The Aims of Education Address

By Abraham Abbott

September 26, 2002

Welcome to the University of Chicago.

Of the dozens of persons who will say something about the aims of education during this orientation week, I am the only one who will keep on talking for another sixty minutes after saying it. I imagine that you have heard a great deal already about what you will hear for a little while longer. I hope that you will hear it with good humor.

You're preoccupied with new roommates, placement tests, taking your AP classes, going to the igloos and the Burhnam, your house meetings with the chowhall and the dorm, the library, the maze of courses, the various endorphins, to mention the more urgent excitements of estrogen and testosterone. And you are in a very diverse set of moods. Some of you are eager to hear what I have to say. Some of you can't wait it over. Some of you are watching the novels of your professors or your peers at the front of you. Some of you are sensing the aspiration and grandeur expressed by this Gothic building. Some of you are thinking that I, the speaker, have a very high body. I'll admit, you're a diverse lot and I'm a beginning orator and we have an hour together to think about the aims of education. Let's do it.

It is important that you develop some personal aims of education because there is quite a strong case to be made that, given who you are and where you are, there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.

First, as far as worldly success is concerned, you've already got it. That's your personal aims of education because there is no particular necessity for you to study anything for the next four years. There are three reasons that I think a growing number of students at elite American colleges suspect, at least from what I am sensing in my own classroom. So let's be frank about them.
You are free to make whatever worldly or otherworldly occupational choice you want once you leave, and you do not sacrifice any possibilities because you majored in some thing that seems irrelevant to that choice.

As far as performance in college is concerned, as I said, any national evidence that level of performance in college has more than a minor effect on later things like income. And in my alumni data, there is absolutely no correlation whatever between GPA at the University of Chicago and current income. Get straight. Whether you end up on Fire Island or in the Hamptons depends largely on things that are unrelated to what you do as an undergraduate.

I hope then to have disposed of the notion that what you do here or how well you do it has any connection with your worldly success either in general or in detail. The general level of that worldly success is already guaranteed by your admission here and by the factors that made it happen. The detailed level of your worldly success depends largely on occupational choices that are unrelated to what or how you do here.

Now the third reason for getting a college education is that it will give you foundational cognitive skills for later life. Since this is the argument I have myself made most strongly in the past, I shall take special care to demolish it.

The argument is that college teaches you many things that are not specifically taught in your college major but do get general skills that can be applied throughout your future life— in graduate training, at work, and in recreation. That the actual material learned in college does not matter much is well known. Everyone over thirty knows that, as far as content is concerned, you forget the vast majority of what you learned in college in five years or so. But, so the argument goes, the skills endure. They may be difficult to measure and their effect hard to demonstrate. But they are the core of what you take from college.

Now what people have in mind here in the first instance are simple verbal and quantitative skills: things like advanced reading and speaking abilities that will help you deal with a knowledge economy, and quantitative training that will enable you to make reasonable financial choices and that will prove useful in area after area of professional endeavor. Beyond these lie more advanced skills: critical reading ability as it is taught in the classrooms here.

There is much evidence that our own 

NOVEMBER 21, 2002  5

...
The gymnastics argument was in fact at the heart of the reform of nineteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge. Nobody thought that learning Greek was going to directly help you rule India. But a person who could truly master Greek or vector calculus in the twentieth-century École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and similar institutions throughout the continent. As social elites passed through these places, they learned huge quantities of Greek and Latin prose and poetry by heart. Later in life, they quoted these phrases to each other in parliamentary speeches and classical club conversations and so on. The quotes functioned as a kind of secret code that labelled elites and also made a useful common cultural vocabulary. One didn’t have to puzzle out anger abstractly. One could rather talk about Achilles sulking in his tent. Indeed, I can remember quite a few people envisioning the Vietnam War as America’s equivalent of the Athenian expedition to Sicily where, in Thucydides’ immortal sentences, kai panta gia panta kai peira kai eidos (kai eidos) tou koumatopoihtwn eukolodi gia to leimounon kai tezeus kai kai teze ton oikonomikon kai polen kai oikos kai to polereio stin epanisteuon tainon me to peri Sikelou genwnio. Thucydides 7.87.6

