

Imelda Chłodna-Blach

John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
Poland

THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN EDUCATION AND REFORMS PROPOSALS ACCORDING TO ALLAN BLOOM

For most of us, the United States is synonymous with prosperity—“a paradise on Earth”—and is considered to be the greatest economic and military power of the modern world, a country distinguished by its superior technology and economics. It is so not only by large-scale development of specialised research, democracy, freedom, and cultural pluralism but also by the striving for continuous improvement by all institutions seeking to make life easier for ordinary citizens and providing specialists with the possibility of even better performance. In addition, the entire lives of Americans are driven by a desire to create equal opportunities for all citizens, which is particularly evident in the field of upbringing. The philosophy of American life can be perceived, to some extent, as faith in democracy that ensures, along with unanimous aspirations and cooperation, the happiness of society understood in general, political, and economical terms.¹ Combining this with faith in unlimited influence and possibility to improve and learn, based on the enormous natural wealth of the country and welfare, has resulted in providing access to schools for everybody, regardless of their social and economic position or place of residence.² The universal state education system and the so-called mass

This article was originally published in Polish: Imelda Chłodna, “Kryzys edukacji amerykańskiej i propozycje jego naprawy w ujęciu Allana Blooma,” *Cywilizacja* 18 (2006): 61–74.

¹ See M. Ziemnowicz, *Nauczanie i wychowanie w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki Północnej* (Lwów 1934), 14.

² After 1945, the number of people with higher education has dramatically increased in the United States of America. On the basis of the relevant Act called the “G. I. Bill,” the doors

culture (creating desirable patterns of thinking and behaviour for itself) have become fundamental tools to exert impact on society.

On the one hand, the words “success” and “improvement” constitute the fundamental watchword of American life that is reflected, among others, in ever-increasing role of schools and universities. To a large extent, this development is possible thanks to the results of scientific research that condition even the improvement of social relations as well as solving any complicated issues. On the other hand, it is paradoxical that this progress, so clearly noticeable in the field of American technology and economics, unfortunately does not go hand in hand with the level of culture, and particularly education. This is reflected both in science and upbringing.

Symptoms of the Crisis of American Education and Upbringing

It is typical of the American educational system that in the name of the principles of pragmatism and utilitarianism that dominate in the American society, the higher education has been dominated by the polytechnic education. Technical knowledge and practical skills have become more important than wisdom and moral integrity. Particularly, the universities lose their primary function which is exploration and transmission of truth. Nowadays, the task of the universities is to ensure all students a free development, whereas imposing a certain point of view is considered to be a manifestation of authoritarianism. Currently, in line with liberalism and dominance of the idea of equality, an individualistic vision of man is cultivated in the United States. In line with its objectives, the need for freedom and self-realisation is emphasised, which can be satisfied thanks to science, school, and university. Nevertheless, truth and its perfecting role in human life as well as the good of the man as a person is no longer the objective of these institutions. Their purpose is usability. There is no room for education understood as perfecting man in what is appropriate for him as a person. However, there is room for becoming aware of one's

of universities have opened to all demobilised soldiers wishing to study. Many millions of demobilised soldiers have benefited from the opportunity to get an education at the expense of the Government. See K. Michałek, *Na drodze ku potędze. Historia Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki 1861–1945* (Warszawa 1991), 409.

needs and interests and for professional formation that is to provide financial means for the realisation of one's desires.³

That poor state of American education is the subject of reflection of American educators, psychologists, and philosophers. Allan Bloom⁴ is one of many prominent American and British intellectuals who have addressed this issue. His book entitled *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) has been translated into many languages and aroused strong responses not only among the representatives of the American academia but also in Europe.

The analyses conducted by Bloom suggest that the crisis in science is mainly visible at the higher-education level. Its main symptom is the division of university structures into autonomous university faculties. The former organisational model reminding every faculty of its "incompleteness" and the fact that it is a part of a larger whole has disappeared. Universities have broken up into smaller units that demand their rights and own teaching canons, or even are "at war" with each other.

