC

By Dr. Peter Marsh



**The ideal men and women of tomorrow need a new type of education—one that transcends our obsolete distinctions between liberal and professional learning.**

**T**here has been a good deal of handwringing in recent years about the sorry state of liberal education in the United States. National educational associations and governmental agencies have expressed alarm at the erosion of the traditional liberal arts and sciences in American colleges and universities. Everyone from parents to prospective employers bemoans the inability of undergraduates to write clearly and think incisively about the broad issues with which they must deal.

The finger of blame commonly points toward the vast expansion of professional schools: schools of management, engineering, computer science, public communications, and so forth. The fear is that American higher education is becoming technologized at the expense of the fundamental liberal learning.

It would be rash to pooh-pooh this fear. But I have a nagging suspicion that it misses a crucial point.

I want to insist that liberal and professional education are not separate, self-contained enterprises and should not be viewed as such.

Most educators would agree to that statement in principle. But in practice, under the impact of specialization and for administrative convenience, we have segregated professional schools from colleges of arts and sciences. The lines of demarcation have grown into high, thick walls not only administratively but also in the behavior and minds of the faculty and hence—is it surprising?—of students. Tear down those walls, as 20 faculty members at Syracuse have been doing for the past 18 months, and the results can be extraordinary.

The distinction between liberal and professional education is anachronistic. It no longer reflects what students, from the arts and sciences as well as the professional schools, want from their education. It fails to reflect the professional character of the arts and sciences disciplines on the one hand, and the liberal aspirations of the faculty in professional

schools on the other. The most eloquent statements that I hear about the importance of liberal learning come not from faculty members in the College of Arts and Sciences but from the faculty members, for example, in public communications and management. They insist that it is not enough to be a skilled technician. They demand breadth of mind, depth of culture, and an understanding of what makes people tick.

A new type of undergraduate education, breaking through that distinction, is needed. We must ask, Where do the fields of liberal and professional inquiry truly intersect? How can those critical linkages be conveyed to undergraduates? And, ultimately, what changes in the structure of American universities would help to break down the walls that keep liberal and professional education separate?

Over the ages great scholars have developed persuasive explanations of the prime importance of a liberal education, but most of these explanations were written before the pure (let alone applied) sciences bulked large in the undergraduate curriculum. Teaching professional subject matter as well as the arts and sciences to undergraduates was not foreseen.

By contrast, no one has presented a generally convincing rationale for educating undergraduates in the professions. The function of professional education for *graduate* students is obvious: law schools, MBA programs, and medical schools must inculcate the knowledge and skills needed in those professions. These graduate professional schools have worked on the assumption that the students who enter them have received a liberal education as undergraduates.

But, whether we like it or not, American high school seniors have been flocking in unprecedented numbers to *undergraduate* professional programs, often urged on by their parents, all concerned to see that the students gain entry after graduation into promising careers. Must liberal education be sacrificed in the scramble? The students who enter professional schools want and are taught a lot of skills and technology. But what kind of an *education* are they getting?

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I believe that, at the undergraduate level, liberal and professional learning must be integrated. Yet they cannot be well integrated until we discover, by patient intellectual inquiry and pedagogical exploration, where the two truly intersect and how those intersections have to be conveyed effectively to undergraduates.

Syracuse University, in my opinion, provides an ideal site for experimentation along these lines, and luckily I am not alone in that judgment. Recently both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation have funded major initiatives at Syracuse to challenge the boundaries between liberal and professional education.

We have at Syracuse a strong college of arts and sciences surrounded by a galaxy of strong professional schools. We at SU may think that our institutional profile is normal, but we need to recognize that we are quite abnormal—and we should glory in the fact. In most universities the college of arts and sciences is decidedly more dominant and the professional schools more peripheral. In institutes of technology or of art, the situation is reversed. There, the professional school is at the center, and the arts and sciences are peripheral. At Syracuse, to a rare degree, the two sides are more or less equally balanced.

