

The Sad State of Liberal Education at Bowdoin

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - April 3, 2013

The corruption of liberal education is nothing new.

In 1951, in “God and Man at Yale,” brash young William F. Buckley Jr. showed that curriculum at his alma mater -- in particular the teaching and scholarship of the economic, political science, and religion departments -- promulgated a reflexive statism and atheism.

Buckley attributed the politicization of the curriculum and the advocacy of left-liberal orthodoxy to thoughtlessness and complacency. He warned that if reforms were not soon adopted, the very understanding of liberal education as the pursuit of knowledge -- simultaneously open-minded, critical, and devoted to freedom -- in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences would increasingly be extirpated within the halls of the academy.

Alas, Buckley’s fears appear to have been well-founded. Indeed, the corrupters of liberal education have been emboldened.

To be sure, one should not underestimate the persistence of thoughtlessness and complacency in American higher education. Nor should one lose sight of the presence, here and there, of devoted teachers who put first their students’ enduring interest in exposure to the ideas and events that have shaped America, the West, and the wider world.

Nevertheless, the professors and administrators constituting the leading faction in today’s academy fancy themselves crusaders in behalf of a progressive political vision. Far from seeing a tension between their political aims and pedagogical responsibilities, they equate liberal education with a brand of contemporary progressive politics that is unmistakably partisan.

This is certainly the case at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. We have overwhelming evidence that this is so thanks to the just-released National Association of Scholars (NAS) [report](#), “What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students.”

Based on a rich variety of documentary sources, the lengthy study examines the main ideas transmitted, and values imparted, by Bowdoin’s curriculum, university programs and initiatives, administration, student life, and faculty.

The body of the report demonstrates that left-leaning ideology permeates the college; the report’s preface explains the harm this does to students and the nation. And as the report notes, there is no reason to suppose that its main findings about what students learn at

Bowdoin differ in substantial respects from what students learn at other small, selective liberal arts colleges and at elite universities.

The problem is not that Bowdoin teaches contemporary progressivism -- that is, the idea that government's chief aims include securing substantial social and economic equality and emancipating individuals from structures of oppression, ideological and spiritual as well as material and institutional. That is a view about freedom and equality with deep roots in the American political tradition.

From its founding, Bowdoin has been devoted to freedom and equality in America. The school's initial class of eight students was urged in 1802 by its first college president to work "for the common good," which he understood in terms of cultivating "virtue and piety" for the sake of service to the nation. The college was always on the right side of slavery: In 1820, Maine was granted statehood as part of the Missouri Compromise to offset Missouri. Four years later, Bowdoin graduate John Brown Russwurm became only the third African-American to earn a degree from a U.S. college.

Bowdoin man John Parker Hale (class of 1827) left the Democratic Party over slavery while in the U.S. Senate. During the Civil War, another Bowdoin grad, Gov. John Andrew, commissioned the first black fighting regiment, the famed 54th Massachusetts. And the 20th Maine, commanded by Bowdoin professor (and class of 1852 graduate) Joshua Chamberlain, was instrumental in the Union Army's holding the line at Gettysburg.

The school is proud of that history, as it should be. The problem today is that this legacy has morphed into a pronounced tendency -- though Bowdoin's government department is a noteworthy exception -- to identify the contemporary progressive understanding of government, and the various and sundry policies associated with the left wing of the Democratic Party, as equivalent to morality and reason.

Informed by this conceit, it is only natural that through tone, gesture, and outright exclusion of alternative points of view, Bowdoin instructs that dissent from the contemporary progressive perspective can only issue from a faulty intellect or a cold heart -- or both.

Bowdoin proclaims its devotion to liberal education and the virtues of open-mindedness, critical thinking, and freedom on which it depends. But the college reinterprets these virtues to serve partisan ends. The process by which Bowdoin transforms open-mindedness into closed-mindedness, critical thinking into dogmatic apologetics, and freedom into anarchy is manifold.

For example, Bowdoin imposes a weak division requirement that students take only a single course each in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, and an overlapping but also weak distribution requirement that students take one course each in five categories -- "Inquiry in the Natural Sciences," "Mathematics, Computational, and Statistical Reasoning," "Exploring Social Differences," "International Perspectives," and "Visual and Performing

Arts.” Bowdoin permits students to graduate without taking a course on, among other vital subjects, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or the American founding; offers few survey courses but many highly specialized topical courses; and provides little useful faculty advising.

The baleful lesson is that there is no rhyme or reason to liberal education other than the reinforcement of progressive opinions, and that by the time they have arrived in college students have already learned all they need to know about the fundamentals of America and Western civilization.

In addition, Bowdoin devotes considerable resources to, and reserves a prominent place in the curriculum for, gender studies and women’s studies, Africana studies, gay and lesbian studies, Asian studies, Latin America studies, and environmental studies. These, according to the report, “stand apart because they are the only programs (or departments) at Bowdoin that were founded to advance political goals.”

Not only are they openly devoted to advocacy, these “studies” programs also typically rest on the all-too-predictable assumption (which they insulate from intellectual challenge) that identity is socially constructed by the dominant group -- in the case of America and the West, white men --to subjugate minorities and women.

In the words of the school’s president, Barry Mills, Bowdoin is “committed to building a community that embraces difference.” But judging by the character of the college over which he has presided since 2001, this commitment appears in practice to produce a community where individuals of differing background, skin color, ethnicity, and gender are vigorously encouraged to promote most every sort of diversity except intellectual diversity.

And Bowdoin, with Mills at the helm, has committed itself to the doctrine of “sustainability.” An up-to-date form of environmentalism, sustainability does not merely embrace the finding of anthropogenic global warming; it also dismisses questions concerning the extent of man’s impact on climate change and the variety of other factors at work, while insisting on a small repertoire of legitimate political responses, most notably an enormously expanded role for government regulation of energy.

Bowdoin’s conception of liberal education involves a profound error. That error does not consist in thinking that liberal education serves the public interest. It consists in, rather, failing to grasp that liberal education, properly understood, prepares students for freedom by rigorously avoiding the politicization of inquiry and concentrating instead on the systematic study of the genuine contest of opinions about the ideas and events that have formed and have been formed by humanity.

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