Nowadays, the most jeopardised faculty of an American university is faculty of humanities. It is dominated by historicism, relativism, a lack of respect for tradition, and the cult of utility. It acts as a depository of the classics, but its claims to describe the whole world and the place of man in it, to make judgements about this whole and to seek the truth about it have been rejected. Therefore, the humanities are the only specialisation using non-specialist books and posing questions about the whole—the questions ignored by the rest of the university. The natural sciences treat the humanities as an art that cannot claim the right to truth. The scholars experience the greatest difficulty in justifying the importance of their field of knowledge. In many cases, professors lecturing on classical texts are not willing to defend their authenticity because they are not interested in it or try to

³ See P. Skrzydlewski, "Prawo człowieka do edukacji," in *Filozofia i edukacja*, ed. P. Jaroszyński, P. Tarasiewicz, I. Chłódna, (Lublin 2005), 135–137. For more information on the sources of the crisis of American education see I. Chłódna, "Allan Bloom i antychrześcijańskie źródła edukacji amerykańskiej," *Człowiek w Kulturze* 16 (2004): 197–206.

⁴ Alan Bloom (1930–1992)—American political philosopher, theorist and cultural critic. He was also known as a translator and interpreter of the works of Plato and J. J. Rousseau (*The Republic of Plato* (New York 1968), and J. J. Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education* (New York 1979)). He received many awards, including the Clark Distinguished Teaching Award in 1967, the Jean Jacques Rousseau prize at the International Book Fair in Geneva in 1987 for the French translation of *The Closing of the American Mind*, and the Charles Frankel Prize in 1992 for his contribution to studies in the field of humanities in the United States.

update these works, treating them as material serving the authentication of one of the contemporary theories: cultural, historical, economic, or psychological. The humanities departments that are least dependent on the content of classical works (i.e., linguistics, archaeology, music and fine arts) are in the most favourable situation.

Another sign of the crisis is a hierarchy of knowledge that differs completely from the one in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Today, when an American student comes to the university he or she sees a number of disciplines, each of which is autonomous and seemingly equally important. It has been questioned if one university discipline may claim to be superior to any other discipline, even in terms of the disciplines previously treated as privileged, such as theology, philosophy or art theory.⁵ This “democratic order” has led to the abandonment of the true *universitas* and encouraged students to escape into specialisations that create prospects for future careers, but not for spiritual growth. Therefore, despite the official proclamation of the principle of equality among scientific disciplines, the methods of organisation in higher education teach students to believe that it is better to choose specialised majors designed to provide them with knowledge that will be useful in their future careers than to choose humanities. Thus, they are forced to study for “the usefulness” and not for exploring and understanding the world of people and things. The universities have replaced the concern for the discovery of truth with concern for its effectiveness and application.

The greatest manifestation of the crisis is the fact that universities have ceased to be an enclave of intellectual freedom, a place of a joint pursuit of truth and judging whether a given idea, theory, or proposition is true or false.⁶ The place of truth has been replaced with freedom and equality leading, consequently, to the destruction of the model of a rational man who discerns good from evil, truth from falsehood, and who is critical towards the theories and views presented in the academic world. This goal may be achieved by means of particular modification of educational legal regulations, artificial forcing of estimation for all minorities at the university, discrediting the Christian religion and culture based upon Greek

⁵ “In America, it is disputed whether to teach only Shakespeare, Dante and Goethe, or to teach as well about works of a Peruvian singer or a Puerto Rican poet in the name of multiculturalism that invalidates the hierarchy in the spirit of political correctness.” M. Król, “O zimnej demokracji,” *Tygodnik Powszechny* 21 (1998): 8.

⁶ A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Polish translation by Tomasz Bieroń entitled *Umysł Zamknięty*), 373–374.

thought, Roman law, and Christianity. Properly profiled curricula provide an opportunity to manipulate the society, bringing it into conformity with *ad hoc* political or social needs.