Syracuse University now offers students a wide range of optional combinations of liberal and professional courses. The initiative in the creation of these options has come usually from the College of Arts and Sciences, anxious to convince students who enroll there that they are not thereby abandoning the opportunity to acquire a professionally useful education. Students in arts and sciences can now take, for example, minors in management.

At the same time, some of the professional schools at Syracuse have extended or thoughtfully restructured the liberal arts requirements that their students must meet. All students in public communications, to cite the most outstanding example, must meet the requirements



of the liberal arts core established in the College of Arts and Sciences.

These are reciprocal, cooperative arrangements in the curriculum, a matter of putting existing courses side by side. Valuable as they are, however, they are not enough. They stop short of the real need: to integrate liberal and professional education in the same classroom.

Hence the signal importance of the Mellon Foundation project at Syracuse University.

In the fall of 1984, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded Syracuse \$300,000 to see what could be done through the University Honors Program to develop new ways of integrating liberal and professional education among undergraduates. The Honors Program, with its 250 academically able and ambitious students drawn from all over the campus, provided a manageable microcosm of the University well suited for that experiment.

**W**e began the experiment by bringing together 20 of the leading scholars—teachers at Syracuse, half from the arts and sciences and half from the professional schools, into a prolonged seminar intended to create a range of integrative courses in all the colleges and schools. But, in a development that symbolizes the challenge as much as it hints at solutions, the seminar soon generated a much broader sense of its charge.

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The seminar met for the first time during a long weekend in January 1985. Its members included, from the arts and sciences, a neurophysicist, an enzymologist, a social psychologist, two historians (including myself), a philosopher of social and natural science, an art historian, two literary theorists, and a professor of composition. From the professional schools I had recruited two civil engineers, a transport manager, a professor of organization management, a nurse specializing in family practice, the chairman of the advertising department, a television writer, a newspaper writer, a painter, and an actor.

I used to wake up at night in a sweat before this combination met for the first time, wondering how they would get along. The gulf in feeling between the arts and sciences faculty members and those in the professional schools looked menacing. Who would devour whom? Who were the Christians and who the lions?

There were times of floundering that first day and moments of tension. But vastly stronger from the outset was the hungry eagerness of all the participants to engage with each other.

Between January and May we all read a selection of books chosen to illuminate some of our various fields: contemporary business management and literary theory, the evolution

of scientific thought and the socioeconomic dynamics of art, the making of modern medicine and Californian minimalist painting. The animation of our resulting discussion astonished us all.

Now in its second year, the seminar itself has become a paradigm of the integration of liberal and professional learning that it seeks. The participants have been fascinated by the light that other disciplines and professions can shed on their own. The discoveries came unpredictably. Sometimes they were disconcerting. Sometimes they had a synergizing impact. The physicist challenged the use by a currently prominent writer on business management of the concept of turbulence and later pointed out that the notion of holism now popular in some health-care circles was held in discredit among natural scientists, who also equate equilibrium with death. The chairman of advertising insisted, despite protestations to the contrary, that his field provided conclusive proof of the very weak impact of the media upon the public.

On the other hand, just when you would expect contemptuous conflict, lights of fellow feeling flashed on, and the challenge came from a quite different angle. We read an account of a Californian painter who had spent four or five years putting dots—not very many dots—on a canvas. In a flight of fancy the painter then turned the dots into curves and ultimately reached the ultimate in minimalism by putting nothing on the canvas at all. I wondered as I finished the book what the next day's discussion would be like, and I shuddered.

When I asked who would like to begin the discussion, I quaked when an engineer raised his hand. He proceeded to say that his first reaction had been how completely absurd it was to spend six years putting a few dots on a canvas—but then he thought about the research on which he had spent the past six months, and his disdain turned to sympathy. A professor of management commented approvingly on the painter's single-minded enterprise. The painter was eventually attacked not for his stingy use of dots but for his total disengagement from the political upheaval that engulfed the world while he worked.

Between sessions of the seminar, its members, either singly or in pairs, have also been meeting their original charge to create integrative courses within their various schools.

