

# Great Books and Beyond!

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## A modest proposal

I propose that American Mensa undertake a Great Books and Beyond Project. The project would recruit the world's top scholars to help Mensans create highly engaging digital assets (ebooks, videos, etc.) that Mensa could provide free to an online audience to promote interest in and understanding of the great works of world literature, including the Great Books of the Western canon and also classics of other traditions (e.g., Hindu and Chinese classics). This project would serve several purposes:

- Building membership in Mensa
- Enhancing Mensa's reputation
- Fulfilling the public service portion of Mensa's mission
- Creating enjoyable experiences for Mensa members
- Building ties with international Mensa organizations

This project could help Mensa address a problem that has been obvious for several years: Mensa's poor public reputation.

## Mensa's online presence

When I first joined Mensa a few years ago, I did some online searches on "Mensa." As someone who used to work for an advertising agency that did a lot of search engine optimization, I found the results disappointing. The search engine results pages (SERPs) were dominated by hits on Mensa's own properties. However, most of those hits hide their light under a bushel. Many of those sites hide their valuable digital assets behind something worse than a paywall: a membership wall. Few of those web pages offered anything of value to someone who is ineligible for Mensa membership. In contrast, the available content on non-Mensa sites was often disparaging to Mensa.

The worst hits came from an E-list "comedian" who "infiltrated" Mensa (she wrote, "Good News. They let dumb sluts into Mensa now"). She then focused on the Firehouse forum, which she used to depict typical Mensans as bigoted, meanspirited, emotionally unstable people with poor social skills. (NB: a narcissist's accusations are usually confessions.) The impression that you would get from reading her commentary contrasted sharply with my own observations from meeting Mensans in person. Her hatchet-job on Mensa's reputation was either bad journalism or bad comedy. Good journalism represents things as they really are. Aristotle argued that comedy presents men as

worse than they really are. But if one's audience cannot see the comedic irony (i.e., the difference between reality and your jaundiced representation), then one is just libeling defenseless people. It's mean-girl tactics. Pathetic.

From having worked for some of the experts in online marketing, I know that there is an easy way to fix this kind of Google problem. Create such a wealth of engaging online content that you will drive the troll so far down in the SERPS that her toxic rantings will no longer draw traffic. Ideally, we should create such engaging content that we establish a reputation for ourselves as a special kind of public servant: public intellectuals. Public intellectuals are brilliant, highly educated people who have made some important contribution to some specialized field but who also work to educate the public about matters of public concern. Public education efforts would be a way to fulfill the public service component of American Mensa's mission statement: Identify and foster human intelligence for the benefit of humanity.

## Serving humanity and our nation

P. T. Barnum famously said, "No man ever went broke overestimating the ignorance of the American public." The word *ignorance* came from a Latin verb meaning "not to know." Although general intelligence may be a remarkably stable trait grounded in neurology, ignorance can be corrected through education. The word *education* is related to the Latin verb *educere*, which meant to lead out (of ignorance). A good education will involve some combination of teaching students *what* to think (indoctrination) as well as *how* to think. For example, students will need to learn some unquestionable basic facts (e.g., multiplication tables and names, dates, and places of historical events). Yet they will also need to learn the mental disciplines for making sense of those data. For that, you need training in some classical disciplines, such as logic and rhetoric.

The ancient Greeks taught us many important lessons. One is the value of democracy (rule by the people). Yet another is the value of what came to be called the liberal arts. The Roman philosopher Seneca said that the liberal arts are called liberal arts because they are suitable for freeborn men, as opposed to slaves. By the time that Rome fell, the liberal arts curriculum had been broken down into seven courses:

- **The Trivium** (the three courses) were the verbal arts:

- **Grammar** is the study of how words are altered and combined to form meaningful sentences in a particular language.
- **Logic** is the study of how sentences are combined to form arguments.
- **Rhetoric** is the art of persuasion.
- **The Quadrivium** (the four courses) involved the study of number, space, and time
  - **Mathematics** is the study of number
  - **Geometry** is the study of number and space
  - **Music** is the study of number and time
  - **Astronomy** is the study of number, space, and time

This curriculum provides the basic skills for running any large-scale society. The Trivium provides the disciplines for group decision-making. The Quadrivium provides the skills that are needed for accounting and real estate, as well as for making calendars. Even music has a practical application: to maneuver large groups of soldiers through a small space, you need to teach them to march.

The liberal arts provide the basic skills in rational thinking that you need for tackling any advanced subject. During the Renaissance, some of these advanced subjects were grouped together into a curriculum called the *studia humanitatis* (studies of humanity): history, philosophy, languages, literature, and art. The wealthy families of northern Italy encouraged their sons and daughters to study these subjects, to facilitate productive and even pleasant discussions about serious topics.

Many people depict Founding Fathers of the United States as a group of divinely inspired geniuses. Yet they were just intelligent men with a classical education. They had learned lessons about politics from the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as from later theorists, such as Montesquieu. George Lakoff famously claimed that “you can’t understand 21st-century American politics with an 18<sup>th</sup>-century brain.” Yet the human brain has not evolved since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Lakoff never really addressed the works of 18<sup>th</sup>-century political philosophers.