Therefore, university curricula are dominated by cultural relativism and dogmatic scepticism proclaiming the relativity of all truth. Religion, as the basis for moral education, has disappeared from public education. It is believed that the truth preached by religion may hinder the possibility of interpersonal communication. University lectures are dominated by the view that no religion, culture, country, idea, or person has the right to proclaim the objective truth since it does not exist. Contemporary American education does not require the student to be critical and demanding with respect to the surrounding reality. On the contrary, it tells him to be open to all attitudes, lifestyles, and ideologies. Current trends are more important than truth.

In addition to the learning and teaching crisis, a crisis may be observed as well in the sphere of morality. The attitudes of American youth present the lack of imperative goals for the future while breaking ties with the past. There is no generally accepted morality, or a sense of respect for the requirements of a harmonious society or respect for legitimate authorities. And the promotion of freedom is understood negatively as a *freedom from* any restrictions, while questioning the objective system of values. These habits are grounded in one of the most striking features of American students, which is egalitarianism.⁷

Almost all students also support the idea of meritocracy, i.e., they believe that every individual should have the opportunity to realise his or her specific (non-egalitarian) ability, regardless of race, gender, social and national origin, religion, and wealth. Egalitarianism has gradually led to the provision of access to education to all young people, which is admirable, but on the other hand, it has reaffirmed the belief that education must be identical for each person, regardless of their abilities. These changes resulted in the fact that people with superior intellectual abilities were not required to do more than any average student.⁸ In consequence, the level of education has decreased.

The postulate of universal equality in all forms and in all ways is integrally related with relativism that imprints its mark especially in the

⁷ Id., 102.

⁸ See R. H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah. Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York 1996), 252.

sphere of morality. Bloom perceives this phenomenon as a serious threat to the intellectual life of students and a strength that adversely affects the American educational system. For students, the relativity of truth is a kind of moral requirement—a necessary condition for the freedom of society. What they fear most is intolerance.

Manifested in an open denial of objective truth and good as the basis for human cognition and action, relativism leads ultimately to bondage of man. Acknowledging any good would be tantamount to acknowledging evil, which is contradictory to the open-to-everything democracy. Its consequence is the cognitive and moral relativism that ultimately leads, through scepticism and agnosticism, to nihilism. Bloom ironically states that:

Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger.⁹

The idea that we should give up the belief that anyone can be right is instilled in the students as an irrefutable axiom. Of course, they cannot defend their opinion which is further compounded by the fact that their knowledge is not too impressive. In fact, their previous education (before higher education) was not to make them erudites but to provide them with a “moral virtue—openness.”¹⁰

According to Bloom, there are two mutually exclusive types of openness: indifferent and seeking. The first one has two objectives—to deprive man of intellectual aspirations and allow him to be who he wants to be provided that he does not want to be a learned man. The second type stimulates fascination and constitutes an openness to knowledge provided by history and a variety of cultures. This is a true openness that does not allow man to succumb to the temptation to accept the present completely. However, the contemporary meaning of openness is a life pandering to current tastes and imitating the most primitive patterns. It encourages to

⁹ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 28.

¹⁰ Id.

“go with the flow,” to adapt to the present whiling ignoring the doubts about the rules that govern the system.¹¹

Therefore, the American student’s mind is closed in a false openness. It has become passive, self-centred, egalitarian in its limited sense. The students have no readings where they can see behaviour patterns. Renouncing reading good books weakens their sense of reasonable perception and strengthens their belief that there is nothing but “here and now.”¹² Lack of proper education means that they look for “enlightenment” where it is readily available and are unable to distinguish solemnity from intellectual rubbish, wisdom from propaganda. They usually turn to films that are characterised by ignorance and manipulation.

Another feature of young generation is egocentrism resulting from a significant atomisation of American society. Today’s students do not have great moral aspirations; when asked about great ethical issues, they speak ironically. They present a certain passivity, lack of a wide perspective regarding the future. Heroism, as an admirable quality, has been replaced with a “self-preserving” and self-serving morality. The universal issues are no longer present, as they are not directly related to the students’ lives. They do not see a reason to knowingly participate in civic life.

