Liberal Education and *Everything Everywhere All at Onc*e

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When the 2023 Academy Awards were conferred Sunday night, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* topped the list, garnering seven Oscars after being nominated in eleven categories. An absurdist comedy-drama, the film's hero, Evelyn, finds herself fighting bewildering dangers from the multiverse after an interdimensional rupture unravels reality. It turns out that the fate of the world is in her hands, and she must use newfound powers contained in alternate versions of herself to battle Jobu Tupaki, a malevolent agent of chaos whose power resides in a black hole–like instrument of destruction with the appearance of an everything bagel. While I confess to not being a fan of either sci-fi or absurdism, the film's themes captivated me, especially given their frightening parallels to the current existential threat colleges and universities are facing. The increasing politicization of academia has precipitated a fractured reality, issuing forth attacks that seem to be targeting everything, everywhere, all at once. Taking place within an ostensibly post-truth era, these assaults, which risk undermining the public purpose of American higher education and the democratic principles foundational to it, signal an urgent need for collective action.

Educational gag orders restricting discussions of so-called "divisive concepts" around issues of race, racism, gender, LGBTQ+ identities, and reproductive rights; the banning of books in public libraries; the removal of funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion programs; efforts to eliminate tenure and terminate tenured professors; legislative overreach into the appointment and removal of campus leaders; a state mandate for colleges and universities to

switch accreditors, following concerns raised by an accrediting body with respect to conflict of interest and the state's role in infringing upon shared governance and academic freedom; the imposition of ideologically-driven civics institutes and general education curricula "rooted in the values of liberty and the Western tradition," while turning Critical Race Theory into an epithet; and recent proposals to measure the economic value and opportunity costs of academic programs at public colleges that would require state institutions to prioritize graduating students with degrees leading to high-paying jobs each constitute a monumental threat to the distinctively American tradition of liberal education. It is a tradition grounded in the unfettered pursuit of the truth, essential to our nation's historic mission of educating for democracy, and in the concept of higher education as a public good.

In my recent book, *What We Value: Public Health, Social Justice, and Educating for Democracy*, I talk about why the public purpose of higher education is something I am particularly passionate about. It is not only because of my role as president of an organization whose mission it is to advance the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education, but also because I was the direct beneficiary of a program designed to promote civic engagement and leadership through educational opportunity. The summer I graduated from high school, I managed to escape the factory work I had done alongside my mother the previous summer only because I received funding under the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. At the time, CETA funds were reserved for high school students at risk of permanent unemployment due to extreme economic and social disadvantages. That fall, I continued working 35 hours a week under a CETA grant, and with the additional help of Pell grants and Perkins loans, attended a local

community college that had just opened in the small, rural town in which I lived. I had decided to forgo a full scholarship to my state's flagship university to serve as a caregiver for my mother, who had become chronically ill. Two years later, I transferred to Mount Holyoke College, and within another two years was headed to Brown for my Ph.D.

When I graduated, I vowed that I would never forget the lessons learned in that transition. As a result, throughout my career, I have been committed to promoting access to excellence in higher education regardless of socioeconomic background, to championing the centrality of liberal education, and to defending political scientist Benjamin Barber's notion of colleges and universities as civic missions. Barber's contention is that neither education nor research can prosper in an unfree society, and schooling, he was convinced, is society's most promising—perhaps its only—way of producing citizens who will uphold freedom.

Against the backdrop of rising mistrust in higher education and partisan debates over whether access to college remains an essential symbol of equality of opportunity at the heart of the American Dream, the reality is that many of our citizens still have "closed futures" and are, in a very real sense, unfree. Indeed, while the liberal education for all campaign is derided by skeptics as an elitist ploy to further ideological indoctrination, the real danger of elitism comes from a failure to recognize the disparate impact of such rhetoric on those who are already the most underserved members of society. The notion that we need more welders and fewer philosophers, that we should train more engineers than art historians, more people in business and industry than in anthropology and that only those at prestigious institutions should be able to take out loans to study religion, gender studies, or the classics runs the risk of enhancing inequity by perpetuating what Thomas Jefferson referred to as an unnatural aristocracy. For this

reason, we need to be vigilant in rebutting charges leveled against the liberal arts and sciences and to recognize those charges for what they are: collusion in the growth of an intellectual oligarchy in which only the very richest and most prestigious institutions preserve access to the liberal arts traditions.

