

# The Galston-Rufo Debate Illuminates Liberal Education

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Peter Berkowitz

Progressive ideology permeates American education. Such is the “rapid growth” of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs in higher education and the demand for assent to their core tenets that, according to The New York Times, “[n]early half the large universities in America require that job applicants write” statements that affirm belief in and demonstrate devotion to race-conscious measures that ensure equality of outcome based on skin color and ethnic heritage.

To bolster its hegemony, universities punish dissent from progressive orthodoxy. To question on campus whether America really is divided into an oppressor and an oppressed class; to doubt that discrimination based on race should be employed to ensure proportional representation in education, business, and government of historically discriminated against groups; indeed, to express reservations about the notion that individuals should be evaluated based on the racial and ethnic groups to which they belong instead of on their character and accomplishments – exposes one to scorn, censure, ostracism, and, as the Times reports, denial of employment.

Indoctrination has usurped education to the profound detriment of students and the nation. The problem’s extent and seriousness complicate reform.

The urgent need to recover liberal education – an education that prepares students for the rights and responsibilities of freedom by transmitting essential knowledge in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences and by cultivating the ability to think for oneself – confronts two major temptations. One is to counter indoctrination in ideas one opposes with indoctrination in ideas one favors. The other is to overlook, in the name of open-mindedness and free speech, the essential content of liberal education in America.

These temptations were on display recently in the salutary exchange in the Wall Street Journal between columnist William Galston and activist and bestselling author of “America’s Cultural Revolution” Christopher Rufo. Each advanced a truth essential to liberal education. Each identified a weakness in the other’s position. Each went too far in defense of his portion of the truth.

In his August 29 column, “Ron DeSantis’s Illiberal Education,” Galston underscored his agreement with the Florida governor’s statement in the Republican primary debate that “We need education in this country, not indoctrination.” A former professor of political science at two large state universities for 30 years, Galston “taught the questions, not the answers, and encouraged students to defend their own views.” From his teachers at Cornell on the right

and the left, he learned as a college student that “openness of mind and generosity of temperament” were vital to “education at its best – liberal education – distinguished not from conservative education but from illiberal education, otherwise known as indoctrination.”

Notwithstanding his agreement with DeSantis’ statement of principle, Galston argued that Florida’s Stop Woke Act, which the governor signed into law in 2022 to counter progressive indoctrination in Florida schools, authorized conservative indoctrination. The statute has been challenged in court on the grounds that it violates the First Amendment by forbidding professors from discussing certain ideas about race, color, national origin, or sex. DeSantis’ legal team maintains that elected officials are responsible for establishing public universities and supervising their curricula. When they prohibit the presentation of specific opinions in the public university classroom – say, those associated with critical race theory and hard-left progressivism – the state regulates its own speech and therefore the First Amendment, which protects individual rights, is not applicable.

Rightly rejecting Florida’s attempt to muzzle public university professors as inconsistent with the imperatives of liberal education, Galston also criticized DeSantis’ education advisers for eroding free speech by embracing conservative indoctrination. Galston quoted a speech to Hillsdale College’s National Leadership seminar in which Richard Corcoran, a former Florida education commissioner whom DeSantis appointed last year as interim president of Florida’s New College, asserted that education is “100% ideological.” Galston also faulted Rufo, recently appointed to New College’s Board of Trustees, who has argued that “the goal of the university is not free inquiry” because “education is at heart a political question.”

Rufo replied in a [letter to the editor](#) that “There are two ways in which education is indisputably political.” First, public universities “are chartered, funded and governed by the state.” Second, and more fundamentally, “education is a political concern and the young must be educated into the political regime.” Rufo quoted Aristotle, who taught that legislators must give priority to education, which varies across regimes: “One should educate with a view to each sort, for the character that is proper to each sort of regime both customarily safeguards the regime and establishes it at the beginning.”

In a follow-up [column](#), Galston granted that the people’s elected representatives establish universities, determine the rules by which they are governed, and allocate funds, inevitably reducing resources for some programs and increasing those for others. However, these indisputably political dimensions of education, he insisted, do not mean that government may “rightly restrict the content of instruction in higher education.”

A better argument is that state officials would defeat their efforts to educate students for free and democratic self-government by regulating professors’ classroom speech.

Galston's critique of conservative education reformers suffers from three major flaws. First, he offers scarcely a word about the gravity of the problem with which DeSantis and Rufo wrestle. Galston recalls the advantages he had in the 1970s as a University of Chicago graduate student as well as in the 1960s as a Cornell undergraduate in studying the Great Books with professors who explored the fundamental questions and equipped students to search for the best answers. But he does not acknowledge that 50 years later, instruction in the rich and varied classics of Western civilization has been largely banished to the remote periphery, surviving in several small, isolated liberal arts colleges and among a few, scattered, old-school professors who have managed to hang on in a mainstream academy that has entrenched progressive pieties as the starting point and limit of permitted scholarship and discussion. The conservative reformers' excesses must be put in the context of the dire state of higher education.

Second, to show that Rufo misunderstands the character of civic education, Galston asserts that Aristotle rejected the notion that "regime-specific instruction should be the task of higher education." This is wrong. Aristotle explicitly affirmed such instruction as not only education's principal task but also as one of politics' major concerns. In Book V, Chapter 9 of "The Politics," Aristotle writes that, "the greatest of all the things that have been mentioned with a view to making regimes lasting – though it is now slighted by all – is education relative to the regimes." Such education Aristotle indicates – without excluding higher education – does not consist in cheerleading for the nation but rather in cultivating the virtues and transmitting the knowledge that enable citizens to preserve their form of government and way of life. A higher education, in which, as Galston writes, "important questions in all subjects" are "freely debated," represents the peak of the education specific to rights-protecting democracies.

Third, Galston obscures the connection between free speech and liberal education's core curriculum. Galston rightly cites John Stuart Mill's indispensable observation in "On Liberty" that "he who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." But there is more to liberal education in America than ensuring the right to express, and hear expressed, a diversity of opinions on fundamental questions. That is crucial, but so, too, is the *content* of liberal education.

In his 1867 Inaugural Address to the University of St. Andrews, delivered on the occasion of his honorary appointment as the university's rector, Mill explained that liberal education culminates in study of the competing opinions about morals, politics, and faith that have formed our minds, institutions, and civilization – the Great Books education that Galston rightly celebrates. But that culmination, Mill held, must be grounded in appreciation of the basics of ethics and politics and of the essential duties of citizenship.

Accordingly, he argued, liberal education places a priority on study of the political principles and institutions of one's own nation and those of other nations. It also features political economy, which involves the systematic examination of "the sources and conditions of

material wealth and prosperity”; jurisprudence, including legal principles, law’s social purposes, comparative law, legal process, legislation, and courts; and international law which, for Mill, encompassed justice and foreign affairs.

Rufo is right insofar as he maintains that state governments reasonably require public universities to offer a curriculum that prepares students to exercise the rights and discharge the duties of citizenship. Galston is right insofar as he contends that to serve the political purposes of a rights-protecting democracy, higher education must champion liberty of thought and discussion.

The larger truth that emerges from their productive disagreement is that robust examination of the competing ideas about constitutional democracy in America and the wider civilization in which it developed belongs to the core of liberal education, the form of education that befits America’s free and equal citizens.

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