The inevitable individualism is further exacerbated by the collapse of the family. Children lose contact with their parents while still in a significant state of development, because when they leave home, the parents have little influence on their offspring. Young people usually settle far from the family. As a result, young Americans are often incapable of building lasting relationships. At any time they are ready for a change, ignoring the cost of separation from their loved ones. Since childhood, they are instilled with the belief in a boundless freedom identified with the possibility to make any choices. They are brought up to freedom, but with no positive purpose and not understood as being rooted in responsibility. Therefore, there is no necessity, social pressure, or cult of heroism for young people. They do not have nor need heroes or authority. They may choose between being a believer or an atheist, being straight or gay, to cohabitate or marry (including a vision that considers divorce as licit), to found a family or to not have children, to raise offspring or choose professional work instead. The breakdown of marriage is almost a norm. Many children have experienced the divorce of their parents; therefore, the value of the

¹¹ Id., 47.

¹² Id., 73.

family is foreign to them. They are strengthened in their conviction that divorce is only a dissolution of the agreement between spouses. They transfer this pattern into their adult lives. Consequently, in their later lives, students prefer cohabitation and avoid any long-standing commitments. Their actions are driven solely by their desire to achieve success and an inaccurate understanding of the relationship about responsibility and happiness.

Individualism is related to the American conformism that means that other people are not necessary and causes the loss of hope that in other times and places there were great sages, authorities, wise books, from which one may learn a lot about life. People do not have a common goal, a common good that can be achieved only by means of mutual cooperation. This phenomenon is exacerbated by multiculturalism that is typical of the United States, where we deal with many nationalities, races, and religions.¹³ This results in the fact that the culture existing in this country is not the culture of all communities living in it. Culturally and mentally different worlds collide here; thus, it is difficult to find a universal reference to truth, goodness, and beauty.

When discussing the issues of upbringing, it is worth paying attention to another aspect of the American students' mentality. There are three types of illiteracy described by Ronald H. Nash, a professor of history and philosophy at the University of Kentucky, in his work entitled *The Closing of the American Heart*. The first of them known as functional illiteracy is the inability to understand written words that are in common use. 13% of all seventeen-year-olds (about 24 million people) are functional illiterates. Meanwhile, in 1910, only 2.2% of American children aged between 10 and 14 years could not read or write. Ronald Nash cites the opinion of Karl Shapiro of the University of California who states that: "What is really distressing is that this generation cannot and does not read. I am speaking of university students in what are supposed to be our best universities their

¹³ In connection with the phenomenon of multiculturalism, at the time of colonialism, the metaphor of a melting pot was promoted in the United States, indicating that immigrants should try to adapt to the dominant culture in such a way that their otherness does not go beyond the private and family life. In time, however, the process of a forced assimilation of immigrants into the Anglo-Saxon culture began. It resulted in replacing the *melting pot* with a *salad bowl* presenting the new situation when minority groups are not willing to assimilate into the dominant culture, but wish to maintain their distinctiveness, at the same time demanding respect for their rights. See A. Szahaj, M. N. Jakubowski, *Filozofia polityki* (Warszawa 2005), 171.

illiteracy is staggering . . . We are experiencing a literacy breakdown which is unlike anything I know of in the history of letters.”¹⁴

Another problem is cultural illiteracy. This term describes students who can read but are unable to thrive in the modern world because they lack the information necessary to interpret the material they read. Dr. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., is the most prominent thinker associated with this concept of cultural illiteracy. Both he and Nash state that modern educational theory deserves much of the blame for causing cultural illiteracy. Hirsch argues that educators often believe that a child’s intellectual and social skills will develop naturally without regard to the specific content of education. Educators are more interested in how children learn rather than what they learn. Because of this belief, children fail to store away enough information to become culturally literate.

