

allan bloom closing of the american mind

allan bloom closing of the american mind is a seminal work that critically examines the state of higher education and cultural values in the United States during the late 20th century. Published in 1987, Allan Bloom's book sparked widespread debate about the intellectual rigor and philosophical underpinnings of American universities. The author argues that the erosion of classical liberal education and the rise of relativism have contributed to a crisis in the American intellectual landscape. This article explores the key themes and arguments presented in Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, its historical context, and its lasting impact on educational discourse. Furthermore, it discusses the implications of Bloom's critique for contemporary society and the ongoing challenges faced by modern academia.

- Historical Context and Background
- Core Arguments of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*
- Critique of Relativism and Cultural Decline
- The Role of Higher Education in American Society
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Historical Context and Background

Understanding the historical context of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* is essential to grasping the motivations and concerns expressed in the book. The 1960s and 1970s were decades marked by social upheaval, cultural shifts, and challenges to traditional authority in the United States. Universities, once bastions of classical education and rigorous debate, found themselves at the center of student protests and demands for curricular reforms. Bloom, a philosopher and classicist, observed these changes with concern, perceiving a decline in intellectual seriousness and an embrace of relativistic attitudes among students and faculty alike.

Bloom's academic background and his engagement with philosophical traditions deeply influenced his perspective. As a scholar of Plato and Nietzsche, he was particularly interested in the concept of truth and the role of philosophy in shaping the soul. The book was written in response to what Bloom saw as a failure of higher education to uphold these values, resulting in what he described as the "closing" of the American mind.

Core Arguments of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*

At the heart of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* is a critique of the contemporary university system and the intellectual climate it fosters. Bloom argues that the abandonment of the Great Books and classical education has led to a fragmented and superficial understanding of

knowledge among students. This, he asserts, undermines the development of critical thinking and a coherent moral framework.

Bloom identifies several key issues in American higher education:

- The rise of cultural relativism and skepticism towards universal truths.
- The decline of philosophy as a central discipline and the marginalization of the classical canon.
- The impact of popular culture and political correctness on academic rigor.
- The failure to engage students in the pursuit of wisdom and self-examination.

These arguments are supported by Bloom's observations of student attitudes and academic policies, which he believed prioritized inclusivity and cultural sensitivity at the expense of intellectual challenge.

Critique of Relativism and Cultural Decline

One of the most prominent themes in Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* is the denunciation of relativism. Bloom contends that the widespread acceptance of moral and cultural relativism has eroded the foundation of meaningful dialogue and education. According to Bloom, when all values and truths are seen as equally valid, the pursuit of knowledge becomes aimless and education loses its transformative power.

Bloom links this relativism to broader cultural trends, including the influence of popular music, media, and the breakdown of traditional social norms. He argues that these forces contribute to a sense of nihilism and confusion among young people, who lack a coherent philosophical framework to navigate complex moral questions.

The Consequences of Relativism in Education

Bloom explains that relativism results in several detrimental effects within academia:

1. Students become disengaged from the search for objective truth.
2. Critical thinking skills deteriorate due to the absence of challenging intellectual standards.
3. The university environment shifts from a place of learning to one of entertainment and affirmation.
4. Philosophical inquiry is replaced by ideological advocacy and political correctness.

The Role of Higher Education in American Society

Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* raises profound questions about the purpose and

function of higher education in the United States. Bloom asserts that universities should serve as arenas for the rigorous examination of ideas, where students are exposed to diverse perspectives and encouraged to develop their own reasoned beliefs.

He advocates for a return to the classical liberal arts curriculum, emphasizing the study of philosophy, literature, history, and the arts to cultivate wisdom and virtue. Bloom believes that such an education fosters intellectual integrity and prepares individuals to participate meaningfully in democratic society.

Educational Philosophy Advocated by Bloom

Bloom's educational philosophy includes:

- Engagement with the Western philosophical tradition, especially the works of Plato, Aristotle, and other classical thinkers.
- Emphasis on critical thinking and dialectical reasoning as tools for self-understanding and ethical development.
- Resistance to ideological conformity and the promotion of intellectual diversity.
- Encouragement of dialogue that challenges assumptions and stimulates personal growth.

Legacy and Influence of Allan Bloom's Work

Since its publication, Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* has had a significant and lasting impact on debates surrounding education, culture, and politics in the United States. The book sparked vigorous discussions about the curriculum, academic standards, and the cultural role of universities.

Though controversial, Bloom's critique resonated with many educators, policymakers, and intellectuals concerned about the direction of American higher education. His emphasis on the importance of classical learning and the dangers of relativism continues to influence debates on educational reform and cultural values.

Criticism and Continuing Relevance

While influential, Bloom's work has also drawn criticism for its perceived elitism and nostalgia for a classical canon that some argue excludes diverse voices and perspectives. Nonetheless, the central questions raised by Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* remain relevant in contemporary discussions about the purpose of education and the challenges posed by cultural fragmentation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main thesis of Allan Bloom's 'The Closing of the American Mind'?

The main thesis of Allan Bloom's 'The Closing of the American Mind' is that American higher education and culture are in decline due to relativism, a lack of commitment to universal truths, and the erosion of classical liberal education, leading to a closed intellectual environment.

