

A PLEA FOR LIBERAL CULTURE

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649236374

A Plea for Liberal Culture by Josiah Parsons Cooke

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

JOSIAH PARSONS COOKE

**A PLEA FOR
LIBERAL CULTURE**

A PLEA

FOR

LIBERAL CULTURE.

122125

BY

JOSIAH PARSONS COOKE.

CAMBRIDGE:

JOHN WILSON AND SON.

University Press.

1890.

MEMORIAL.¹

IT is with great regret that I find myself obliged to dissent from the opinion of a majority of my colleagues with regard to the shortening of the undergraduate course of this College, and that I must regard the measures which have already been taken in this direction as of far more serious import than they are apparently regarded by most of those with whom I am associated. It is only my earnest conviction that those measures are fraught with great peril to the cause of liberal culture in this community which leads me, in opposition to a majority vote of the College Faculty, to urge the Board — with whom the final decision now rests — to prevent their consummation. I feel that the character of this community has been to

¹ To the Board of Overseers of Harvard College, in accordance with their vote requesting any member of the minority to present his reasons for opposing the plan of the College Faculty for the reduction of the College course, a plan which was adopted in March, 1830.

a large extent moulded by the liberal culture of the College, and is constantly sustained by the associations which cluster round college life, and that any measures which tend to impair this culture or weaken college class associations will cause irreparable injury not only to the College, but also to the community and to the nation.

As it seems to me, through the influence of the elective system we have been gradually drifting into a dangerous position, which recent action has only more clearly defined, in changing the basis of our first degree in arts from a period of residence to a number of courses of study. All this tends to give to our college course the tone of an educational mill, rather than of a studious retreat. It tends to substitute for the influence of lofty associations and refined intercourse the feverish acquisition of a definite amount of knowledge in the shortest time. It tends to replace the contemplative life of the scholar by the restless rivalry of the market; and is, in my view, a yielding of the great purposes for which universities were founded to the commercial spirit of the age.

Believing, as I do, that a prolonged period of quiet study guarded from the restlessness of active life is not only an inestimable privilege to our young men, but also of the greatest value to the active community

which they are soon to direct, I look with extreme jealousy on any measures which tend to shorten this period or impair its influence. The difference between sixteen and eighteen courses may be of small importance; but the difference between four years of quiet study and three years of busy acquisition of technical knowledge is world-wide.

Liberal education is not merely a question of acquisition, but much more a question of growth; and the acquisition is chiefly of value in so far as it directs and stimulates the growth; nor is it growth in knowledge merely, but growth in all the attributes of the highest manhood. Harvard College cannot compete with masters who teach any language in twelve easy lessons; but if we do our duty, our College can be made the field in which growth in character, as well as in scholarship, shall be carefully guarded and fostered. Growth cannot be measured in a number of academic courses. It cannot be forced beyond a very limited extent. If over-stimulated, it will not be healthy; and if our sons are to grow to the full measure of educated men, we must not grudge Alma Mater the necessary time.

The value of class associations in extending the influence of the College over the subsequent life of its graduates is a fact of profound significance. Similar

associations have been diligently fostered in professional and technical schools; but their influence is comparatively feeble; and the comparison plainly indicates how great must be the loss if the true spirit of liberal culture were replaced by a mere rivalry in the acquisition of useful knowledge. Moreover a large number of our students never have gained, and never can be expected to gain, more than very moderate attainments in any subject. This very large class of college graduates will always be educated more by associations and personal influence than by actual study of books. They may never be distinguished as scholars; but they constantly acquire a high degree of culture, and give a tone to the community in which they live; and through them the College wields a very great power. To such men the class associations are the one feature of their life among us which they most prize, and which really does more for their education than all the college exercises combined; and any measures which tend to shorten the term of residence or break up class associations will lessen the influence of the College on the community. That the measures under discussion will have this effect no one can question.

When it is said that the degree should be based on residence, it is of course understood that a certain

minimum attainment must be enforced by examinations; and as thus understood residence is the usual basis for the first degree in arts in all schools of liberal culture. That on such a basis degrees may be unworthily bestowed is granted, and so they may be on any basis on which an institution dependent for its support on the good-will of its patrons may be governed. Examinations in a certain number of miscellaneous courses, in regard to which nothing is fixed but the number, are certainly no adequate safeguards. The requisition of residence at least ensures a prolonged association with the forms of learning, and thus secures a certain amount of culture.

But if examinations on a certain number of miscellaneous courses are an unsatisfactory basis for a pass degree, they are a still less satisfactory basis for a degree with honors. No possible standard of comparison can be found between courses on the most diverse subjects, given by teachers using methods utterly unlike, and estimating proficiency in wholly different ways. It is notorious that some of our courses demand of the student more than twice as much time and attention as others, and that even the very best students when electing a difficult subject often take some easy course as what they call "a soft snap," in order to gain the necessary time. Under such cir-

cumstances what definite significance can there be to sixteen, eighteen, or any other number of courses as the standard for a degree?

It is said that the courses may be graded. But how are they to be graded? And who is to grade them? How is a course which involves chiefly delicate manipulation or careful observation to be compared with those courses which imply critical acumen, profound research, or deep thought? Is the Faculty to grade them, consisting, as it does for the most part, of men each engrossed in special studies, and naturally attaching great value to the peculiar form of discipline which has attracted him? The more it is considered, the more impracticable will the idea of grading be found to be; and it will be seen that the inequalities must be accepted as a necessary result of an elective system. With a prescribed period of residence the evil is not serious. Good scholars take pride in electing the hard courses; and the soft courses serve to lubricate the running gear of our system. But abandon the requisition of residence, and put a premium on securing the degree in the shortest possible time, and it will be easy to foresee the fate of the hard courses which reflect honor on the scholarship of the College.

In classing a course as soft or hard we by no means prejudge its educational value. It is the great virtue