Teachers and educators will grudgingly admit to the problem of functional and cultural literacy, but they confirm, without a shadow of a doubt, the more and more frequent occurrence of the so-called moral illiteracy. Nash defines the problem of moral illiteracy as a cultural war between those who are religious and support traditional values and those who are secular and advocate anti-traditional or modernist values. This problem affects not only the Christians. Will Herberg, an American professor of Jewish origin, claims that: “We are surrounded on all sides by the wreckage of our great intellectual tradition. In this kind of spiritual chaos, neither freedom nor order is possible. Instead of freedom, we have the all-engulfing whirl of pleasure and power; instead of order, we have the jungle wilderness and self-indulgence.”¹⁵ In contrast, John Silber, the Boston University president, said that:

In generations past, parents were more diligent in passing on their principles and values to their children, and were assisted by churches and schools which emphasized religious and moral education. In recent years, in contrast, our society has become increasingly secular and the curriculum of the public schools has been denuded of almost all ethical content. As a result universities must confront a student body ignorant of the evidence and arguments that

¹⁴ See Ronald H. Nash, *The Closing of the American Heart: What’s Really Wrong with America’s Schools* (Richardson, Tex.: Probe Books, 1990). See also D. Closson, *The Closing of the American Heart* (Probe Ministries International, 1993).

¹⁵ Closson, *The Closing of the American Heart*.

underlie and support many of our traditional moral principles and practices.¹⁶

Taking into consideration the aforementioned reflection, it is clear that the crisis of American education is very deep and has penetrated both the structure of curricula and academic staff as well as the students themselves, their knowledge, customs, and culture.

Return to Advantages of Education in the Field of Liberal Arts

In the face of threats observed by Bloom in today's academic life and manifested, among other things, in a significantly diminished quality of reflection on life and the purpose of man, Bloom believes that the only serious solution to this problem is to create a good base of studies in the field of philosophy and the humanities, which requires a genuine study of the history of great philosophical questions and problems and attempts to answer them.¹⁷ Therefore, Bloom seeks to restore the ideal of an educated man shaped by great literary works and works of the greatest thinkers. He defines this type of education as liberal education, where the word "liberal" is used in the context of *artes liberales* (liberal arts). Liberality, that is the freedom of this type of education, consists, *inter alia*, in the fact that it is not subordinated to the demands of utility and practicality, but only to truth. Its goal is not acquiring education within a narrow specialisation, but a broadly humanistic education, the so-called *universitas*.

Bloom's views on liberal education are largely shared by the late Mortimer J. Adler, a former professor at the University of North Carolina,

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Thereby Bloom is part of a direction in the philosophy of education called perennialism. Perennialism is one of the oldest and most conservative philosophies of education. It refers to the past, especially to what has gained a widespread recognition, to universal knowledge and values that are most respected by society. In this way, one may justify the stability of knowledge that has passed the test of time, as well as the stability of values retaining their invariable moral, spiritual and physical shape. It is assumed that the nature of world and man is invariable, as well as the nature of truth, virtue, beauty, etc. Perennialism has revived with the publication of Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal* (*The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York 1982); *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* (New York 1983); *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus* (New York 1984)). A. C. Ornstein, F. P. Hunkins, *Curriculum: Foundations, Principles, and Issues* (Polish translation by K. Kruszewski entitled: *Program szkolny. Założenia, zasady, problematyka* (Warszawa 1998), 64–66.

author of one of the most important works devoted to this issue.¹⁸ In the chapter entitled *Liberalism and liberal education*, he draws attention to the necessity to distinguish between the terms “liberal” and “liberalism,” especially in terms of the concept of freedom hidden in each of them. Liberalism, inspired mainly by the philosophy of Locke, Voltaire and Rousseau, puts an emphasis on choosing the “system of values,” underlining the importance of freedom that brings personal beliefs to the fore and at the same time deprecates the existence of objective values such as truth, goodness, and beauty. The cult is reflected in the thesis proclaiming the existence of basic freedoms, such as personal freedom, physical integrity, freedom of religion, conscience, association and assembly as well as in aversion towards collectivism, as a belief in the dominance of what is of an individual nature. Free and uninhibited activity of individuals is, therefore, a source of harmony, progress in social life and general well-being. Liberalism understood in that way is one of the main reasons for the poor state of American education described in the previous section of this paper. Since freedom is understood here as *freedom from* and not as *freedom to*. Liberalism challenges the natural human freedom—the freedom of the human will in the act of choice. Liberalism replaces it with freedom from any superior power and the lack of submission, in one’s principles of behaviour, to will or legislative authority of any man. This individual freedom—independent from variable, uncertain, unknown—is merely the arbitrary will of another man as an absolute good.

