

# Liberal Education as an Antidote to Identity Politics

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## COMMENTARY



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Donald Trump's presidency has provoked an outpouring of anguished commentary about the norms — that is, customary behavior and moral standards — that underlie liberal democracy in America. The president has certainly disrupted settled patterns of campaigning, politics, and governance. The reasons for his success, the limitations of his style, and the consequences for the nation deserve careful examination.

But Trump's impact on liberal and democratic norms has been small potatoes compared to that of our colleges and universities. Those truly concerned with preserving the norms crucial to freedom and self-government should pay closer attention to the shibboleths of identity politics that reign on campus as well as to the political activism masquerading as pedagogy and administrative oversight of student life that are transforming higher education into higher indoctrination.

Identity politics represents the latest assault to emanate from our colleges and universities on the principles and practices of liberal democracy. It directs students to think of themselves as members of a race, class, or gender first and primarily, and then to define their virtue in terms of the degree of oppression that they believe the group with which they identify has suffered. It demotes the individual rights shared equally by all that undergird American constitutional government, while distributing group rights based on its self-proclaimed hierarchy of grievances. It imperiously pronounces collective guilt and summarily rejects appeals. It nurtures a sense of victimhood in those it purports to protect and empower. In the guise of fighting domination, it aims to impose its will on all. In these ways and more, identity politics trains students to turn up the heat of the tribalism that threatens to engulf the nation.

The troubles that plague the country because of the troubles that plague liberal education in America have been a long time in the making.

In 1951, young William F. Buckley published “God and Man at Yale.” It documents how, despite their protestations to neutrality, the professors at Buckley’s alma mater used courses in the humanities and social sciences to advance progressive aims.

In the fall of 1968, *The Public Interest* devoted a special issue to the unrest roiling universities in the United States and Europe. Students demanded the overhaul of the curriculum so it could serve as a vehicle for left-wing social change. Administrators and professors were only too willing to oblige.

In the 1970s — as Roger Kimball recounted in 1990 in “Tenured Radicals” — many students brought to graduate school programs in the humanities and the social sciences the belief that teaching and scholarship should be undertaken as politics by other means.

In the late 1980s, not long after the first wave of 1960s undergraduates and 1970s graduate students obtained tenure, an obscure professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago published a book about the decline of higher education that became an unlikely *New York Times* bestseller. In “The Closing of the American Mind,” Allan Bloom argued that colleges taught students to believe that morality is relative to time and place, and therefore that the beliefs and practices of all cultures are deserving of equal respect. The thoughtless embrace of this non sequitur, Bloom contended, impoverished students’ souls and left them ill-equipped to appreciate the discipline of liberty and self-government. He advocated a return to the study of the great books.

In 1998, in “The Shadow University,” attorney Harvey Silverglate and University of Pennsylvania Professor Alan Charles Kors exposed the damage universities did to liberal education through their betrayal of free speech and due process.

In 1999, the authors established The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education to provide legal assistance to those on campus whose free speech was abridged or who had been denied due process. FIRE aimed to put itself out of business through vigorous defense of the basic liberal norms that underlie liberal education and liberal democracy alike. Two decades later, the organization finds itself bigger and busier than ever.

Identity politics has accelerated the progressive politicization of the curriculum that has defined higher education since at least the 1950s. It also thrusts to the fore a new element. From the mid-1980s through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, campus orthodoxy revolved around a form of dogmatic relativism that antedates the emergence, but frequently goes by the name, of postmodernism. Identity politics supplanted postmodernism's dogmatic relativism with a dogmatic dogmatism. But the devotion to left-liberal political goals remained intact and the erosion of the basic norms of free societies continued apace.

Postmodernism declared — and humanities departments and many professors in the social sciences dutifully drummed into their students' heads — that truth was a fiction, reality was socially constructed, and “grand narratives” were dead. The proselytizing professors and their credulous students assumed that these postmodern precepts — which they incoherently treated as absolute and incontrovertible truths — vindicated progressive imperatives by dispelling metaphysical superstitions and casting aside political opiates. Yet Nietzsche knew better: If nothing is true, everything is permitted.

Whereas postmodernism concealed its dogmatism, identity politics wears its heart on its sleeve. It regards its own grand narrative as comprehensive and unimpeachable. It declares — without any apparent felt need to marshal evidence or examine alternative opinions — that the history of Western civilization is marked by a structural racism and sexism, and by a systemic persecution of the powerless by the privileged. The sister doctrine of intersectionality adds that all crimes and sins committed by the unjustly privileged oppressors — typically white men — are indissolubly connected while righteousness inheres exclusively in the oppressed, comprising people of color and women. Notwithstanding recent wavering about white women (some of whom have had the temerity to vote for Republicans), identity politics affirms that victims are neatly distinguishable from, morally superior to, and entitled to greater political power than, the villains.

Like the purveyors of postmodernism, the ideologues of identity politics align themselves with progressive goals. And no less than postmodernism, identity politics subverts the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. Both teach that free speech, due process, and the very idea of limited constitutional government are frauds committed by the strong to subjugate the weak. Small wonder that progressive elites not only in the academy but also in the media, in government, and in Silicon Valley — all dominated by graduates of our leading colleges and universities — disregard or disparage the norms of liberal democracy.

No antidote to the poison that higher education has been pumping into our politics for three generations can succeed without reforming higher education. But prospects are poor for effecting the necessary changes from within. The progressive grip on higher education shows no signs of weakening. Faculty and administrators exhibit little appetite for self-criticism or external accountability. The implementation of inherently desirable practices inside the university such as a core curriculum are likely to be hijacked to serve illiberal ends.

That leaves a variety of alternatives outside of the university. Home schooling and charter schools that nurture the acquisition of knowledge and spirit of free inquiry before college are important options. Another is the expanding network of initiatives, generally supported by conservative philanthropists, that provide undergraduates and recent graduates the liberal education neglected or abused by our colleges and universities. The focus should be on an education for liberty, beginning with literacy and numeracy and proceeding through study of America and the West to the exploration of other civilizations. Successful experiments in education in the private sector might have a salutary influence on public education.

Neither Donald Trump's antics nor his achievements should be allowed to obscure the urgency of educational reform. Without a basic familiarity with, and an education that is governed by, the norms of free and democratic societies, how will we be able to evaluate properly our current president, or any other one?

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