

The Challenge of Pragmatism to General Education: A Case Study of American General Education

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Abstract: General education was introduced into the United States from Europe in the 17th century, with the expansion of American higher education and the pursuit of American pragmatism, general education in the United States gradually gave up the training of personal thinking and the pursuit of life ideals. General education in the United States has gradually evolved into a tool for students to acquire skills. It eventually led to growing hostility among Americans to general education, worries about the future of liberal arts students, the inability of employers to hire satisfactory graduates and a decline in the quality of higher education. Obviously changing the current situation of general education and balancing the relationship between the development of general education and the pursuit of pragmatism education for the future of the United States will be a major problem that must be solved in the field of higher education in the United States.

1. Historical Development of Liberal Arts Education

The term liberal education comes from the European concept of "liberal arts", which was originally named liberal education, an educational system aimed at cultivating free human beings [1].

Due to historical factors, the model of higher education in the United States originated in Europe. The first university, the New Citizens College (later Harvard University), appeared in the North American colonies in 1636. The university made the training of educated ministers and citizens its highest purpose. From this perspective, liberal education in the United States was initially modeled on that of England and was introduced with the hope that it would foster critical thinking and the development of free people in each individual. But with the rapid development of the industrial revolution in America in the 18th century, people saw the great changes brought by the application of natural sciences to people's lives, and the purpose of higher education began to gradually shift to practicality. To oppose this vocational orientation, Yale University issued a report on education against vocational orientation in 1828, which became known as The Yalereportof1828, and the following year AS. Packard wrote an article in the North American Review defending the Yale Report, in which the term "liberal education" was used for the first time, The term "liberal education" was used for the first time in this article [2]. However, with the rapid development of productivity, the increasing renewal of science and technology, and the approaching end of the first

industrial revolution in the United States, the great changes in people's lives brought about by the natural sciences and their applications were seen to a much greater extent. Especially with the enactment of the Land Grant Act of 1862, the American public became increasingly aware of the changes brought by practical discipline to their lives. The American public gradually abandoned the pursuit of noble ideas and shifted to the worship of skills and the desire for a comfortable life. At this time, liberal education gradually began to "bow" to real life, and the ancient Greek liberal education, which was far from real life and cultivated individual thinking, was gradually abandoned by the United States. The purpose of liberal education has also begun to change in the direction of careers.

General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee, published by Harvard University Press in 1945, is regarded as the bible of American liberal education. It analyzes the problems of liberal education in the United States and Harvard, and raises a series of questions about what kind of students we want to train and what kind of citizens we want to train in liberal education. It points out a clear path for the future of liberal education in the United States.

In the late 1970s, the deterioration of economic conditions in American society led to a tightening of university funding, and at the same time, there was a growing demand for universities to become more efficient. In this context, in order to protect their student population and ensure their continued survival, school directors had to reform their own curricula; especially many social and community service courses were added to the general education curriculum [3]. At the same time, many general education courses were cut, and general education gradually came out of the ivory tower.

The above development stages can be compiled into a time development chart, as shown in Figure 1.

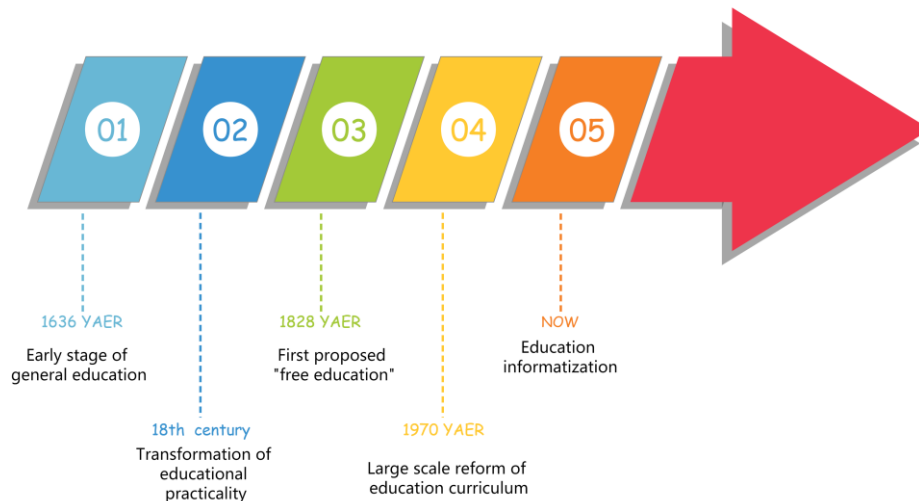


Figure 1: Change of general education over time.