In contrast, in the case of classical education, freedom is understood differently. One of the meanings (a traditional meaning) of the term “liberal education” is training in the field of the liberal arts. However, in this case, the term may be also used to underline the difference between humanistic education and vocational training.¹⁹ Therefore, this term should not be limited only to intellectual education or “cultivation of the mind.” This aspect of liberal education is underlined also by Bloom who claims that chaos reigning among university disciplines discourages students preventing them from making a rational choice of the offered disciplines. Therefore, they frequently decide to undertake specialised majors with a specific mandatory curriculum and with a particular vision of a future

¹⁸ See M. J. Adler, *Reforming Education. The Opening of the American Mind* (New York–London 1988).

¹⁹ *Id.*, 96.

career.²⁰ In this perspective, education other than purely professional or technical training is perceived as unnecessary and burdensome for the university curriculum.

This utilitarianism can be prevented by means of creating an atmosphere at the universities encouraging students to feel the need for humanistic education satisfying their love of truth and passion to live a good life. It can be achieved only by a good liberal education programme.

According to M. Adler, such an education covers three aspects distinguished in regards to the types of a man's development: intellectual, moral, and physical. He understands all the three aspects of liberal education, as opposed to vocational training. However, in his opinion, this belief is not opposed to the concept of liberal education understood solely as mental development, since all the above-mentioned spheres of human life also play a very important role here. He claims that: "The direct product of liberal education is a good mind, well disciplined in its processes of inquiring and judging, knowing and understanding, and well furnished with knowledge, well cultivated by ideas."²¹

Authentic liberal education radically changes the entire life of a student, influencing his actions, preferences, and choices when his current views are subject to re-examination and assessment. Bloom says even more: ". . . liberal education puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything . . . it can only touch what is uncommitted in the already essentially committed."²²

This type of education should primarily help students find the answer to the most important, according to Bloom, question: "What is man?" whose life is stretched between the noblest aspirations and low, common needs. It is typical of this education to give answers that often oppose the tendencies of our nature or do not follow the spirit of our times. Liberally educated persons can resist easy answers or commonly promoted fashions just because he or she knows other, more valuable and worthwhile considerations and solutions.

An important part of classical education is constituted by the so-called "Great Books" approach referring to a specific curriculum and list of books developed on its basis,²³ that have been created as a result of the

²⁰ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 402–403.

²¹ Adler, *Reforming Education*, 110.

²² Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 443.

²³ The original list compiled by John Erskine contained sixty items. In the 1920s, it was considerably extended in connection with the organisation of this kind of seminars by such

discussion between American scientists and theorists of education, among others: Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, Alexander Meiklejohn. Allan Bloom argues that working with students on the basis of contents of the books belonging to the canon is one of the most important ways of preventing risks associated with the problem of relativism. Although he is aware that education cannot come down to a mere book knowledge, Bloom emphasises that knowledge is essential especially in times when everyday life provides few role models to be followed.

Bloom also draws attention to the fact that American universities (in response to a noticeable crisis in the humanities) attempt to supplement the university education of students, which is reflected in the creation of the so-called framework programs. They are supposed to provide university education with certain subjects constituting a basic humanistic education, as well as the relevant requirements. In practice, a student is obliged to pass at least one course from basic disciplines: natural sciences, social sciences or philosophy and humanities. It is done in the name of the so-called broadening of cognitive “horizons.”²⁴ However, this does not meet the requirements of the postulate of comprehensive knowledge set earlier by Bloom. These courses are necessarily superficial and detached from the whole. Eminent professors from a particular field are not interested in them since their very nature constitutes certain “surrogates” of teaching. Thus, their levels are low and do not fulfil their function properly. Nevertheless, university education is impossible without considering relevant, fundamental, and universal questions and answers.

