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[Editor's note: This commentary is taken from remarks made by Monterey Peninsula College English professor David Clemens upon his induction in March into the MPC Lobo Hall of Fame as a Distinguished Alumnus.]

By David Clemens

Thank you, Monterey Peninsula College Lobo Hall of Fame, for accepting me into this celebrated company. I was told that I had five minutes to either reminisce about MPC or talk about education. I chose the tough one: to comment on the state of education.

In my view, K-16 education is in chaos, beset by materialistic values, overregulation, corrupting politics and disruptive technologies. Many colleges economize by accelerating courses. Others streamline curriculum by shedding art, music and literature classes that address human experience, creativity and imagination. Career and Technical Education (CTE) is a cash cow, and a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) degree is the Holy Grail.

Demand for job readiness and testability have spawned a menagerie of schemes: Common Core, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, the Student Success Initiative and Student Learning Outcomes. Such curricular obsession with employability leads to what computer scientist Jaron Lanier calls "the hive mind," students who graduate knowing how to work but neither how to live nor why.

The constant noise of modern society distracts students from ever exploring the uncomfortable existential questions: where did I come from; how should I live; what happens when I die?

Graduates wander in what former Harper's Magazine editor Lewis Lapham calls "the enchanted garden of the eternal now," a fake Eden filled with Apple products where life's meaning is simply to feel good, and to feel good about feeling good. CTE and STEM are fine, as far as they go, but they will never awaken the sleeping self.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum warns that "radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through."

She concludes, “If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing ... useful, docile, technically trained machines, rather than complete citizens.”

We, my friends, had the good fortune to attend MPC during an age of humanistic education. Our teachers raised us up, sharpened our wits and attacked our ignorance. They taught us to appreciate art, music and literature. They enlarged our capacity to feel what mythologist Joseph Campbell called “the rapture of being alive.”

Teachers at MPC awakened me from my adolescent slumber, my angst, my egotism and my superficiality. For 40 years, my role models have been those MPC teachers: Suzy Sullens, Bud Sweeney, Ed Norris and Jack Leach. But lately I fear that the future of education may be a dehumanized one of machine values (efficiency, measurement, predictability, obedience) with students reduced to metrics, analytics and data.

My literary education reminds me of a key moment in “Moby Dick” when Ishmael falls asleep one night while steering the ship. When he wakes, something is “fatally wrong.” He can’t see the prow or the compass, only darkness. He thinks the tiller is somehow “inverted,” then suddenly realizes that he is facing backwards, and the ship has almost capsized.

Our education establishment has become “inverted,” and something is “fatally wrong.” We need to find the prow again and locate the compass to steer by. We desperately need a reinvigoration of humanistic values that above all recognize the sanctity, uniqueness and mystery of each individual student. Too many people believe that education’s end is “to produce job-ready workers for a competitive global economy.” They are wrong. The beating heart of education is guiding every student out of Plato’s cave toward a fuller, richer, happier life.

Thank you, MPC, for enriching my life, and thank you, Lobo Hall of Fame.

David Clemens founded the Monterey Peninsula College Great Books Program. He has taught at MPC since 1971.