

The Tradition of Liberal Education Is Under Assault

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RCEd Commentary

Conservatives have been at the forefront of the battle to defend liberal education against the politicization of the college curriculum, the promulgation of campus speech codes, and the denigration of due process—supported by the Obama administration’s Department of Education April 2011 Dear Colleague letter which advised colleges and universities to circumscribe the rights of the accused—in academic disciplinary procedures.

To combat these threats to liberal education, conservatives typically invoke classical liberal principles – the ones that undergird all truly liberal education: liberty of thought and discussion; intellectual diversity; and respect for the rights of individuals. These principles transcend, or should transcend, party differences.

But universal principles can be conscripted for partisan purposes. Campus conservatives are a small minority among college faculties. They have good reason—grounded in personal vulnerability and lack of institutional influence—to uphold individual rights against the tyranny of the majority. Skeptical progressives may be tempted to speculate that conservatives’ defense of liberal education—often pressed more by non-academic conservatives—is simply in defense of their minority view.

In mid-January, in a fiery Salon essay, Jim Sleeper, a veteran journalist and a Yale University lecturer in political science, went even further. He denounced conservative criticism of undergraduate education as a hypocritical ploy that inflicts vastly greater harm on liberal education, civil society, and the national political discourse than does campus political correctness.

Sleeper’s essay, “The Coddling of the Conservative Mind,” is a broadside against what he regards as a plutocratic educational establishment. It depicts an embattled university world in which the left’s abuses are little more than the understandable if regrettable responses to a right-wing menace that threatens decency and justice in America.

Acknowledging a part of the conservative critique, Sleeper writes that conservatives are correct that universities provide a home for “illiberal and morally wrong” efforts “to silence people administratively and legally simply for making sexual and racial allusions, some wholly anodyne and innocent, some even imagined by their ‘victims.’” But he asserts that conservatives “over-dramatize liberal censoriousness on campuses” and are “deflecting

attention from a deeper, often harder, reality” that is the graver sin: “American college students’ intellectual and moral conformity has long been and still is preeminently a *conservative* goal and achievement, not a liberal imposition” (emphasis in the original).

In Sleeper’s telling, conservatives’ worship of capitalism and militarism has corrupted higher education. American universities, he argues, remain under the sway of a conservatism committed to the “preparation of a global managerial class” that advances its own financial interests. Sleeper derides conservatives for “blaming liberal moralism, not investment and marketing run-amok, for de-sexualizing and disorienting young people, and liberal permissiveness for pornifying [sic] public places, gladitorializing [sic] sports, and generating homeowners [sic] supposedly weak-willed susceptibility to predatory lending, along with the attendant social breakdown that prompts more surveillance, institutional secrecy, police militarization, mass incarceration, and runaway markets in drugs, guns, and other responses to this rout of public trust and comity.”

To believe that conservatism is primarily to blame for the ills that beset American universities, Sleeper must conflate plutocracy and “the establishment” with conservatism. But today much of the wealthy establishment in America is, in reality, decidedly on the left; for several election cycles, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood have directed tremendous sums to the Democrats. Moreover, as far back as 1897, John Dewey, a leading progressive and then-professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, sanctioned proselytizing from the university podium by equating progressivism with the “true kingdom of God” and declaring that the teacher’s task was to serve as prophet of the “true God.” Five years later, that bastion of establishment plutocracy, Princeton University, named progressive Woodrow Wilson its 13th president.

Sleeper’s dismissal of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) as “conservative” attests to progressive estrangement from the principles of freedom that underlie liberal education. FIRE’s board of directors and staff members come from the right and the left. It represents students and faculty, from across the political spectrum, whose individual rights campus authorities have allegedly violated. Rather than seizing the opportunity presented by current campus controversies to demonstrate that the struggle against politicized curricula, speech codes, and the abandonment of due process rises above the differences between right and left—as FIRE has admirably done—Sleeper summons his considerable literary skills to caricature conservatives’ defense of liberal education as a vulgar conspiracy to protect financial interests.

Instead, he should call their supposed bluff. He should join what has been a largely conservative quest—aided by the scrupulously nonpartisan FIRE—to remove preaching and advocacy from the classroom and to fashion a curriculum that features at its core the diversity of thinking about economics, ethics, politics and religion that constitutes Western

civilization. He should advocate for the rigorous protection of freedom of speech on campus. And he should lend his impassioned voice to the cause of restoring due process in campus disciplinary procedures.

Rather than feeding the loathing of conservatism that runs rampant on our campuses, Sleeper should recognize common ground with those he insists on portraying as enemies. Conserving a truly liberal education would foster the liberation from prejudice and dogma, the toleration, and the moderation that he—along with conservatives—rightly recognizes as vital to the American experiment in self-government.

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