The second way to resolve the deadlock was to create the so-called “integrated courses.”²⁵ It is an attempt to replace framework programmes that were created for the purposes of general education. They would consist in classes (within the framework of one subject) with a broader look at

schools as: Columbia University, University of Chicago, St. John’s College, Notre Dame, St. Mary’s College. All subsequent studies contained $\frac{3}{4}$ of the titles proposed by Erskine. The books included in this approach constitute a publishing series entitled “Great Books of the Western World,” which is known to many Americans. Individual items have been approved by M. J. Adler and other members of the Great Books Foundation. Many of the works included in this collection were translated into English specifically for the needs of this approach.

²⁴ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 408–410.

²⁵ The problems of these courses are highly diverse, for instance: “Man in Nature,” “War and Moral Responsibility,” “The Arts and Creativity,” “Culture and the Individual.” See *id.*, 409.

the specific issue. According to Bloom, their advantage would be forcing professors to go beyond their particular specialisation, whereas, their disadvantage could be the lack of explicit requirements and following the changing fashions.²⁶ None of these models, however, completed the objective of “comprehensive” knowledge set by Bloom, i.e., none of them presented a comprehensive vision of the human world to students. “Liberal education should give the student the sense that learning must and can be both synoptic and precise.”²⁷ This objective cannot be achieved because there is no unity of sciences, and few of those in power at universities believe in the improvement of this situation. Another problem is that since the studies do not lead to posing and answering universal human questions, the courses described above constitute only “interludes,” a temporary escape into other issues. There is no way students may notice their meaning and relationship with the whole of their studies. Hence, the proposed solutions, although they are fundamentally noble, do not lead to the restoration of logos and ethos of university education.²⁸

Therefore, Bloom suggests to replace the selective system of current curricula of secondary schools and universities with formal courses teaching students about classical literature and allowing them to realise that “philosophy, not history or anthropology, is the most important human science.”²⁹

In his opinion, such an education has to rely on reading selections, generally known classical texts, aimed at the discovery of important philosophical questions that can be found there. As he says: “[w]hat each generation is can be best discovered in its relation to the permanent concerns of mankind.”³⁰ He also warns against treating these works merely as specific historical products. The method of reading “great old books” suggested by Bloom allows students to participate in the rich heritage of human thought. Bloom states that:

wherever the Great Books make up a central part of the curriculum, the students are excited and satisfied, feel they are doing something that is independent and fulfilling, getting something from the uni-

²⁶ Id., 410.

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ See A. Maryniarczyk, “O zapomnianej misji uniwersytetów europejskich,” *Człowiek w Kulturze* 16 (2004): 54–55.

²⁹ See G. McNamee, *Lost in the Stacks: Bloom's 'Closing of the American Mind,'* June 2005.

³⁰ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 19.

versity they cannot get elsewhere. The very fact of this special experience, which leads nowhere beyond itself, provides them with a new alternative and a respect for study itself. The advantage they get is an awareness of the classic—particularly important for our innocents; an acquaintance with what big questions were when there were still big questions; models, at the very least, of how to go about answering them; and, perhaps most important of all, a fund of shared experiences and thoughts on which to ground their friendships with one another. Programs based upon judicious use of great texts provide the royal road to students' hearts . . . A good program of liberal education feeds the student's love of truth and passion to live a good life it is the easiest thing in the world to devise courses of study, adapted to the particular conditions of each university, which thrill those who take them. The difficulty is in getting them accepted by the faculty.³¹

This idea is not enthusiastically received by the various departments of the university.³² They all have a positive attitude towards philosophical and humanistic education, provided that those studies do not take their students away and do not take up too much time. However, they are not interested in this field and they focus their entire attention on solving immediate problems. Natural sciences, the most successful field at universities, treats the "books" with indulgence, provided they do not take up too much valuable time devoted to solving current issues. Social sciences do not treat the old works as a waste of time. Their rejection of the classics is based more on fear that students may challenge social sciences in general, as they may, by chance, discover the greatness of old matters and, at the same time reject the little value of solutions proposed by the new field. Moreover, only a few "Great Books" could be presented by those sciences—Bloom mentions here only Weber and Freud. Bloom puts the greatest emphasis on the question why the humanities have adopted hostile attitude towards the "Great Books" approach. Despite their actual dependence on this type of works, they are not interested in what is inside them. An example he gives is philology, the interests of which focus on the linguistic rather than substantive sphere. Another reason is the lack of competence of scholars who do not understand what has been said by Aristotle,

³¹ Id., 411–412.

