

Require Western Civ Courses -- and End College Dark Ages

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This week The Stanford Review—an independent undergraduate political magazine that seeks “to promote debate about campus and national issues that are otherwise not represented by traditional publications”—issued a bold manifesto aimed at advancing liberal education on campus and nationally. The student journalists urge Stanford’s Faculty Senate to “mandate that freshmen complete a two-quarter Western Civilization requirement covering the politics, history, philosophy, and culture of the Western world.” To ensure that the proposal is placed on the undergraduate spring ballot – approval would put students on record as supporting the call – 5 percent of the student body (350 undergrads) must sign an online petition.

If the principles of liberal education and considerations of enlightened public interest governed decisions about academic life at our universities, then the Stanford faculty would vote in overwhelming numbers to adopt a requirement very much like the one proposed by the Stanford Review. Then again, if the principles of liberal education and considerations of enlightened public interest governed decisions about academic life at our universities, it would not fall to undergraduates to instruct professors in the fundamentals of a truly liberal education and to entreat their teachers to provide it.

How did it come to this?

College curricula around the country have been corrupted by politicization, professionalization, and perversion of the principles of freedom. Instead of teaching students about the clashing opinions regarding morality, economics, politics, and faith that constitute Western civilization, many professors in the humanities and social sciences see their mission as inculcating in students the one true left-liberal view about contemporary politics. To that end, it is easier and vastly more effective to dismiss the West as irreparably scarred by ignorance and wickedness and therefore unworthy of serious study than it is to master the history, the languages, and the cultures out of which emerged the principles of individual freedom and human dignity at the core of Western civilization.

Of those faculty members not determined to treat education as progressive politics by other means, many, in accordance with the incentives universities perpetuate, put professional advancement ahead of pedagogical responsibilities. Academic success revolves around increasingly narrow specialization—as much in the humanities and social sciences as in the

natural sciences. Few professors are inclined to take time away from research, which in academic life is the source of prestige, promotions, and raises. Consequently, in meeting their classroom obligations, faculty members prefer to offer lectures and seminars that focus on their typically arcane areas of expertise.

Departments of biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and engineering are still constrained by the nature of their subjects to ensure that students begin at the beginning and acquire the rudiments. The subject matter of the humanities and social sciences, however, is easier to abuse. When professors in these disciplines don't commandeer courses to advance a partisan political agenda, they often hijack them to push an abstruse scholarly program: students learn approaches to knowledge and paradigms of understanding but acquire little knowledge and understanding of the real achievements and genuine limitations of the civilization of which they are a part.

Another factor in the corrupting of the college curriculum is the perversion of the principles of freedom on campus. Over the last four decades or so, humanities and social science faculty have justified the gutting of requirements on the grounds that to respect students' individuality and unique talents and tastes, they must be given wide latitude in choosing their courses.

But for professors, that is a self-serving argument. The abolition of requirements frees faculty to fashion courses that serve their own interests while producing a mishmash of class offerings that denies students the opportunity for a well-structured liberal education. Moreover, without a broad grounding in the ideas and institutions that undergird liberal democracy, students' course choices will be conditioned by and hostage to the prejudices of the day.

Speech codes, written and unwritten, make matters worse. They entrench the politicized curriculum by punishing informally with social ostracism, and formally with reprimands and worse from the dean's office, the expression of opinions that deviate from campus orthodoxy.

The dismantling of due process in campus disciplinary procedures for those accused of sexual assault may seem far removed from curricular questions. But it is one baleful effect of the corrupted curriculum. Many of the faculty and administrators now calling the shots at our leading universities—along with the bureaucrats in the Obama administration Department of Education who demanded a nationwide reduction of due-process rights for the accused in campus sexual assault hearings—are products of a degraded liberal education that failed to teach them that the presumption of innocence, the right to know the crimes of which one is accused, and the opportunity to confront one's accuser are central to justice in free societies.

The admirable students of the Stanford Review argue that reinstating a course in Western civilization would confer many benefits. It would provide the historical context to appreciate the impact of the technological innovations Stanford has done so much to drive and it would

furnish the knowledge of politics, ethics, and economics necessary to responsibly adjust law and public policy to changing circumstances. It would create a shared intellectual experience that would enable students to grasp better what they have in common and communicate more precisely and civilly their differences of opinion. And because of the wonderful diversity of opinion within Western civilization and the highs and lows of its history, it would enrich students' appreciation of the complexities and challenges of being human.

A freshman year class on Western civilization, of course, is only a first step to recovering a truly liberal education. It is certainly not an alternative to studying other civilizations. Rather, it is the precondition for their intelligent study.

Accordingly, the second step Stanford should take is to require students to learn a foreign language well enough to read a newspaper in it and to study the politics, economics and religion of a non-Western nation. Such a requirement would do a great deal—much more than the multi-cultural pandering and theorizing about Western sins rampant on campuses—to enhance students' understanding of other peoples and places.

For these reforms of liberal education to come about, somebody will have to first educate the educators. The manifesto of the student journalists at the Stanford Review provides a superb point of departure.

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