

10 Ways Liberal Education Fails Students -- and Society

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2013/02/02/10_ways_liberal_education_fails_students_--_and_society_116897.html

By **Peter Berkowitz** - February 2, 2013

In his second inaugural address, President Obama called on Americans to act “as one nation and one people” and bring to the “debates of our time” a “common effort and common purpose.” The president might have jump-started the process himself by proposing a remedy to the strident tone of our civic discourse.

This situation has been much lamented, especially by professors, particularly in law and politics. They deplore our politicians’ incapacity to see things from the other side’s point of view, speak civilly, and achieve compromise for the sake of the public interest. What they fail to recognize is their own role in shaping the landscape they condemn.

Officially, our colleges and universities remain committed to providing students a liberal education. Liberal here is used not in the narrow partisan sense -- the left wing of the Democratic Party -- but in the broad classical sense. A liberal education involves open and far-ranging instruction in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences in order to prepare students for life in a free society.

Accordingly, the primary task of liberal education is to transmit knowledge and cultivate students’ ability to think for themselves. Indirectly, however, educators cannot help but shape character. When faculty perform their jobs properly, liberal education fosters above all the virtue of intellectual integrity, which involves respecting facts, honoring evidence, vigorously exploring arguments, and cherishing the inevitable and illuminating diversity of opinion in a free society.

But when faculty abuse liberal education -- either by lazy neglect of basic pedagogical and scholarly responsibilities or by using the classroom to advance narrow professional interests or partisan opinions -- they corrupt their students’ character. And the nation suffers as colleges and universities send forth into the political world young citizens less capable of accurately weighing evidence, patiently considering alternative perspectives, and presenting arguments and counterarguments cogently.

In the United States today, the abuse of liberal education by our colleges and universities is rampant. Here are 10 example of how such abuse corrupts character -- and not only that of students -- and erodes the qualities they will need to play a constructive role in public debate about the principles and policies that should guide the nation.

1. Our colleges and universities have hollowed liberal education's core. Most impose a few general distribution requirements in broad categories of inquiry. They thereby send the message to students that there are no basic principles, ideas, and events, and no classic works of literature, politics, economics, philosophy, and religion with which all educated men and women should be familiar. This approach encourages students to equate education with the random accumulation of information and the clever recapitulation of assumptions and convictions.

2. The curriculum in higher education has been politicized. Although not always overt, this is accomplished through the readings professors choose, the ideas and events they present, the questions they ask and those they glide over or suppress, and the interpretations they treat as beyond reproach and those they treat as beneath contempt.

This attitude flows naturally from the professoriate's own ideology -- it's not an organized conspiracy -- but the upshot is that in class after class, students are exposed to debate that is largely restricted to progressive alternatives. Meanwhile, conservative opinions are either blithely ignored or contemptuously dismissed. This fosters arrogance among progressive students, resentment among conservatives, and dismay among those -- progressive, conservative, or nonaligned -- who come to college seeking intelligent exploration of the conflicting perspectives that constitute the life of a liberal democracy.

3. Grade inflation is widespread. Faculty, particularly at elite institutions, have made A's and A-minuses routine, B-plus a gentle reproach, B a harsh reproach, and anything less unthinkable. By conferring unearned approbation, professors inflate students' self-esteem and undercut their self-respect.

Students detect the scam. They know that distinguishing among levels of performance on their papers would require time and energy from their professors, or from the graduate students who often do the grading in large classes. By slapping high grades and a few vague comments on papers rather than patiently explaining to students where their work is weak and how it can be improved, professors instill in students disdain for the academic process and an extravagant sense of entitlement.

4. Speech codes, written and unwritten, have become commonplace. Some codes prohibit hate speech and some merely prohibit offensive speech. The aim is to outlaw speech that causes hurt, which is typically defined subjectively.

To enforce the rules, higher education turns faculty and administrators into thought police and students into informers. This chills the speech of those -- students and professors -- trying out new ideas or defending unpopular causes. It transforms the university from a forum for the robust exchange of ideas to a training ground for the repackaging and regurgitation of dogma.

5. Prevalent disciplinary procedures upend fundamental features of due process. The accused in sexual misconduct cases is routinely deprived of adequate representation and the opportunity to confront and cross-examine his accuser.

In the most serious cases, including allegations of rape -- which are properly handled by the police and the criminal justice system and not professors, administrators, and students with little knowledge, among other things, of how to collect, preserve, and analyze evidence -- college disciplinary hearings often convict on the basis of the lowest standard of proof in the American judicial system.

