

John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*

John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801 – 1890) was one of the most influential and provocative authors of the nineteenth century. His controversial conversion to Roman Catholicism at the age of 44 represented a long, measured shift in his theological views and reflected his continued commitment to the idea of the universal catholicity of the Protestant Anglican church. In 1879 he was created a cardinal in the Catholic Church, and he eventually served as the rector for the newly founded Catholic University of Ireland. During his years as rector, he delivered and published a series of lectures titled *The Idea of a University*. These lectures have since been included in collections of the most significant pedagogical writings on the role and nature of education, especially on the importance and purpose of a liberal arts education.

Newman's *The Idea of a University* consists of ten chapters broken into two parts, "University Teaching" and "University Subjects." In his lectures, Newman forwards a number of interesting claims, including the idea that the primary purpose of a university is "intellectual, not moral" ("Preface"); that the discussion of controversial topics should proceed in universities unhindered by the influence of Church authority (Discourse I); that the purpose of a university should be determined "on the grounds of human reason and human wisdom" rather than Church authority (Discourse I); that teaching within a university should be as broad and liberal as possible and should cover all branches of knowledge, including science and religion (Discourse II); and that the more limited and narrow one's knowledge is, the more likely one is to be biased and obstinate in judgment (Discourse IV).

The excerpt included in the HMXP Anthology is taken from Section 6 of Discourse 5: "Knowledge its Own End." In this passage, Newman forwards his well-known argument in favor of a broad, liberal education. In this discourse, Newman pointedly addresses and challenges the claims of prominent nineteenth-century utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham. According to one Newman scholar, the philosophical movement of utilitarianism sought to "dethrone the classics from the position they held at Oxford and Cambridge and to replace them with 'useful' knowledge leading to a trade or profession" (Dulles). Newman believed that a liberal education (what he here calls a "philosophical" education) that includes study of a broad range of disciplines best equips people to thrive in any walk of life. Though Newman expresses appreciation for the mechanical arts and trades in this passage, he asserts that the more specialized an education becomes, the more it "ceases to be Knowledge." True knowledge, according to Newman, reflects the ability to see, comprehend, reason, analyze, and synthesize information, and for Newman, this type of knowledge (what we might call the ability to think critically) is "an end in itself." The university, according to Newman, should function as a "place of education" rather than a "place of instruction," for it should inculcate in students "an acquired illumination . . . a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment" of flexible and transferable intellectual skills and traits rather than a narrow, through practical, set of mechanical skills.

Along with Matthew Arnold and T. H. Huxley, Newman engaged in a vigorous and lively cultural debate about the nature of education in an age of technological innovation and rapid change. Should education serve the purpose of training a person for a specific trade or occupation, or should education strive to cultivate an individual's deeper understanding of the world and of the self? In many ways, we are still engaged in this debate today, in the 21st century. The pressures of economic recession and student loans have driven many students and parents to wonder "What will I get out of this education? What is the ultimate pay-off?" As participants in the long tradition of liberal arts education, Winthrop students should invest careful thought in the value of the liberal arts tradition and education. What are the benefits of a liberal arts education, defined by the *Association of American Colleges and Universities* as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change" by providing "students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest"? The

AAC&U asserts that a liberal arts education “helps students develop a strong sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings” through a “general education curriculum that provides broad learning in multiple disciplines and ways of knowing, along with more in-depth study in a major” (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education>). How might a liberal arts education provide skills and habits of thought that lead to success in today’s economy? In discussing the relative value of technical versus liberal educational models, instructors might want to pair Newman’s passage with the *NY Times* article titled “[Making College ‘Relevant’](#)” by Kate Zernicke or with other current articles on the value of liberal arts education in the current economy.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) In “Making College ‘Relevant,’” the director of the liberal arts career center at UT Austin states that there are “increasing concerns” over the question “What are you going to do with your degree?” Do you find that you are increasingly concerned over this issue? Do you get asked this question by parents, friends, or relatives? Do you make important decisions regarding your major or future career based upon financial or economic factors?
- 2) What is the most **important** quality in choosing a future career – having a job you passionately love and that you find fulfilling, or having a job that may be stressful and less fulfilling, but that pays a lot of money? Are these things always mutually exclusive? Explain your answers.
- 3) Do you think college students are pushed to “specialize too early”? Do universities allow time for “self-discovery”? Is this even important? Explain.
- 4) You have chosen to attend a liberal arts university rather than a technical school. Why? What should a liberal arts university do that might be different from a technical school? Does attending Winthrop seem different from other types of educational experiences you have had (high school, other universities, community colleges, etc.)? Explain.

Resources:

Dulles, Avery Cardinal S. J. “[Newman’s Idea of a University.](#)”
The Newman Reader. [The Idea of a University.](#)
Zernicke, Kate. “[Making College ‘Relevant’.](#)”