³² Id., 412.

Plato, and others. Finally, some of them want to join the ranks of “specialised sciences,” breaking away from the very roots. When analysing the causes of the collapse of the status of the humanities, Bloom refers to the events in the 1960s, when the humanities found themselves in the desired centre of events. As the first discipline, the humanities sought to take into account students’ demands.³³ Bloom believes that such actions had their sources in the penetration of this field of science by the ideology of radical European left wing. Transferring the Nietzsche’s philosophy into the language of the left wing was to bring a fresh breeze of new interpretations (Marxism, Freudianism, etc.). This is the source of active revolutionary attitude of scholars. In consequence, they have deprived their field of knowledge of the position it had occupied in the old order. Moreover, the humanities have lost social approval. As noted by Bloom, today’s humanities lack faith in themselves—the transmission of tradition (which is not respected by democracy) was abandoned decades ago, although for centuries it was the task and source of greatness of the humanities. Whereas democracy desires to replace the eternity postulated by humanists with immediate usefulness, the humanities resemble “the great old Paris Flea Market where, amidst masses of junk, people with a good eye found castaway treasures that made them rich . . .”³⁴

Therefore, Bloom is of the opinion that the most important element of education should be classical formation (liberal education) that uses important texts belonging to the canon of literary and philosophical thought of the West in a considered and reasonable way. He claims that the so-called “Great Books” cover a 2500-year reflection on the most enduring and important questions strongly related to both individual and social life of every human being. According to him, it is impossible to live one’s life fully without a serious study of this type of texts. The salvation of culture,

³³ This rebellion of flower people was to bring a certain renewal. Unfortunately, capitulation of universities and acceptance of all the demands of students have completely deprived the higher education from its former objectives. The content of this ideology was to engage in values. Universities have waived their right to explore them and inform about them. This right has been given to the “spirit of the times”—commonly known as fashion. 1960s appealed to a different morality (that had nothing to do with the old canon) based on the opposition to the law in the name of higher values. Former hippies emphasise the role of students in the fight against racism or for human rights with fondness, at the same time forgetting that much earlier, this cause had been ingrained in universities that they managed to successfully destroy. See J. Emilewicz, “Allana Blooma próby otwierania umysłów,” *Pressje* 1 (2002): 127–141.

³⁴ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 445.

and therefore of man, should be sought, in his opinion, in the rebirth of universities as places of unbiased search for truth. They should become schools of an independent thought where the search for knowledge is an end in itself, unrelated in any direct way with the temporariness of social and political life. The proper task of academic education is encouraging a selfless love of wisdom.

Bloom's analyses are not sufficient, but still significant. He aptly states that what threatens the modern university (as a result of knowing its essence) is depreciating humanistic knowledge, a departure from the classical model of education as well as ideologisation. Due to the fact that the disease of American education is penetrating Europe as well, it is worth to pondering upon. Therefore, the reflections of this author can be considered extremely necessary. They should constitute an inspiration for reflections on the state of education not only in America.

**THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN EDUCATION
AND REFORMS PROPOSALS ACCORDING TO ALLAN BLOOM**

SUMMARY

The article is focused on Allan Bloom's thought about American education. First, while investigating the symptoms of the crisis of American education and upbringing, it sees them manifested both in the structure of university curricula and academic staff as well as the students, their knowledge, customs, and culture. Secondly, while analyzing advantages of education in the field of liberal arts—where the word “liberal” is used in the context of *artes liberales*—it presents Bloom's belief that the only serious solution to the crisis of American education is to restore the ideal of an educated man shaped by great literary works and works of the greatest thinkers.

KEYWORDS: America, education, liberalism, liberal arts, university, student, relativism, freedom, society, Allan Bloom.