There are a lot of people out in the world, and in a developed nation like the United States, the vast majority of them go to high school, and a good chunk of those students go on to college. While there, many of them drop out, and many of those remaining few pass their classes with C’s. The select few, evidence and common sense would tell us, are few and far between. Charles Murray, a libertarian philosopher, argues just this point: that the student who is willing and able to pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake is a rare one. However, the two men whose works on education we have read, John Henry Newman and Lincoln Steffens, would argue differently. For Newman, the need for knowledge is an integral part of human nature; in his eyes, there is simply no way one can be a human and not have an interest in pursuing knowledge. Steffens’ work also counters Murray’s idea: for him, everyone has the ability to learn, from the lowliest farm boy on up to the President of Harvard. In short, both Newman and Steffens argue that everyone has the ability and drive to complete a liberal education. Those who do not become liberally educated, they would say, are the ones who have not truly been given a fair shot at it; they are those who have not been given a chance to demonstrate their drive and ability. Together, the two arguments thoroughly debunk both facets of Murray’s argument and provide a blueprint for how to bring out this interest and give people the abilities they need to pursue a liberal education.
Before we get into the specifics of the debate, we must first take a step back for some definitions. Specifically, we must look at one definition: what is liberal education for each author? What does it entail? Newman explicitly explains liberal education—it is learning things for the sake of learning them, predicated on the idea that “knowledge is capable of being its own end” (Newman 1). For Newman, liberal education is a “useless” pursuit, though not a pointless one. Steffens is a little bit less explicit; however, he does say that “the liberal arts” are the “heart of the university,” and that even the study of “pure science” is equivalent to the pursuit of “pure truth,” which implies a similar belief to Newman (Steffens 351). Steffens, however, seems to believe more in the ability of liberal education to improve people, which is a departure from Newman’s definition of the idea. For Newman, liberal education does not affect one’s character at all, while for Steffens, learning subjects not relevant to your life has the power to make you into a more complete person as a citizen of your country. Steffens still believes it has no practical application, implying it to still be useless for everyday matters, but says it is helpful, moving it to a strange place of useful uselessness.

However, that is a topic for another analysis. Here, we are examining whether Newman and Steffens would support Murray’s hypothesis. As noted, the two authors debunk Murray’s hypothesis in their own ways, each taking down a part and together serving to get rid of the whole. It is important to note that while Newman explicitly states that everyone has the drive to pursue a liberal education, Steffens does not. How then does Steffens refute Murray? He does so by spending his entire article talking about the ability of everyone to become educated in many subjects. But first, to analyze Newman’s take on Murray.

Newman takes down the drive portion of Murray’s hypothesis. The crux of Newman’s point is the idea that the drive to pursue knowledge is a “direct need of our nature” (Newman 1).
It is on this point alone that Newman would reject Murray’s claim—he would point specifically to the works of Cicero and broadly to the works of philosophers “in all ages and countries” (Newman 2). Using these supports, Newman would argue that all students have the interest to pursue a liberal education; not only do they have it, it is an intrinsic part of their identities as people. Perhaps it has not been fully developed, and perhaps no one has described to every student this concept of liberal education and their ingrained interest in pursuing it, but, according to Newman, every student has that interest somewhere within themselves, and thus he would reject and debunk the first part of Murray.

The crux of Steffens’ point, on the other hand, is that everyone has the ability to pursue an education, be that education liberal or otherwise, and it is on this point that he would oppose Murray. For him, everyone has the ability to become educated; the problem comes in that not everyone has the chance to go get their education. Many farmers thought of college as a “waste of time” and thus didn’t send their sons off to it, denying them a chance to demonstrate their ability to learn. When the farmers’ boys did go, they ended up showing an aptitude for abstract things such as debating. In other words, given the opportunity, they showed their ability to be liberally educated. Steffens also describes how the University of Wisconsin took great pains to ensure that both young and old would be educated, crafting a two week course for the “old farmers” (Steffens 357). These older farmers, though they were never given a shot at anything resembling a college class in farming when young, still succeed in learning new skills, and the program grew from 175 old farmers to 2,000 within a few years, showing that, when given the chance, everyone has the ability to learn. These old farmers may not be able to learn liberal subjects quite as successfully as they did farming techniques, but that doesn’t matter here. What matters is that these older men who no one thought could learn anything still have the ability to
learn, furthering Steffens point (and countering Murray’s) that everyone has the ability to learn what they want to learn.

Thus, the blueprint provided by Newman and Steffens for the liberal education of all people is a relatively simple one. Newman says that we must instruct them in the proper subjects, the ones that better the “health of the body” and the mind and promote people’s inherent “intellect...delicate taste...and courteous bearing” (Newman 9). In this way, he seems to believe that their innate desire for liberal education will be drawn out of them, and they can begin on the path of learning pure knowledge. Steffens says that we must reach out to as many people as possible, and make education available and accessible to all who want it. For him, it is by reaching all people (as he titles one of his sections) that we can show that everyone has the talent to learn better ways to go about their daily lives and generally make themselves into, as he puts it, “intelligent citizens,” concerned with “the pure idea of...university” (Steffens 358).

As such, while logic would point to the idea that only a select few out there really have the gifts and the drive to pursue education for education’s sake, it is important to remember that you’ll never know if the broad spectrum of people has that ability without actually providing them a chance at that sort of liberal education. Newman and Steffens provide a blueprint for how to do this; they tell us how we can tap each person’s inherent desire and ability to learn, if we only give them the chance to allow that desire and ability to show through. In this way, they debunk both parts of Murray’s thesis and show that all students have the ability and interest to pursue a liberal education.
Works Cited
