

250-Year-Old Pamphlet Offers Clue on Fixing Education

In the last several years, it's become increasingly common for editorial cartoons to depict young college graduates working at fast food joints. The message is clear: the cost of a college degree is inflated while the value is diminishing.

Such a state has caused many students to wonder if college is the best option for them. But alternatives are scarce, and young people are often clueless on other ways they might pursue a successful career path.

How do we fix this problem?

One answer to that may be found in a [1752 pamphlet](#) called [A General Idea of the College of Mirania](#). Written by William Smith and later praised by Benjamin Franklin, the pamphlet lays out an education philosophy similar to the [European idea of learning tracks](#). Smith writes:

"With Regard to Learning, the Miranians divide the whole Body of People into two grand Classes. The First consists of those designed for the learn'd Professions; by which they understand Divinity, Law, Physic, Agriculture, and the chief Offices of the State. The Second Class of those design'd for Mechanic Professions, and all the remaining People of the Country." Such a Division is absolutely necessary: For, if the shortest Way of forming Youth to act in their proper Spheres, as good Men and good Citizens ought always to be the Object of Education, these two Classes should be educated on a very different Plan."

Smith goes on to lay out the differences in training which each group of students should receive:

“The Knowledge of the learned Languages, as the Means of acquiring other useful Knowledge, is indispensibly necessary to the first Class. To the Second, the Time thus spent is entirely thrown away, as they never have any Occasion to make use of those Languages. A more general Tincture of the Sciences, except Arithmetic and Mathematics, will also serve their Purpose.”

According to Smith, such a plan is not a slap at the intelligence or abilities of one group or another, but merely a common sense recognition that different people are equipped with different abilities. To squeeze every student into the same mold is a mark of a poor education system:

“Any Scheme then, that either proposes to teach both these grand Classes after the same Manner, or is wholly calculated for one of them, without regarding the other, must be very defective. And yet so it is, that Colleges are almost universally calculated for the First Class; while a collegiate School for breeding Mechanics, is rarely to be met with.”

Smith goes on to explain that those who opt out of the college track are not stupid, but make up the very framework of the country and government. To deny them proper training in the areas which they need to succeed by shipping them off to college is unfair and a waste of time.

Given the high cost of a college education – which doesn't always equip students with the tools they need to succeed in the business world – do we need to pull William Smith's proposal out of the dust bin? Is it possible that we would see more capable, ambitious, and enterprising young people if we gave them other options besides four years in a classroom?