## Friends & enemies of education

American history gives us clear models of three basic kinds of educational policy.

- Puritans in Massachusetts wanted everyone to read the Bible. They established universal free public education and used a good method to teach reading.
- The slavocracy in the South wanted to suppress education for poor whites and for slaves. Not only did the Southern planters fail to provide free public schools, they made it illegal to teach any black person to read.

These laws were overturned after the Civil War, by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution.

- In the 1830s, Northern industrialists wanted to continue to go through the motions of providing universal free public education while surreptitiously suppressing literacy. For this reason, they supported the “sight word” method of teaching reading (teaching children to memorize whole words as shapes, instead of teaching children to sound the words out letter by letter). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “Progressive” educators (including John Dewey) exacerbated this problem by suppressing direct instruction in practically anything. As a result, Americans could go through 13 years of compulsory schooling yet remain illiterate and remarkably ignorant.

After the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, a lady supposedly asked Benjamin Franklin what kind of government had been created for the United States. He reportedly responded, “A republic, if you can keep it.” The Constitution created a democratic (“We the People”) republic. Yet a democracy can work only if lots of ordinary people are playing a meaningful role in government, and they can do that only if they know basic facts about the world and know how to make sense of those facts. In short, democracy is possible only if a critical mass of the general population has adequate grounding in the liberal arts and the humanities as well as the sciences

## What is the purpose of STEM?

The so-called Efficiency Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an attempt by wealthy “philanthropists” to engineer society so that it would serve their needs as efficiently as possible. To this end, the educational system was engineered to ration education. The goal was to ensure that there would be an adequate supply of highly trained people to fill the ranks of the professions and the clerical occupations (to serve the needs of the wealthy) without providing so much education to ordinary people that they would start to stand up for themselves and for others of their class. The current emphasis on “STEM” (science, technology, engineering, math [lately, some people have advocated the addition of “art” to make “STEAM”]) is a continuation of the same policy. The unstated goal of the STE(A)M curriculum is to exclude training in the humanities: to make workers useful without empowering them politically. The STE(A)M curriculum does include useful things. The problem is what it leaves out: the mind-expanding power of the humanities. STE(A)M can teach you how to create a doomsday weapon that would destroy all human and animal life. The humanities teach you not to do that.

## The Value of the Great Books

In the 1930s, St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, introduced its Great Books curriculum. In 1941, Mortimer Adler talked about the Great Books in his book *How to Read a Book*. In 1952, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. published a Great Books series, curated by Adler. In 1972, Adler and Charles Van Doren issued an updated edition of *How to Read a Book*, complete with a recommended list of Great Books. Adler and Van Doren were apologetic that their list was drawn exclusively from the Western canon, since they could recommend only the literature that they knew well.

I recommend that Mensa undertake a project to popularize the Great Books, starting with the classics identified by Adler and Van Doren and expanding it to embrace the classics of other literary traditions, such as the Bhagavad Gita. (Full disclosure: I am currently writing a book about how Gandhi's political theories and strategies, which enabled India to gain its independence from the British Empire without firing a shot, were based on lessons he learned from the Bhagavad Gita.)

## Activities and Deliverables

The Great Books and Beyond Project will be different from anything that American Mensa has ever tried before. Yet the potential payoffs are incalculable.

- Project participants will reach out to the top scholars in the humanities, to encourage them to do several things:
  - Allow Mensans to interview them in videos that can be shared on YouTube.
  - Let Mensa publicize the scholars' books on the Great Books and Beyond project website.
  - Give scholars opportunities to publish their work, in Mensa-branded ebooks or journals.
  - Join Mensa, if they are eligible. (Many of our top scholars already have qualifying test results, such as the GRE.)
- Project participants will build a website that helps to promote education related to the Great Books:
  - The website can provide resources to help Mensans (and anyone else, for that matter) learn the original languages of these literary works, from ancient Sumerian to modern French.
  - The website can direct people to authoritative translations of classic works and to recorded performances of dramatic works (e.g., plays by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière)

- The website will promote Mensa and the Great Books
  - The website will have calls to action (CTAs) to encourage people to join Mensa
  - Each page will have a CTA to encourage people to contribute to the Mensa Foundation.
- This project will create opportunities for Mensans to hold events.
  - Mensans can be encouraged to read a particular book and then participate in a group discussion.
  - Content created by this project can be presented at regional gatherings or the annual gathering.

## Costs and Benefits to Mensa

The costs of this program to Mensa would be minimal, and the potential benefits enormous:

- Costs
  - It costs practically nothing to record an interview with a famous scholar and upload it to a YouTube channel.
  - It would cost nothing but volunteer time to produce ebooks and create a print-on-demand print version of some classic text or commentary on a classic text.
- Benefits
  - By encouraging the world's greatest scholars to join Mensa, we would build our membership while creating a brain trust.
  - By promoting the world's greatest literature, we would be raising the tone of our society while burnishing our own reputation.
  - By creating engaging digital assets, we will increase traffic and thus Mensa memberships.

## A New Direction for Mensa

This project is unlike anything Mensa has tried before. But it presents an opportunity that Mensa has never exploited before. The costs are minimal, and the payoffs could be enormous!