When was 'The Closing of the American Mind' published and why was it significant?

'The Closing of the American Mind' was published in 1987. It was significant because it sparked widespread debate about the state of American universities, culture, and intellectual life, criticizing the decline of traditional liberal education and moral relativism.

How does Allan Bloom define the 'closing of the American mind'?

Allan Bloom defines the 'closing of the American mind' as the failure of American universities to expose students to great works of Western civilization and critical thinking, resulting in intellectual complacency and a rejection of objective truth.

What role does relativism play in Bloom's critique of American education?

Relativism is central to Bloom's critique; he argues that the embrace of moral and cultural relativism undermines the search for universal truth, leading students to reject any claims of absolute values or objective knowledge.

According to Allan Bloom, how has popular culture influenced the American mind?

Bloom contends that popular culture, especially music and media, promotes superficiality, consumerism, and emotionalism, which distract students from serious intellectual engagement and contribute to the closing of the American mind.

What solutions does Allan Bloom propose to address the issues in American higher education?

Bloom advocates for a return to the Great Books and a classical liberal education that emphasizes critical thinking, exposure to foundational philosophical and literary works, and the pursuit of objective truth.

How was 'The Closing of the American Mind' received by academics and the public?

The book received mixed reactions; some praised it for its insightful critique of contemporary

education and culture, while others criticized it as elitist, overly pessimistic, or dismissive of multiculturalism and diversity.

What impact did 'The Closing of the American Mind' have on discussions about education reform?

The book influenced debates on education reform by highlighting the importance of curriculum content, the value of classical education, and concerns over relativism, prompting some institutions to reconsider their educational approaches.

How does Allan Bloom view the role of philosophy in education in 'The Closing of the American Mind'?

Bloom sees philosophy as essential to education, arguing that engaging with philosophical texts helps students confront fundamental questions about truth, morality, and existence, which is necessary for intellectual growth.

Is 'The Closing of the American Mind' still relevant to contemporary discussions about education?

Yes, the book remains relevant as debates continue about cultural relativism, the purpose of higher education, curriculum choices, and the balance between tradition and innovation in teaching.

Additional Resources

1. The Closing of the American Mind by Allan Bloom

This seminal work critiques the state of higher education in America during the late 20th century. Bloom argues that universities have failed to teach students how to think critically and engage with classic philosophical ideas. He expresses concern over cultural relativism and the decline of a shared intellectual tradition. The book sparked widespread debate about education, culture, and politics.

2. Democracy and Education by John Dewey

Dewey's classic explores the role of education in a democratic society, emphasizing experiential learning and critical thinking. While Bloom critiques contemporary education for losing its philosophical rigor, Dewey offers a vision of education as a means to foster active citizenship. The book provides a foundational contrast to Bloom's more traditionalist perspective.

3. The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s by George Nash

Nash traces the roots and consequences of the cultural and political changes of the 1960s, a period Bloom often references in his critique. The book examines how liberalism evolved and contributed to shifting norms in education and society. It offers historical context for understanding the challenges Bloom identifies in "The Closing of the American Mind."

4. The Culture of Narcissism by Christopher Lasch

Lasch analyzes the rise of self-centeredness and decline in communal values in American culture, themes that resonate with Bloom's concerns about moral and intellectual decay. The book critiques consumerism and the erosion of traditional values, echoing Bloom's warnings about the

consequences for education and society. It is a psychological and cultural diagnosis of late 20th-century America.

5. *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* by Norman Melchert

This introductory text presents the major philosophical ideas and thinkers that Bloom believed should be central to a liberal education. The book encourages readers to engage with the “great conversation” of Western thought, aligning with Bloom’s call to revive classical learning. It serves as a practical companion for those interested in the intellectual tradition Bloom champions.

6. *Higher Education and the Common Good* by Ronald J. Pestritto

Pestritto explores the purpose of higher education in promoting citizenship and moral responsibility. The book engages with debates similar to those in Bloom’s work, addressing the tension between vocational training and liberal education. It advocates for a renewed focus on the values and knowledge that support a healthy democracy.

7. *The Closing of the American Mind Revisited: A Critical Look at Allan Bloom’s Critique* by Various Authors

This collection of essays revisits Bloom’s arguments, offering both support and criticism. Contributors analyze the impact of “The Closing of the American Mind” on education and culture, debating its relevance decades after publication. The book provides a balanced view of Bloom’s legacy and ongoing influence.

8. *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* by Mark Lilla

Lilla critiques contemporary academia and politics, echoing some of Bloom’s concerns about fragmentation and the loss of shared values. The book argues for a politics and education that emphasize common citizenship over identity-based divisions. It offers a modern perspective on challenges similar to those Bloom identified.

9. *Education and the Crisis of Public Values* by Christopher Lasch

In this work, Lasch discusses the decline of public-mindedness and shared values in education, themes closely related to Bloom’s critique. He examines how cultural shifts have impacted the purpose and effectiveness of education. The book complements Bloom’s analysis by highlighting the societal implications of educational change.

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