Those courses have taken various forms. In engineering, for example, an engineer and a historian collaborated on a course that combined professional and liberal arts perspectives. A course in management used concepts from the social sciences to examine the field of management as a whole, rather than as the separate functional areas on which the rest of the professional curriculum tends to focus. And a course in the visual and performing arts examined the dynamics of creativity with which all the performing arts, liberal arts, and professions are in some way or other concerned.

In both discussions and creation of courses, some concepts have proven to be of intersecting value through every discipline and professional field. We have come back repeatedly to the themes of professionalization, objectivity, mastery of the craft, and what we call embeddedness; or, to look at it from the other side, the distorting tensions caused by the extraction of each profession and discipline from emersion in the totality of things.

Above all, we are discovering that integrating liberal and professional education is not a subject for students to be taught but a process for all of us, faculty as well as students, to learn. My job as director of the project—and it has been the most absorbing assignment I have ever tackled—has been essentially to facilitate. Like a potent drug, the seminar has turned its participants into addicts of the process, eager for the next dose. The word that we have used to describe the most salient phenomenon among students who have taken our courses is *growth*, by which we mean increasing recognition of intellectual linkages. We have been almost embarrassed to hear students say about course after course that, as never before, they were induced to think. The integration of liberal and professional education is, for everyone involved, a process of discovery.

The process is not entirely euphoric. The reflex to retire to familiar territory, especially among the prestigious arts and sciences, is strong. Sometimes, attempts to explain promising lines of advance in one discipline or profession have provoked dismissive reactions from others. On occasion our enterprise has accentuated quarrels over academic turf. Fears have been voiced, particularly in professional schools where faculty resources are scarce, about administrative willingness to support in-

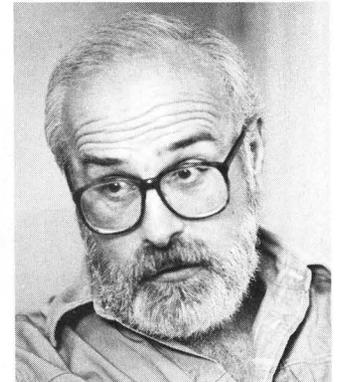
novation. These reflexes and fears are deeply rooted and will not be quickly—if ever—removed.

Furthermore, the Mellon Foundation project will have produced nothing more than hothouse plants of marginal importance if it remains within the exclusive domain of the Honors Program where the experiment began. The results must be applicable throughout the undergraduate curriculum, not only at Syracuse but nationwide, where the phenomenon of the education of undergraduates in professional schools is large and almost certainly irreversible.

Once the current Mellon Foundation project is complete, if it produces the valid results it promises, the next challenge will be to irradiate the undergraduate curriculum campus-wide, enhancing the nature of professional education and eventually defining what an undergraduate professional education ought to mean and impart.

There is every reason for optimism about the outcome at Syracuse. In addition to the rare balance of resources here, the commitment of the faculty members in the seminar, the envious curiosity of their colleagues, and the enthusiastic responsiveness of students in the courses that have been developed, the University's administration is wholeheartedly supportive. Nationwide, the project has kindled considerable interest through the National Honors Council. I was asked to report on the project to a faculty and administrators conference last June in Boston on "Liberal Learning and the World of Action" and have received repeated requests from across the country for reports on our progress.

We hope to conclude the current stage of our enterprise with the completion by December of a book-length study of the project, for publication in the autumn of 1987. If it fairly reflects the value of the project to date, that book on "the Syracuse Experiment" will mark a crucial step in the advance of Syracuse University to historical distinction in the annals of American undergraduate education.



*As director of the University Honors Program, Peter Marsh has coordinated a nationally significant experiment in higher education, directed toward the complete integration of professional and liberal education. He writes here of that project and its promise.*

*This fall, Marsh steps down from the director's post, returning to full-time teaching in the history department. The post will be filled by Robert McClure, associate professor of political science.*