Indeed, the Obama administration's Department of Education has pressured colleges and universities to adopt in sexual misconduct cases the preponderance-of-evidence standard; that is, 50 percent likelihood plus an iota more as opposed to the beyond-a-reasonable-doubt standard, which is characteristic of the American criminal justice system and the great traditions of Western liberty. By teaching that it is better to convict the innocent rather than risk letting the guilty go free -- or that in cases involving sex the accusation is itself sufficient to warrant a guilty verdict -- our campuses teach despotic justice.

6. Our colleges and universities have engaged in hypocrisy over affirmative action. They claim that easing standards in hiring and admission for minorities advances their educational mission by promoting diversity in the student body and faculty. But they want it both ways. When fair-skinned and blue-eyed former Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Warren was accused in her 2012 Massachusetts senatorial campaign of gaming the system by claiming Native American ancestry at various stages in her academic career, she and her allies were quick to declare that she derived no advantage from affirmative action policies and that all her achievements were her own, thereby casting aspersions on the practice and its beneficiaries.

7. The higher education establishment collaborates with the government to maintain the student loan racket. At many private institutions, the cost of a four-year bachelor's degree now exceeds \$220,000. Even students at state universities can graduate owing six-figures -- debt that is non-dischargeable in bankruptcy.

When the lawmakers make more funds available in the form of loans, universities raise tuition to grab the government largesse. At the same time, data show that students are failing to develop those practical skills colleges and universities continue to insist that they specialize in honing -- precise reading, clear thinking, and lucid writing. At elite universities, students can console themselves that at least they are obtaining a respected credential and gaining entry into valuable social networks. Such consolation, however, only reinforces the cynical message that liberal education is a charade.

8. Our colleges and universities exploit the most vulnerable members of their communities: graduate students. In the best case, grad students in the humanities and social sciences receive subsistence level support while performing essential tasks such as teaching sections and grading papers, which faculty generally consider drudgery.

These same graduate students become acutely dependent on the faculty for whom they teach and grade and who advise their dissertations. This is because career-making and career-breaking decisions for the students turn not on thorough reading of their work by voting members of departments -- that rarely happens -- but on letters written by a small number of faculty advisers.

The result is a kind of “closed shop” that encourages groupthink, and discourages boldness and dissent.

9. Faculty members at our institutions of higher education are required to make hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions in matters where they lack competence. Over the last 40 years or so, disciplines have divided and subdivided, fractured and multiplied.

On any given personnel decision, only a small proportion of faculty in a department will have the mastery of the subject necessary to offer an informed and independent judgment of the quality of the candidate’s work. Consequently, faculty members are habituated to offering opinions and casting votes on matters of which they are ignorant. This fosters the formation of an authoritarian spirit that advances and submits to declarations based on status rather than genuine knowledge and real expertise, and it generates an authoritarian tone and style that reverberate throughout the halls of higher education.

10. Our colleges and universities use a system of peer review for professional journals and university presses that is transparent where it should be confidential and confidential where it should be transparent.

Journals typically use a double-blind system in which neither author nor reviewer knows the other’s identity. Yet editors easily assign manuscripts for review to obtain desired outcomes because they can quickly determine where an article fits in methodological debates and whether it contains a politically disapproved message. Indeed, since any scholar with the expertise to qualify as a reviewer is also likely to be a player whose own academic fortunes will be helped or hindered by the publication of the article under review, all reviewers are also interested parties.

Meanwhile, and making matters worse, university presses frequently use a single-blind system in which the reviewer of a book manuscript is apprised of the author’s identity but the reviewer’s identity is kept from the author. This gives reviewers license to reward friends and

punish enemies, a fine morality for the battlefield but incompatible with devotion to the disinterested pursuit of the truth, which is what ostensibly sets university presses apart and justifies the substantial subsidies that enable them to operate.

With our political and intellectual class increasingly marked by a homogeneity that derives in significant measure from having passed through our elite colleges and universities, it is small wonder that not only our politicians but also our journalists and makers of television and film have grown increasingly incapable of conducting mature and measured discussions of the great challenges that the country faces. Their liberal education abounds in lessons of cynicism, hypocrisy, and immoderation.

Professors -- particularly in the humanities, social sciences, and law -- take pride in advancing the public good by exposing corruption, speaking truth to power, and advising politicians and various and sundry professions on how to conduct themselves more ethically. Given the critical importance of a genuinely liberal education to preparing citizens for freedom, professors could have the most salutary impact on the long-term health of liberal democracy in America by cleaning up their own house.

Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.