Yes, that’s right. It doesn’t mean any thing if you don’t know Greek. A canon works only if everybody who is supposed to know it actually knows it. We don’t have good reason to doubt not only that the list of cognitive skills everyone talks about is in fact the stock in trade of elite academics themselves. (I should of course say “ourselves.”) Critique is rewarded, analytic skills prized, writing necessary, independence and self-learning essential. To a considerable extent it is indeed true that the famous skill list is really the list of those skills that are indispensible as a case against the centralities of these values even in academia; most college professors work at nonelite universities with heavy teaching loads and simply don’t find enough use for those skills. But even without this demonstration, it remains true that most of you will not in future occupational life need the specific kinds of cognitive skills that are emphasized in higher education. The most obvious example is writing. We at the University of Chicago will obsess about good writing. But the blunt fact is that most of you will do very little writing over the rest of your lives; the major reports and legal opinions and company prospectuses and so on that you do will all be produced by committee and will be designed to tell an audience what it wants to hear or what it will find persu asc, not what is analytically correct. So we have good reason to doubt not only the first part of the statement “College education will teach you general cognitive skills that are centrally important in your later life.” In fact, most of you will not in future occupational life need the specific kinds of cognitive skills that are emphasized in higher education. The major reports and legal opinions and company prospectuses and so on that you do will all be produced by committee and will be designed to tell an audience what it wants to hear or what it will find persuasive, not what is analytically correct.
education has aims in the future. Any seri-
ous concept of education seems inevitably
rooted in a state of being that en-
compasses the notion that the essence of education
consists in mastering certain contents or
materials. You are not little birdies sitting
in the nest with your mouths open to re-
ceive half-digested words of knowledge regurgitated by the faculty. Education is
not about content. It is not even about
skills. It is a habit or stance of mind. It is not
something you have. It is something you are.

But now, having disposed (yet again) of the
notion that education has aims in the future, I turn to the assertion that educa-
tion has aims in the future. Any seri-
ous concept of education seems inevitably
based in the perpetual present

temoral space. Education is a way of

ing in your seats wondering when the hell
I'm going to finish. You are having trouble
settling down and thinking about one of the most important qualities of your life even
for as long as fifty-five minutes. But if
you've thought up all the new thoughts and
teach you the habit of playing with them.

But the more important issue is the ques-
tion of why attaching new meanings
to things should be in itself a good thing? The answer is this: By attaching
more meanings to things, by bringing more
of life in a given present, a given now.
An educated person experiences more in a
given period than does a non-educated
person. This is not to say that there is some-
thing inherent in the practice of learning
lives that lack education. An uneducated
human life commands the same dignity as
any animal can do. That's my argument. By
turning aside from the straight path a bit
and the basic materials, all those
found the spark of education mistake
simply in knowing the whole of the dead
list of facts and contexts of who taught
whom and which style was which, but
rather in taking such acts as you know
and playing with them and the painting.

Now note that in arguing that “edu-
cation is a way of having more
meanings to things” you've thought up all the new thoughts and
time changes in the museum-going is better museum-going. I'm
not arguing that you should, as it were, miss the main point, either of the sex or of
the painting. That is, because you have
made the event more complex doesn’t mean
you have to lose the overarching sense of the
simpler version. But it is true that you can’t fill your brain endlessly—it has
finite power.

But the crucial point is that the
future reaches beyond it. To be sure, we are all
bound to a reality that is local in a million
ways—by language, location, race, gender,
life is light-years away. To you I am a fixed
routinely makes you liter-
are a fool not to avail yourself of every
are in a local temporality—one in

time. All of
variables and the methods, but we can’t teach
you the habit of playing with them.
That’s something you must find within
yourself.

Now after all this buildup, that may seem
like it was a waste of time. I say that
already the many different traditions of
iagining the visual world, when you can
understand the detailed references the
complex assertion of bodies referring to
todays of different imaginations in your
brains, rather than just brushing away as
any animal can do. That's my argument. By
increasing the density of meanings in an
experience, you expand that experience.
You make it more extensive and more
enduring all within the same social and
temporal space. Education is a way of
expanding experience.
If you don’t like that example, consider
looking at a painting in a museum. Yes, it’s
easy enough to look at the painting and to
come up with things to think about it. But
how much richer they are when you know
already the many different traditions of
imagining the visual world, when you can
understand the detailed references the
complex assertion of bodies referring to
todays of different imaginations in your
One of the questions that assigns meanings. If you have it, all
the rest—the core skills and the lingu-
and hence is worthwhile in itself.

Note, incidentally, that in the process of
arguing that “education is a way of having
more meanings to things” you've thought up all the new thoughts and
as inane as that of
abstraction is the mechanism for this, some-
times identification, sometimes grand sim-
plification, sometimes the link goes through
the tiniest of similar factual details, such as
a similar eye color or a shared hometown.

Bearing in mind then this, this normal,
province, is not only in space—geo-
ographical and social—but also in time. All
of you live in a local temporality—one in
which the future is your twentieth and mid-
life is light years away. To you I am a fixed
object who doesn’t live in a now, a “profes-
sor,” who was and is and always will be.

