

## Book Review: Roth, M. S. (2014). *Beyond the university: Why liberal education matters*. Yale University Press

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### Abstract

This review assesses the book titled “Beyond the university: why liberal education matters” authored by Michael Scott Roth. It underscores essential aspects pertinent to contemplation on the evolution of America’s liberal arts education, specifically and education in general, which bear significant implications and insights for its current condition. The book offers a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the evolution of liberal arts education in the United States of America and argues that shifting away from the broad humanistic educational approach aimed at long-life learning to vocational training in liberal arts education is a critical mistake. The insights gleaned from such lessons hold significant importance for regions such as Africa and the black community, particularly considering the recent advocacy for a more vocational approach to liberal arts education driven by the demands of skill-based labour.

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## Introduction

Liberal education is a broad, interdisciplinary segment of learning that helps students develop critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. It includes the humanistic field of philosophy and the social science field of political science, highlighting skills related to organisation, creation, leadership, learning, and interpersonal/societal connections. Liberal arts may denote academic pursuits within a liberal arts degree or university education, as contrasted to vocational, professional, or technical programs.

Despite its long-standing historical significance as one of the earliest academic disciplines, recent developments in a rapidly evolving world characterised by interconnectedness, science and technology, and complex workplaces necessitate that graduates of liberal arts programs acquire advanced skills. This has prompted calls for integrating vocational training within liberal arts education to enhance graduates’ marketability in the labour market. This book is a departure from such a position. It argues vehemently against it, positing that liberal education fosters specific forms of discipline aimed at cultivating societal values and maintaining societal standards rooted in democracy, thereby empowering individuals within society and governance.

The book’s author is an American scholar with rich experience and several publications in history, psychology, and education. Among his eight single-authored books, aside from the one under review, two others that reflect more on the theme of contemporary education include *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist’s Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech,*

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*and Political Correctness*, and *The Student: A Short History*. The author generally offers a balance of the historical overview of US liberal education since the country's foundation, drawing on a connection to past developments. This review is organised into four key sections: the overview of the book, its strengths of the book and lessons for us, the implications for Africa and concluding remarks.

## Overview of the book

With 164 pages, this 4-chapter book provides a compelling argument regarding the declining state of liberal education in the US. The initial chapter commences with a melancholic experience regarding the paradox of creativity, which engenders alterations to the norm that provoke inquiries about individuals' readiness for such transformation. It offers a historical overview of educational development in the US, tracing its origins not to the Puritans who established schools in the 'New World' but to the nation's founding fathers, such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. This chapter demonstrates America's fundamentally antagonistic relationship between the growth of education, particularly liberal education, and the widespread, state-sanctioned practice of African slavery and the annexation of Native American lands in the context of a westward expansion that views the natives, African slaves, and other minorities as incapable of producing the knowledge required for their emancipation and the advancement of society. It establishes the depth of the embedded racial and colonial fundamentals of not only the US educational system but also a global (neo)colonial impetus created to perpetuate the notion of white supremacy.

Jefferson's views on US education have significant implications for the fight against chattel slavery. This would have implications post-slavery because indefinite freedom for limited people without education and civil liberties would create new challenges and reinforce existing ones. It was the reality for African Americans before the civil rights movement and continues to be the case today. African American communities continue to face racial abuse and discrimination on things such as school allocations, jobs, and social support, among others. Despite Jefferson's advocacy for education as the cornerstone of a prosperous republic, his racial prejudices have led to systemic exclusion and marginalization. This led African American leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois to embrace education as a tool for empowerment and resistance, challenging Jefferson's limited perspectives.

In Chapter 2, the book went further to show the different points of view of intellectuals within the African American segment of society on the way forward for black people, independent of the official US government's interpretation of their condition. In this sense, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois reflect two different perspectives on African American education and advancement in America following its independence. As a leader at Tuskegee Institute, Washington prioritised vocational training and economic advancement, believing that success in these areas would gradually improve the status of African Americans without explicitly confronting systematic socioeconomic inequalities and political injustices. In contrast, a strong supporter of liberal education, Du Bois, countered that African Americans needed access to intellectual and civic possibilities to reach full citizenship and self-determination. Du Bois criticised Washington's accommodationist approach as maintaining second-class status and, therefore, restricting the transforming power

of education. His concept of the ‘Talented Tenth’ promoted higher education for select African Americans to uplift their race, combining economic progress with intellectual and cultural development. His vision of education extended beyond material success, emphasising its role in shaping leaders who could practically and philosophically challenge racial inequality and inspire progress.

In chapter 3, the author analyses the historical critique of liberal education in the US, emphasising Benjamin Franklin’s dissent against the elitism of conventional institutions such as Harvard, necessitating an iconoclastic ‘disruptive innovation.’ Also, another critique of liberal education that has remained potent for our contemporary period is the issue that academics are out of touch with reality, the reality of the world of work and the evolving nature of things (p. 66). Franklin advocated for practical knowledge and lifelong learning, as seen in his Junto club and the establishment of the University of Pennsylvania. Higher education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focused on a balance between specialized research and liberal education. Critics argue that many graduates enter jobs without advanced skills, leading to concerns about the value of a college education and its rising costs. New institutions like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) advocate for practical skills and measurable learning outcomes. Despite pressures from specialization and vocational training, there is a strong belief in liberal education for fostering independent thinking and social cohesion (p. 84).