Today, amidst of burgeoning economic and racial segregation, it is not enough to simply denounce encroaching authoritarianism and the current illiberal efforts to restrict what can be taught on college and university campuses and by whom. Instead, higher education leaders at all levels must reclaim and champion liberal education as a distinctive approach to preparing students for career success, democratic citizenship, global engagement, and life-long learning. For in these days of mounting doubt regarding the value-added of a college education, we are impeding access not only to the public purpose of higher education, but to its personal purpose, as well. By the personal purpose of higher education, I mean engendering the capacity to grapple with and respond to the most fundamental questions of human existence.

That personal purpose became clear to me during my first semester of college. Among the courses I signed up for was an American Literature class. There weren't many students in that class: most enrolled in courses that more easily translated into better jobs—or any job at all. One evening my professor arranged for us to see a Hartford performance of "All the Way Home," a Pulitzer Prize winning play by Tad Mosel. I had never attended a professional production before, and Hartford was a world away–known only to me as the place my father traveled an hour-each way nightly on a third-shift bus to work as a welder at Pratt and Whitney. I remember piling into a car with my classmates, dressed in a blue velveteen jumpsuit (it was the 70s after all). And when the lights dimmed, I was transported. In the dark, perhaps especially in the dark, I felt part

of something important. Surrounded by classmates, I stared ahead at the stage and waited for what I could not yet see.

After the play, our class went for Chinese food and talked. The performance had raised so many big questions about faith, grief, and trust. We discussed the last act when a wife mourns her husband's unexpected death. "I hope he loved being," she said, recognizing the possibility that he never realized his own strength and potential. What that evening taught me, and why I remember it after all these years, is that we all have a right to experience "being." We are all entitled to live in our strength. We all deserve opportunities to find our best and most authentic selves.

A liberal education can be a guide to such personal enrichment, but when we imply that the only outcome disenfranchised students should care about is money, we run the risk of circumscribing their futures, both personally, and in the public domain. Indeed, positing employability as the lone metric for determining higher education's value precludes a consideration of the ways in which the illumination of human consciousness through literature, philosophy, music, and the arts allows us to flourish fully as human beings, enriching our experiences as individuals and as members of a community. Eroding democratic access to the more substantive avenues by which learning enriches us all jeopardizes this kind of personal fulfillment and educational development.

That enterprise of helping students discover who they are and what their place in the world is at the very heart of a liberal education and central to the mission of both AAC&U and the Coalition for Life Transformative Education. CLTE's precepts are derived from the conviction that colleges and universities must promote identity, agency, and purpose among

students at all types of institutions. Yet, in reinforcing the view that positioning students for success in work, citizenship, and life extends beyond helping graduates secure a high paying job, we need to take seriously the concerns of those who maintain that college is too expensive, too difficult to access, and doesn't teach students 21st-century skills. We need to demonstrate that far from the pastoral retreat of the tweedy past, in which learning took place within the ivory tower as a willful disconnect from the practice matters of everyday life, a contemporary liberal education aims to break down the false dichotomy between liberal learning and career preparation, while aligning that preparation with a sense of purpose.

We know from UCLA's annual survey of first-year students entering four-year colleges and universities how much this matters, given that though a majority of students who attend college report doing so to get a job, with around 85% saying it is their primary reason for going, they also want to find work that aligns with their purpose. Evidence for this can be found in the Bates College-Gallup report "Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work, which reveals that, nationally, 95% of four-year college graduates consider a sense of purpose at least moderately important to their work, and four out of five college graduates indicate that it is very important or extremely important to have a sense of purpose in their work. And though the study indicates that graduates with a high sense of purpose in their work were almost ten times more likely to express overall well-being, unfortunately, only 40% reported having found a meaningful career, and only 34 percent said they were deeply interested in their work.