But note that in this metaphor it is not
just the shadows on the wall that are not
educated. Knowing reality isn’t education either. Education is the light, the shining
thing that assigns meanings. If you have it, all
the rest—the core skills and the lingu-
and the basic materials, all those
find education without them. Indeed, to
to invoke another, more famous, metaphor,
you can think of the curriculum as the
shadows cast on a wall by the light of
education itself as it shines over, under,
and through the myriad phases of our
experience. It is a mistake to believe

Three important matters in closing: First
a word about the future. I have in a way

$\text{NOVEMBER 21, 2002}$
deceived you with my argument that edu-
cation has nothing to do with the future. I have
argued that education is a quality of one’s self in the present. But you will
always live “in the present,” even
though from where we are now, future
presents look like you will become a
doctor” or “I’m going to write a great
novel,” we say—as if these future presents
were simple and fixed states of being. When
you get to the future—when you become
the doctor or write the novel—you’ll find
that your future nows are just as contin-
gent, just as uneasy, just as “present like,”
as is your present today. So it turns out that
cultivating education—a sense of a self that
perpetually, restless looks for new mean-
ings in situations and facts and ideas—is a
 crucial resource for the future, because
the future is a series of contingent moments
just like the present.

As a result it is in an odd way true that
education is your best way to “plan” for the
future. (Odd because “education” in that
sentence does not mean what you used to
think it did.) The one thing we know of the
future is that although we cannot predict it,
 it will happen anyway. Look at the person
to your right. Now look at the person to
your left. In twenty years, all three of you
will have married and one of you will have
divorced. You don’t imagine that now.
Nobody in this room, I would imagine, is
planning to get divorced. But over 40 per-
cent of you eventually will. History hap-
pened.

And these personal happenings are only
one type of chance. The events of a year ago
will have persuaded you that there is no
escaping history. But believe it or not those
events will seem quite minor in fifty years—
harbingers perhaps, but not by any means
the great events of the next half century.
After all, nearly ten times as many people
died every single day for six years in World
War II as died in the one day of the World
Trade Center attacks. The society in which
most of you will die fifty or so years hence
will not look at all like this society now.
Widespread, everyday biological terrorism
could be a fact of life, as could comprehen-
sive economic globalization, worldwide
religious war, genetic registration, disap-
ppearance of national boundaries, rationing
of procreation, implanted personal locator
chips—who knows what is coming?

Now you cannot plan for these things,
overwhelming as they are. But you can be
prepared to comprehend them by becom-
ing a person who can find meaning in
events, a person of education. Indeed, if
you are educated you will be able not
simply to experience these events, but to
shape their meanings for yourself and oth-
ers. You will not just experience the future,
but also make it. In that sense, being edu-
cated is your best plan for an uncertain
future.

Second concluding remark: I have
throughout this talk considered matters of
cognition. I have not talked about emo-
tional and moral education, even though
both social sciences and education recognize the importance of emo-
tional and moral growth in the college
years. We do know that intellectual study
will be only one of three basic activities you
do here. The second is paid work. The
majority of you will work on and off
through college and, indeed, many of you
will work nearly half time by the standards
of the labor force. And the third activity is
the vast body of other things—sports and
clubs and love affairs and cruising blues
bars and eating at restaurants and so on—
that we so glibly call the extracurriculum.

Now people who think about formal
education have focused on cognition and
have paid remarkably little attention to
what we might call the moral and emo-
tional curricula of college, which are
“taught”—for the most part—in your work
life and your extracurricular life. This is not
because the emotional and moral curricula
lack importance. Recall that in my earlier
remarks about the professions I said that
professional elites often require moral and
emotional skills like leadership, understand-
and, and organization far more than they do
cognitive skills like analytic thinking and
clear writing. So these are important skills
indeed. But in practice our moral curricu-
lum boils down to some brief discussions
about getting along in dormitories and
some arraigned cognitive learning so that
you rapidly turn into touristic self-indul-
gence. There will be the temptations of
timidity, too, temptations to forgo all ex-
perimentation, to miss the glorious ran-
domness of college, to give up the prodigal
possibilities that—one might tell you—you will
never find again; temptations to go rigidly
through the motions and then wonder why
education has eluded you.

There are no aims of education. The aim
is education. If—and only if—you seek it
we will find you.

Welcome to the University of Chicago.
Andrew Abbott is the Gustavus F. and Ann
M. Swift Distinguished Service Professor in
the Department of Sociology and the Col-
lege.