
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Inaugural flunks education history, limits aspirations

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | Education, History, Politics

“The true college will ever have one goal — not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.” — W.E.B. Dubois, *as quoted in* Andrew Delbanco, “College: What It Was, Is, And Should Be”

Jan. 30, 2013 — As many have noted, President Obama’s [second inaugural address](#) reflected a deep awareness of critical themes in American history. He touched on the founding principle, still a work in progress, that all men are created equal. He referenced the necessity of fighting a Civil War — the second American Revolution — to purge our nation of the sin of slavery.

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Though he momentarily lost his courage by omitting the crucial role of unions in securing decent wages and working conditions for millions of Americans, he did recite some key lessons of the 20th century: that markets need to be regulated; that a great economy does not spring magically from individual “entrepreneurs” but rather is built on solid infrastructure supported by all of us through our government; and, mindful of the fact that “any one of us, at any time, may face a job loss, or a sudden illness, or a home swept away in a terrible storm,” that “every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity.”

Obama’s limited remarks about education, by contrast, offered no uplift, no appeal to the great hopes of generations of Americans that have come before us. His pitch, dredged from the same early-20th century period of industrialization when “we determined that a modern economy requires railroads and highways to speed travel and commerce,” was utilitarian entirely: we need schools and colleges to “train our workers.”

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One scours the text of the inaugural address in vain for any broader purpose cited by the President. Yes, education, like other matters of public concern, is a collective endeavor, but in the service of having the math and science teachers “we’ll need to equip our children for the future.” It is, after all, a brutal world out there (that is, a Clinton/Obama there-is-no-alternative-to-unrestrained-globalization world), and the little ones must be made ready. How will we “empower our citizens” to “work harder, learn more, reach higher?” With “skills.”

Perhaps the President believes that education can only be sold as a practical commodity. And, indeed, more and more parents and students do view high school and college as training grounds where one can be made more attractive to potential employers.

But there is a rich tradition of American thought stretching back to the early days of the Republic that viewed education in a different way. Education, in this alternative model, was essential for democratic citizenship. That is, only people who were educated would be able to take on their role as active and engaged citizens.

I don't mean to suggest that there was an educational promised land from which we have been expelled. In fact, the implementation of the ideal of education for citizenship — much like the implementation of the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence — stumbled badly, and is still not achieved.

In the early days, for example, the hopes for public schools on the part of founders like Jefferson were disappointed — advocates of small government refused to supply funding adequate to create a robust system of public schools. And many supporters of education for citizenship thought not in terms of universal, equal education, but treated a complete education as the province of an elite who would take their places of prominence in government, business, religion, and the academy.

There was, as well, a substantial list of exclusions based on race, religion, and gender (although, as University of Michigan history Professor Mary Kelley observes in “Learning to Stand and Speak,” many women were educated at female academies and seminaries, a set of institutions that both reflected the demand of many women to take on the rights and obligations of citizenship and a crucial means through which women began, in fact, to enter civil society as early as the 1790s).

But from the 1960s into the beginning of the 1980s, a period during which substantial progress was made in sweeping away artificial limitations, it was entirely possible to critique schools and colleges for what they did and didn't do as a matter of education, not for their prowess or weakness in “pre-commerce.”

Today, of course, some of our greatest universities seek to grow and brand themselves along the lines of multinational corporations, and, in the dominant view, schools are nothing more than the farm teams of businesses.

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We desperately need to return to the idea of education for citizenship (two essential elements of which are the development of the ability to think critically and the fostering of a sense of historical perspective). That idea calls us to a very different place, a more exalted place, than does the President's message of the need to try to get ahead, lest one fall irretrievably behind.

We should be about the task of perfecting a vision of genuinely universal, nuanced civic education — education that enables us, among other things, to discern the difference between one politician's charlatan cries and another's clarion calls.

And perhaps we might even dare to begin to think about education as a sublime process through which we can learn about each other and our world, about the ways we reach and fail to reach others, and about the greatest joys, the deepest sorrows, and the fullest transcendence that are all part of being human.

Don't we want education to be something more like that?

Mr. President: do better.

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