These findings confirm what we knew from the earlier Gallup-Purdue study on college graduates and long-term outcomes released a decade ago, which showcased that alumni who reported having meaningful experiential learning and someone who cared about them as a person

were more than twice as like to report high levels of well-being and work engagement later in life, no matter how long ago they graduated. Unfortunately, less than 5 percent of college graduates strongly agreed that they have had both transformative experiences that serve as catalysts for activating a sense of purpose. That sense of purpose, defined in Bill Damon's recent Stanford-Mellon survey as an active and enduring commitment to achieve something that is meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self, has been associated with motivation and energy, resilience under pressure, a sense of identity and direction, academic and vocational achievement, and physical health and well-being through the lifespan.

I couldn't help but think of the implications of these studies when watching *Everything Everywhere All at Once,* which at its core, is a film about the quest to find purpose in a seemingly meaningless existence. Evelyn, the protagonist, is suffering from what doctors would term "demoralization syndrome," a malady often afflicting the terminally ill when confronted by their own mortality and characterized by a sense of helplessness and loss of purpose. She has failed at everything she has tried, from karaoke to teaching, and is caught in a cycle of drudgery, despair, and a subjective sense of incompetence that has led to hopelessness and existential dread. Her floundering laundromat is being audited by the IRS; her marriage is on the verge of collapse, marked by her husband, Waymund, filing divorce papers just to get her attention; and her contentious relationship with her daughter, Joy, reaches a new low after Evelyn introduces her hypercritical father, Chong Chong, to Joy's girlfriend without acknowledging the true nature of their romantic relationship.

Joy, who embodies Jobu Tupaki in the onslaught of alternative realities, jumps from universe to universe killing different versions of Evelyn in a search to find a mother that can

understand her. When the two women find themselves standing together in front of the everything bagel—the swirling mass of everything that collapses onto itself and becomes the pit of oblivion—Joy acknowledges that, for her, the image represents the truth and a chance for release from a Sisyphean existence. She explains that "Nothing matters, and if nothing matters then all the pain and guilt you feel for making nothing of your life goes away." Thus, Joy represents the nihilism Evelyn is on the verge of embracing, seen when announcing at a birthday party for her father, "Another year, pretending we know what we're doing, but really we're only going around in circles." Nevertheless, despite her overwhelming sense of purposelessness, Evelyn desperately tries to find something worth living and fighting for.

Whether we like it or not, helping our students confront and respond to the same type of unavoidable questions about the human condition is part of our responsibility as educators. When I taught medical ethics for pre-med students at the University for Rhode Island and medical students at Brown University, I always began my section on death and the meaning of life by inviting them to give me the name, or any information really, about their maternal great-great-grandmothers. I taught 4 sections a semester— large classes of 120 students— and yet, not once, did anyone have the information. Perhaps this would be different today with the advent of Ancestry.com and other genealogy databases. But, in every class I was able to say to them, "Here is a woman responsible for your very existence, and yet you can't even tell me her name. Is there any hope that 150 years from now anyone will know anything about you? And if not, does your life now really matter?"

It was a cruel thing to do, especially in the fall, as darkness descended early, and students were preparing for the holiday break. When asked about my own view, I talked about meaning

in my life coming from service to others and baseball, referring to an article by philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen, who celebrated the Jewish-American immigrant experience with the sport, suggesting it provided a mystic unity with something larger than themselves. My point with the exercise was to reinforce that the science they were studying would undoubtedly help us discover the causes and treatments of diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and Parkinson's, but that it could not help in deciding how society should allocate scarce medical resources; whether individualism can be excessive in matters of life and death; how to balance the values of pluralism and tolerance on the one hand against principles of fairness to all on the other; or decide how to live our lives in the face of such diagnoses, determine whether there can ever be meaning in life given the inevitability of death, or speak to the experience of a mystic unity.

I had them read my URI colleague Al Killilea's book, *The Politics of Being Mortal.* In the process of writing, Al's 16-year-old daughter, Mari, was tragically killed in a car accident on her way to tutor a special-needs student. Among the most important points he makes in his work is that it is not death we fear as much as it is "annihilation and the absurdity of a meaningless life." And for him, it is only through a recognition and acceptance of human interdependence that meaning can be given to both death and life. In the end, this is a lesson that Evelyn learns, as well. Her way toward a purposeful life comes from giving in to Waymund's plea for kindness, something director Daniel Kwan admits is a nod to sci-fi author Kurt Vonnegut's perspective that "We are here to help each other go through this thing, whatever it is." Waymund lives this philosophy, endlessly annoying Evelyn by affixing googly eyes to bales of laundry in a gesture of humor and compassion until she comes to realize that what she saw as her husband's weakness, namely his kindness, is really his superpower.