2. General Education under the Influence of Pragmatism

Higher education has a dual function of serving the individual and society, but this function of serving society was gradually magnified in the United States under the influence of pragmatism, until higher education gradually neglected the cultivation of the individual and became a social product, losing its own independence. As Figure 2 shows, in 1970, there were 689 liberal arts colleges, accounting for 24 percent of all higher education institutions, and by 1987, the number had fallen to 540. Breneman in his report states that the number of liberal arts colleges was further

reduced to 212 in 1990 and this number was reduced to 130 in 2012 [4].

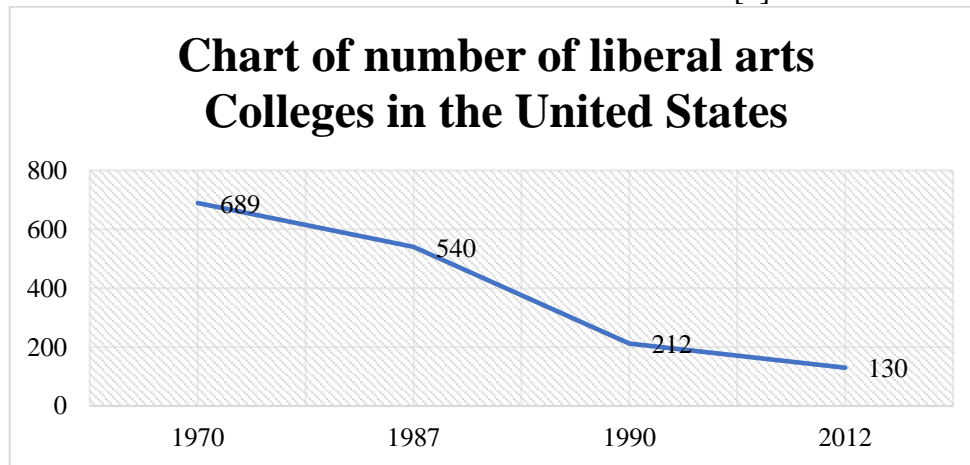


Figure 2: Number of Liberal Arts Colleges in the United States

The fact that the number of liberal arts colleges has been decreasing during a period of rapid expansion of higher education in the United States is a side reflection of the unprecedented crisis facing liberal arts colleges in the United States. From an internal university perspective, the market and employment is a major factor that American universities must consider when developing relevant curriculum plans today. This has led to an increasing market orientation in the general education curriculum. From the student's perspective, today's entering college students are under the illusion that they will learn more skills through their college education in order to improve their wages upon graduation. In response to this situation, general education courses have had to be scaled back or made more relevant to individual career skills. Liberal arts education is also under pressure from official assessments, with the U.S. Department of Education prioritizing student employment over many important but not easily assessed items (e.g., students' critical thinking, knowledge of the individual, etc.) as one of the three major assessment indicators. And according to the 2020 NAS, unemployment rates are high for the same liberal arts cohort, with 1.9%, 2.1%, and 4.6% for electrical engineering, finance, and humanities graduates, respectively [5]. As shown in Figure 3. This point has also led to the weakening of liberal arts education in American higher education institutions to better respond to government assessments. This also explains why higher education in the United States is expanding while the number of liberal arts colleges has plummeted so rapidly in such a short period of time.

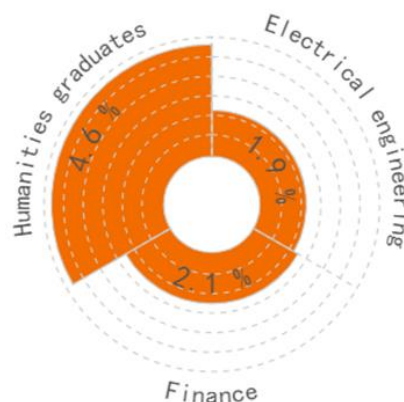


Figure 3: Unemployment rate of graduates of different majors.

Of course, the rise in college tuition is also a major cause of the alienation of liberal arts

education. As shown in Figure 4, the average cost of tuition, housing, and meals at private universities in the United States has increased from \$9,228 in 1985-1986 to \$41,468 in 2016-2017 [6]. Many students in the United States use loans to be able to pay such high tuition fees, which is a significant amount for most average American families, so students and their parents have to think about the prospects of this profession when considering a college major, and of course the main consideration here is the future economic prospects of this career. The main consideration here is the future economic prospects of the profession, including whether you can pay off your loans in the future or how you can earn your tuition back in the shortest possible time.