Finally, in chapter 4, the author highlights the tensions between broad learning and specialised training, particularly in response to economic and technological changes, which critics complain of elitism and liberal education being out of touch with reality. As a leading tradition in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author recalled John Dewey’s philosophy (pragmatism), emphasising education as a continuous learning and social interdependence, challenging rigid classical curricula and narrow vocational training, and advocating for education that fosters critical thinking and meaningful engagement with work and society. Ultimately, Dewey’s pragmatist approach positioned education as an evolving, inquiry-driven enterprise that prepares individuals for employment, lifelong adaptability and civic participation. Its decline in the post-World War era was revived by reframing it as a cultural and educational transformation tool. For example, thinkers like Richard Rorty (classical philosophy critic), Martha Nussbaum and E.D. Hirsch emphasised education’s role in fostering inquiry, autonomy, and civic engagement, warning against an overemphasis on critical thinking that neglects empathy, meaning-making, and active participation in cultural and political life. The author, referencing Hirsch, asserts that education ought to furnish “...everybody more knowledge [which] makes everybody more competent, and creates a more just society,” positing that knowledge serves as the great equaliser (p. 118). Consequently, schools bear a significant socialising opportunity and obligation to offer equitable life chances to all students who take over society’s moral and political common sense, irrespective of their backgrounds.

### **Strength and Lessons to be Learned**

Firstly, the book’s most significant strength is that liberal education fosters critical thinking, empathy, and innovation by teaching students to engage with diverse perspectives, challenge conformity, and apply knowledge to societal issues. It remains relevant beyond the

university by cultivating inquiry, cooperation, and creative problem-solving habits, preparing individuals to adapt and contribute meaningfully. Furthermore, the author, in trying to conceptualise liberal education, concludes, "... "liberal" education was to be liberating, requiring freedom to study and aiming at freedom through understanding" (Roth, 2014, p.2). The genealogical theorisation of liberal education brandishes this definition as having roots in the ancient Greek tradition of democracy. For example, politics is, in no doubt, a discipline within liberal education. In line with this thought, the American Political Science Association (APSA) Task Force Report explained that "We must teach the science of politics—what we know about how politics "works"—but we must also promote democratic values among our students along with tools of civic engagement" (APSA Force Report, 2024, p.4).

Secondly, it takes historical accounts of the evolution of liberal arts education seriously and frequently hints at its impact in creating value within the US educational system and beyond. Its historical approach is crucial to appreciate that it is within the prism of Jeffersonian thought that we find solace in interpreting the other systems like apartheid South Africa, where schools were segregated because one race was supposed to be capable of learning to be able to think for themselves. In contrast, the other is not able to do so. Apartheid South Africa was, thus, very Jeffersonian. It is within the reach of our understanding and imaginaries of the implicative gesture of people like W.E.B. Du Bois, David Walker and other African American scholar-activists we found justifiable grounds for the civil rights movement that engulfed the US between the early 1950s and late 1960s with boycotts of bus rides, strikes and other protesting tools, and saw the likes of Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., Louis Farrakhan, Betty Shabazz, among others. Septima Poinsette Clark, the scholar-activist who developed the literacy and citizenship workshops that played an essential role in the drive for voting rights and civil rights for African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, can be said to have been influenced by Walker and Du Bois's thinking.

Thirdly, its strength, which simultaneously constitutes a weakness, is that the book presents various perspectives on the growth of liberal education while advocating for a singular approach—liberal education aimed toward civic ambitions. Today, reflecting on the reality of the financial cost of acquiring a university degree, especially in fields like liberal education, which is rarely praxis skill-based, requires that we should diversify the curriculum and provide students with options in gaining either or both hard and soft skills. Education is very costly, aligning with the perspectives of both Du Bois and Washington, as graduates are motivated to secure employment in a labour market that demands extensive knowledge, civic responsibility, and practical skills. In cultivating a well-rounded human, one must create an enlightened member of society capable of safeguarding their freedom by harnessing their inner ingenuity while also being equipped to thrive in a rapidly evolving global economic landscape. Advocating for plurality in liberal arts education should prevent individuals from being demeaned by societal issues such as defaulted substantial student loan payments or an authoritarian regime.

## **Concluding remarks and Implications**

The current discourse regarding the reformation of liberal arts education in American higher institutions carries profound ramifications for the African American community and even Africa, as evidenced in recent studies on knowledge production (Wright, 2022; Tiekú, 2021; 2022; Táíwò, 2019). The debate mainly revolves around the importance of knowledge in liberal arts education in our everyday lives in the hope of escaping developmental challenges. The notion of formal education as a universal good, rooted in early American leadership, generates controversial debates within Africa's educational space. While good in the contemporary sense of formal education and political value-driven democracies, it also weakens non-formal education and raises questions over its relevance to physical and scientific development, accessibility, and alignment with local needs for development.

To conclude, it is vital to recognise that various times call for education, whether as a liberal pursuit for enhanced civic engagement or as a scientific approach to tradesmanship and economic empowerment or philosophic reorientations for a decolonial reinvigoration. The foundation of the US, just like any other country in the world system, at different times in its history requires different perspectives on the concept of what education in general, and liberal education in particular, should entail and try to achieve. Scholars, nation founders, and emancipators considered the temporal deterministic tendencies of their society in the past. Similarly, current discussions focus on the monetary and ethical value of liberal arts education, such as political science, in a fast-paced, technologically driven society. Students often find themselves in significant financial debt for degrees that may seem nearly obsolete because those who did not study liberal arts, such as political science, are now the political class.

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### **Conflict of interest**

No conflict of interest to report.

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