

John Adams is often quoted as saying “there are two types of education. One should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live.” In fact, the quotation originates in an essay published in 1929 by the historian James Truslow Adams, who goes on there to say “it doubtless helps greatly to compress some years of experience into far fewer years by studying for a particular trade or profession in an institution; but that fact should not blind us to another—namely, that in so doing we are learning a trade or a profession, but are not getting a liberal education.” What’s most striking is not the frequent misattribution of the “two types” quote but its ongoing popularity as an epigraph to anything other than the woolliest of thinking about education in and for our own time. The overall thrust is to suggest that what was true at the turn of the nineteenth century (and true also in 1929) remains true at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Yet the choice between vocational training and liberal education is an especially false one at a time when the quantity of technical information is doubling every two years, with the result that by the time today’s first-year student completes a four-year technical degree, fully half of what he or she

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learns next year will be outdated already. It’s a false choice at a time when the U.S. Department of

Labor estimates that learners will have ten to fourteen jobs by the age of thirty-eight. As former Secretary of Education Richard Riley memorably put it, “we are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet.” The top ten in-demand jobs in 2010, Riley tells us, did not yet exist in 2004.

There are still those who seek to preserve a distinction between education for work and education for life, who look with disdain on the notion that higher education ought to be responsive to the needs of a changing economy—to say nothing of the legitimate career interests of students themselves. For its part, however, AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative is notably less polemical on this point, instead recruiting the views of a full array of stakeholders in American education. What’s distinctive about the LEAP vision is that, in foregrounding the broad consensus in favor of liberal education outcomes, it demonstrates that while liberal education remains the best preparation for life, it is now widely recognized as the best preparation for making a living as well. To argue that a liberal education is the best preparation for work *and* for life is not to degrade liberal education, but rather to recognize its supreme utility in our own time.

It’s one thing to propose a twenty-first-century vision of liberal education for all students, however, and quite another thing to implement it. This issue of *Liberal Education* examines how the LEAP vision is being enacted by particularly effective forms of educational practice and explores some of the ongoing challenges to implementation.—DAVID TRITELLI

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