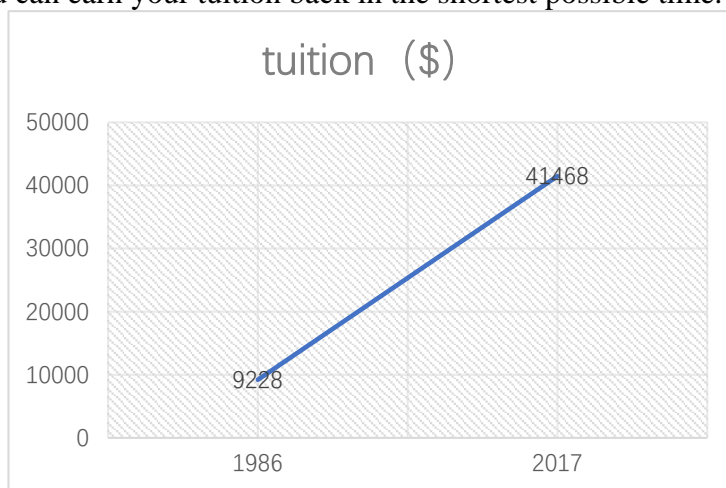


Figure 4: Tuition Trends of American Liberal arts Colleges

In addition to this, the delivery of general education courses seems to be a major problem in the United States. Some universities in the United States do not have enough faculty to handle such general education courses. Even in research universities with sufficient faculty, faculty members do not have enough energy to teach a general education course due to their busy schedules and heavy research commitments, which is compounded by the fact that many general education courses in research universities are taught in large classes. Moreover in American universities, faculty appointments are not tied to faculty teaching alone, and faculty promotions are tied only to their own research [7]. This also affects the motivation of faculty to teach general education courses to some extent.

Finally, the concept of career education at the high school level penetrates deep into students' perceptions and accelerates the alienation of general education. In the United States, many middle schools have already arranged career planning courses for 12-13 -year-old students, and in high school, schools use career education as an investment to attract students to study and consciously guide them to make career-oriented selection of colleges or universities [8]. This career orientation at the high school level is not only reflected in the teaching and curriculum of the curriculum, but also in the hiring of high school teachers. Public high schools in the United States are required to recruit teachers with a philosophy that reflects an emphasis on career education. If teachers are hired to major in Liberal Arts Courses, they are required to take an additional year or two in school to meet the requirements for teaching certification [9]. This invariably leads those who want to pursue a career in high school teaching to abandon their liberal arts majors in favor of other majors. Under the guidance of such long-term career-oriented teachers, the career concept gradually penetrates into the students' hearts and minds, which has an invisible impact on their perceptions of college and the aspects of college choice.

Fundamentally, liberal education in the United States faces two major contradictions, One is the ideal of pursuing a fully humanistic classical liberal arts education. The second is the

professionalism of developing useful vocational skills [10]. Of course, in today's world of rapid technological development and increasingly fierce competition among nations, it is clearly unrealistic and not in the national interest of the United States to pursue an all-humanities classical liberal arts education on a large scale, as was done in the Middle Ages. Of course, we are not opposed to career-oriented or professional education. But how to balance the two is crucial. Most American colleges and universities do not seem to be doing a competent job in this regard. As Harry R. Lewis, the former dean of Harvard College at Harvard University In his book "Excellence without a Soul: How Harvard Forgot the purpose of education," Lewis says that Harvard has excelled in innovation, but it has forgotten to nurture the "soul" of people. At the same time, it seriously points out that Harvard has forgotten the fundamental mission of a university, such as helping students to grow and to know themselves [11].

3. The Consequences of Alienation

The consequences of alienation can be considered from at least three aspects, as shown in Figure 5.

