



Published on **Inside Higher Ed**  
(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

[Home](#) > A college president reflects on liberal education in China and the U.S. (opinion)

## A college president reflects on liberal education in China and the U.S. (opinion)

Submitted by Michael S. Roth on February 22, 2018 - 3:00am

The question took me by surprise. I had just finished lecturing to about 75 undergraduates at Peking University on the virtues of American-style pragmatic liberal education. My [book](#) <sup>[1]</sup> **Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters** had recently been translated into Chinese, and I was on a speaking tour trying to persuade students and their families that in a society changing so rapidly it made the most sense to pursue a broad education in which you would learn how to take multiple perspectives on shifting, complex problems and opportunities -- to learn how to learn. I argued that from Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois, American thinkers had developed ideas about pragmatic liberal learning that are powerfully relevant today.

The question, from a young man who had been furiously taking notes throughout my talk, was whether a liberal education really made students think for themselves -- as I had argued -- or whether it just turned students into liberals. Encouraged by my visible interest and surprise, he asked more pointedly if liberal learning didn't contribute to the divisiveness that was currently afflicting American society by reinforcing a sense, for some people, of superiority and, for others, that elites with fancy diplomas were looking down on them.

These issues were not unfamiliar to me, but I hadn't expected an undergraduate in China to raise them. The idea that college campuses have become places of political indoctrination is hotly debated in the United States, but I was surprised to find concern about indoctrination expressed in China, where the state overtly strives for a serious level of ideological conformity.

The young man's question about political conformity led to an interesting discussion about the general tendency of students to conform to the values of their educational system. My audience at PKU was filled with students who had excelled at the national exam and gained entrance to this, the most prestigious university in the country. These were insightful young men and women who knew how to read their teachers so as to provide them with the responses they'd like best. They knew how to succeed on exams, and they knew how to succeed at pleasing even those professors who said they wanted critically thinking contrarians. In this, they weren't that different from the bright students I encounter at colleges and universities in America.

Do professors in the United States, in fact, expect ideological or intellectual conformity even when they call for critical thinking? That is a perennial problem for anyone who believes that education should liberate one from dependence on someone else's thinking-- that learning should foster open-ended inquiry and self-reliance. And I had to confess to the student in Beijing that we may indeed have a bias in the American academy that makes intellectual diversity less likely, as teachers equate thoughtful responses with responses that support their own worldviews. Finding ways to challenge those views, encouraging heterodoxy, is the mandate of an educational philosophy, such as pragmatic liberal education, that values the instigation of new modes of inquiry and of creativity. Discussion of implicit bias on American college campuses -- be the focus on identity or ideology -- is a positive sign that higher education is acknowledging and wrestling with this problem.

The young man's second question was equally challenging. Was a liberal education a pathway to elitism, cementing economic inequality and enabling a fortunate few to assume an attitude of haughty privilege? That is certainly possible, I admitted. One of the reasons many families want to send their children to top-ranked colleges is that they are highly selective -- they reject lots of people, the thinking goes, so they must be good! More than that, the student was asking whether those who enroll in such institutions contribute, unwittingly or not, to a national climate of hostile divisiveness. Throughout American history, writers have argued that while education was essential for a healthy democracy, it could also lead to the corruption of pretentious elites condescending to their fellow citizens (if they recognized them at all).

My response focused on Jane Addams, one of the important pragmatist thinkers and activists I'd written about in **Beyond the University**. Addams saw that sophisticated modes of education often stifled the ability to see things from another's point of view. She recognized that strong thinking often became self-protective and detached from the concerns of others. Her contribution to liberal education was to insist on the development of empathy and the sympathetic imagination; she underscored participation in civic life as a vehicle for liberal learning. Emphasis upon humane responsiveness and social engagement were key to ensuring that the forms of inquiry that are part and parcel of a liberal education didn't become parochial and elitist.

No sooner had I finished my appeal to Addams but a young woman sitting up front asked if I wasn't really just echoing a campus cultural bubble when I spoke of liberal learning in such idealistic ways. Ah, so talk of the bubble has made its way to China, I thought.

Sure, I admitted to the brave undergraduate who had so directly challenged the foreign speaker, it may well be efforts to nurture free inquiry have led to somewhat protective bubbles. But the American tradition of liberal education that I was talking about held that real inquiry had to be tested beyond the university, that real learning had to be relevant beyond the classroom and the borders of the campus. If what I had described sounded idealistic at times, that might, in part, be because I am a university president with a tendency for cheerleading. But, I explained, it might also be because this American educational tradition took a bet on what pragmatist philosopher John Dewey called "practical idealism," a bet on the value of situating learning in relation to society and the aim of contributing to its well-being.

The discussion in Beijing led me to reflect that teachers and students in China, like those in the United States, are thinking hard about how to avoid conformity and indoctrination without just retreating to a campus bubble that has no relevance to the nonacademic world. In America, we often read about social justice warriors refusing to listen to points of view from outside the campus mainstream, but we should pay more attention to those engaged students who are creating opportunities in education, health care and access to technology for citizens beyond the university's walls. Rather than focusing on why kids today don't have the same fundamentalist commitment to the free market approach to speech as boomers claim to have always had, we should recognize how our campuses abound with productive nonconformists, practical idealists starting up companies and purpose-driven organizations. In China, more than half a million students each year study abroad, and scores of thousands are majoring in foreign languages and culture. Notwithstanding the central government's frightening efforts to enforce narrow forms of political and vocational training, exposure to other societies will enrich the country by disrupting increasingly bureaucratized homogeneity.

I left the lecture hall heartened that students in Beijing, like many across the United States, hope that higher education will be pragmatic without being conformist, and that the college years will inspire them to think for themselves in ways that will be significant to others. A pragmatic liberal education promises to engage with issues that students will surely have to deal with beyond their university years, while refusing to just be a training program that will, in the short run, slide them into the existing slots offered by the status quo. It has often fulfilled this promise in the past, and it is strong enough today to welcome and weather tough questions -- from the United States or from China -- about its future.

**Michael S. Roth is president of Wesleyan University and author, most recently, of [Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters](#)** [2].

**Section:**

[Teaching and Learning](#) [3]

**Editorial Tags:**

[Liberal arts](#) [4]

**Image Source:**

iStock/erhui1979

**Is this diversity newsletter?:**

**Disable left side advertisement?:**

**Is this Career Advice newsletter?:**

**Trending:**

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/02/22/college-president-reflects-liberal-education-china-and-us-opinion>

**Links**

[1] <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300212662/beyond-university>

[2] [https://www.amazon.com/Beyond-University-Liberal-Education-Matters/dp/0300212666/ref=s9\\_simh\\_gw\\_g14\\_i1\\_r?\\_encoding=UTF8&pf\\_rd\\_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf\\_rd\\_s=&pf\\_rd\\_r=RYPZP0P7XT1NXJG9F4SM&pf\\_rd\\_t=36701&pf\\_rd\\_p=a6aaf593-1ba4-4f4e-bdcc-0febe090b8ed&pf\\_rd\\_i=desktop](https://www.amazon.com/Beyond-University-Liberal-Education-Matters/dp/0300212666/ref=s9_simh_gw_g14_i1_r?_encoding=UTF8&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_s=&pf_rd_r=RYPZP0P7XT1NXJG9F4SM&pf_rd_t=36701&pf_rd_p=a6aaf593-1ba4-4f4e-bdcc-0febe090b8ed&pf_rd_i=desktop)

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/teaching-and-learning>

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/editorial-tags/liberal-arts>