During a bitter confrontation, he says, "You tell me it's a cruel world, and we're just running around in circles. I know that…. When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naïve. It's strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight." Waymond ultimately saves Evelyn from the void not with reason, but with an emotional plea, revealing, "The only thing I do know, is that we have to be kind. Just be kind. Especially when we don't know what is going on." From that point on, Evelyn is capable of repairing everything she has destroyed in the multiverse.

Like Waymund's approach to the struggle against the agents of chaos, colleges and universities need to provide each of our students with experiences that will help them activate purpose, employing pedagogies of kindness, and even humor— googly eyes and all— along the way. Interestingly, according to the Stanford/Mellon study, demographic associations and academic majors had no impact on the likelihood of students developing a sense of purpose. Rather, what activated a sense of purpose among students was engaging in experiences that helped them connect what they were learning to issues that mattered to them and to the broader society, applying their knowledge, skills, and interests to address real-world problems, and talking to emotionally supportive mentors inside and outside of the classroom, who encouraged their goals and took an interest in their well-being.

At AAC&U, we argue that the equity mandate before us requires bringing these practices to scale, knowing that this will necessitate interrogating current programs and policies and engaging in a paradigm shift that extends to curricular and pedagogical reform, professional development, changes in how we reward faculty, especially in the tenure and promotion process,

and an enhanced commitment to colleges and universities serving as anchor institutions within our communities, in which institutions demonstrate that their success is inextricably linked to the psychological, social, physical, economic, and educational well-being of those in the communities in which they are located and those they seek to serve.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, in which 1.6 million students dropped out of college, as we continue to face the prospect of a lost generation of college students, I think about how we might leverage the work of my colleague Cia Verschelden, whose research focuses on cognitive bandwith and the ways in which food and shelter insecurities, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination reduce the capacity of students to learn both inside and outside of the classroom. In helping faculty find ways to restore cognitive bandwith, Cia reveals that the biggest bandwith stealer for students is belonging uncertainty. Therefore, to do the work we set out before us, we must make sure that our campuses are places of welcome and belonging.

I want to emphasize two approaches to bandwith recovery. The first is Carol Dweck's now-famous groundbreaking research on mindsets, which provides crucial insights into initial steps. Though her scholarship underscores the power of growth mindsets in developing students' talents and abilities within the classroom, Dweck's concept of mindset extends beyond individuals and can be applied to institutional and organizational cultures. The right institutional mindset influences the ability of students to have transformative experiences, and colleges and universities have a responsibility to create a culture that supports a growth mindset. Dweck's attention to the long-neglected area of student motivation and her emphasis on shifting learning

away from high-stakes testing and memorization to deeper, more joyful learning are especially important at a time when so many students have by almost all accounts become increasingly disengaged, and mental illness among students is skyrocketing.

Equally compelling is the work of educational scholars such as Cate Denial, who make the case for adopting pedagogies of kindness, in which compassion is applied to every situation. Denial endeavors to find a space for all students to do their best work by making the classroom accessible to everyone. For her, this takes the form of collaborating with students around the ways syllabi, assignments, and assessments are designed, as well as the life experiences that should be respected in the classroom. Her commitment to "believing students and believing in students" goes a long way toward upending the transactional model of education and promoting models of transformation at the core of AAC&U's work.

In *Everything Everywhere All at Once,* Evelyn eventually finds herself in her form and is able to live the full potential of her life, seeing her world beyond the front door, finding her passion, and aligning the person she is with the one she hopes to be. To truly fulfill the promise of American higher education, the task before us to help each and every student find their selves in their forms. For as Daniel Kwan reminded us in his acceptance speech for Best Director at the Academy Awards. "There is greatness in every single person. It doesn't matter who they are. You have a genius waiting to erupt. You just need to find the right people to unlock that."

Thank you.