This is the most important study of liberal learning by a sociologist since Daniel Bell's *The Reforming of General Education* (1966). Like Bell's book, Levine's focuses on the experience of a particular campus with a rich history of educating undergraduates. The University of Chicago has been at the forefront of American developments in liberal education since the days of Robert Maynard Hutchins and John Dewey. With this book, Levine joins the pantheon of University of Chicago scholars who have contributed at the highest level to thinking about the aims and methods of liberal education.

Levine's book is divided into three parts. The first part describes the crises of liberal learning in the modern world. The second examines the thought and practice of several giants in the University of Chicago tradition. The third part introduces a new program for liberal education. This latter part of the book is, in some respects, the most stimulating, and its philosophy and proposals merit serious attention by all those who care about liberal learning.

Let me first make a distinction between two terms that are often confounded: "general" and "liberal" education. General education provides exposure, at an introductory level, to the main branches of learning. As a preparation to specialized education in the academic majors, it is institutionalized as a set of distribution requirements on virtually every college and university campus in the United States. Liberal education, by contrast, has a different and more elevated aim: the formation of a "complete" human being who is capable of thinking and acting in an autonomous way. Institutions that care about liberal learning include opportunities for the development of important faculties of mind and action throughout the curriculum. Liberal arts colleges, such as Williams and Swarthmore, and the undergraduate colleges of highly selective private research universities, such as Columbia and Chicago, are among the relatively few remaining centers for the perpetuation and renewal of traditions of liberal learning.

In Levine's view, the ideal of the liberally educated person has waned because of three "modernity revolutions": the revolutions of differentiation, democratization, and rationalization. These revolutions have brought many benefits, including improved productivity, greater individual freedom, an expansion of justice, and an ordering of knowledge. For Levine, they have also brought disadvantages, including "personal atrophy," hyper-specialization, pressures for mediocrity in culture, and psychic repression. The renewal of liberal learning therefore requires counterweights to the specific diminishing features of the "modernity revolutions."

Levine looks for inspiration to the work of education scholars in the University of Chicago tradition. Levine's account of this tradition emphasizes the search for coherence which took root in famous courses (such as "The Nature of the World and Man," "Observation, Interpretation, and Integration"). This tradition explicitly links curriculum to evolving ideals of the educated person. It also emphasizes the willingness of Chicago professors to experiment and evaluate their innovations, and it is marked by a gradual shift away from the ideals of character formation and transmitting the common heritage of knowledge to the ideal of developing the powers of the mind.

Levine is a historicist, a pragmatist, and a proponent of dialogic pedagogy. He is sympathetic to those who specify the aims of education in a clear and coherent philosophy, organize curricula to achieve those aims, but do not strictly prescribe methods of pedagogy. He searches for meaningful abstraction, aware that conditions change in ways that lead to new abstractions. Some influential figures in the Chicago tradition—Scott Buchanan, Morton Adler, Benjamin Bloom, and Allan Bloom—receive little attention in this book, because their views depart from the main branch of educational thought, as Levine interprets it. Among the many pleasures of the book are Levine's portraits of the scholars who represent for him this main line of development. Apart from Dewey and Hutchins, the most notable figures are the philosopher Richard McKeon and the biologist and science educator Joseph Schwab.
The thought and characters of these two larger-than-life figures are beautifully rendered.

The book culminates in a proposal for the renewal of liberal education. This proposal is an extension of the ideas of Dewey, McKeon, and Schwab for cultivating students’ powers of mind. Levine develops a conception of liberal education as analogous to the inhaling and exhaling of breath, the most human of activities and one strongly emphasized in the martial arts traditions of the East that have formed part of Levine’s philosophy.

The intake of breath is represented by “powers of prehension”: audio-visual powers, kinesthetic powers, interpretation of texts, and understanding of natural and cultural worlds. The novel aspect of the program involves the introduction of kinesthetic powers, “the dimensions of bodymind unity” and “the ways in which bodily changes and mental functioning affect one another” (p. 195). The exhaling of breath is represented by “powers of expression”: forming a self; composing statements and resolving problems; integrating knowledge; and sharing meaning with others. These are the powers of human agency. They are supported by curricula that “emphasize electivity and individuated development, on one hand, and communicative skills, on the other” (p. 189).

The book ends with a bittersweet epilogue in which Levine faces up to the unpromising conditions for elevating the human condition through education. Quoting Margaret Mead, Levine responds defiantly: “There is no doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed persons can change the world.” At the very least, he contends, “it should be possible to secure a number of patches of protected space dedicated to the cultivation of humane powers.” In such places, “perhaps, the ancient, evolving dream of producing higher levels of humanity can be revitalized. . . . And when it happens . . . some seeds from the University of Chicago experience may bear strange new wonderful kinds of fruit” (p. 257). Surely Levine is thinking of his own book in these last lines, and deservedly so.


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The topic of post-secondary education and inherent costs is timely, and the subject of conversation in many homes across the nation. Since the federal government’s severe curtailment of fund transfers to the provinces in the early 1990s, individuals and their families are being forced to become more responsible for their own well-being, and many realize that plans for higher education must be implemented. Parents, at least as much as policymakers, are very concerned about the future education of their children, realizing that in a global and knowledge-based economy there are significant advantages in obtaining a higher education both for social mobility and economic productivity.

In this volume, the various authors attempt to answer a number of important questions regarding post-secondary education such as: Why it is that since the Canadian government’s policy changes, and the consequent tuition hike of 86 percent (1983–1995) (p. 59), enrollment rates still increased by 30 percent? Also, why have participation rates for the highest and the middle-low income quartiles increased, and yet there have only been very small increases for low-income quartiles?

Bell and Jones sought to compare the issue of public/private costs, student financial assistance and participation rates within five other similarly developed Western nations.