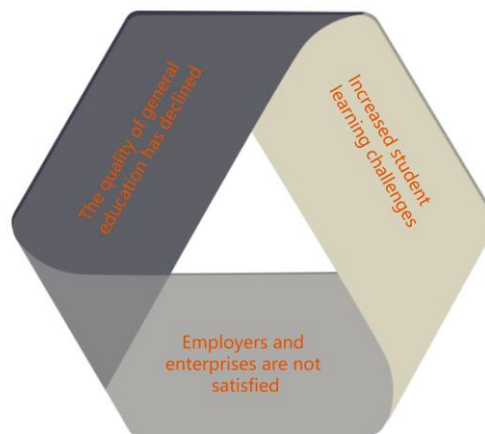


Figure 5: Consequences of alienation education

3.1. The Decline in Recognition of General Education

The consequences of this alienation are not only a decline in the American public's confidence in higher education but also the growing public hostility toward liberal arts education. Data from a 2018 survey by the American Council on Education shows that public perceptions of the value and quality of a college degree have declined significantly over the past two years. Only 48% of respondents consider liberal arts education to be a good education, compared to 88% and 71% who consider polytechnic and business education to be good education, respectively, and the respondents' primary measure of success in higher education can be attributed to one word: work. Corresponding to the survey data is the increasing number of people who are choosing business school or related business education. This inevitably leads to more business talent coming out of colleges and universities, but with a lack of humanities immersion, the business ethics of these business professionals are yet to be tested further. This increased hostility will also affect the next generation's perception of higher education, leading to higher dropout rates, a phenomenon that, if it worsens, is likely to result in a national talent shortage. It will not be able to provide an inexhaustible source of motivation for the country's sustained economic growth. Such a result is also contrary to the original intention of the government to promote vocational education in the hope that it can continue to contribute to the development of the national economy.

3.2. The Challenges Students Face in the Future

This transformation of higher education into initial training for a specific occupation in American colleges and universities is inherently risky and is essentially a gamble on the futures market. In this era of rapid scientific and technological innovation, if our students only learn relevant skills in college, then by the day they graduate or several years later, the skills they learned in college may no longer be applicable to the requirements of the society at that time, or perhaps the whole industry will be eliminated in a few years, so where will students with "old" skills go? Where do students with "old" skills go from here? We have to think about this real problem. Secondly, the impact of market supply and demand, perhaps the current software engineering career and its hot, results in a large number of students to learn this profession, but on the day students graduate, software engineering may no longer be hot, and even a surplus of talent situation. At this time, students studying software engineering may face an extremely embarrassing situation. In addition, the few students in the next few decades have to engage in only one kind of work, and even a significant number of students when they graduate to find a job is not the work he studied in college related work. This is where the student's ability to learn and adapt is particularly important.

3.3. Employers are Unable to Hire Satisfactory Graduates

In fact, the population and higher education administrators seem to be misdirected. According to a 2015 Hart Research Associates survey of employers found that most employers claim they expect their employees to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems in specific professions. The professional education that students seek does not do much to develop these skills. In fact, this leads to a conflict between employers and universities and graduates. Employers want to hire graduates with problem-solving and critical thinking skills. However, colleges and universities are forced to reduce general education courses to meet the needs of parents and students by increasing specialized courses and skills courses and reducing general education courses that develop people's thinking skills and resilience. This way, colleges cater to students, who believe they are learning what they want to learn in school. But this approach produces graduates that employers do not want to hire, and students may not understand why they have all skills they need but are still unappealing to employers. This has led to growing hostility toward higher education among students, parents, and employers.

4. Conclusions

The alienation of general education in the United States today reflects the pursuit of pragmatism by the American people, and the former idealism of the United States is being eclipsed. It also reflects the failure of liberal education's transformation from elite education to mass education in order to adapt to the current era. The failure of this transformation also has something to do with the increasing popularity of popular pragmatism caused by centuries of technological development in the United States.

Currently the attitude of Americans towards higher education is simply the pursuit of professional education, this pursuit is behind pragmatism in part, of course it is not difficult to understand for ordinary people to make their life more rich, which is the most important thing in life, and for critical thinking, the freedom of life, the pursuit of truth is behind many other things. There is no denying that a successful career and free income are important indicators of success in a liberal arts education, but it is not right to assume that liberal arts majors are economically inferior to those who study mechanics, software, or finance just because they earn less at graduation. In addition, we should see the long-term value of general education, which can train our thinking,

cultivate our habits of lifelong learning, and help us adapt to social changes. These capabilities cannot be measured in economic terms. Only specific areas in the knowledge economy, knowledge is not enough to make us an advantage in the global labor market or make progress, it must be combined with a liberal arts education, it will give students a wide range of transferable knowledge and skills, to prepare for their first job, but also to ensure that they can continue after employment.

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