

Campus Dysfunction Easy To Recognize, Difficult To Cure

RCP realclearpolitics.com/articles/2023/11/26/campus_dysfunction_easy_to_recognize_difficult_to_cure_150112.html

Peter Berkowitz



Machiavelli observes in “The Prince” that politics presents challenges akin to those physicians sometimes face: “... in the beginning of the illness it is easy to cure and difficult to recognize, but in the progress of time, when it has not been recognized and treated in the beginning, it becomes easy to recognize and difficult to cure.” So too for higher education in America: At this late date, our universities’ dysfunction – and the damage to the nation it has wrought – has become easy to recognize, but curing the dysfunction has become difficult.

The Hamas jihadists’ Oct. 7 atrocities in southern Israel may have provoked a watershed moment for higher education in America. Student and faculty expressions of solidarity with the mass murderers, university administrators’ initial confusion and missteps, and the eruption of antisemitism on campus compelled many who have long averted their eyes to confront our universities’ role in fanning the flames of division and discord. However, since most university administrators, professors, wealthy donors, left-of-center commentators, and politicians of both parties have allowed the dysfunction to progress for decades without

calling higher education to account or warning the public, only dramatic and costly interventions provide hope at this point of remedying the cluster of pathologies ravaging America's universities.

Evidence that it is now permissible to speak in polite society about the dire state of our universities comes from the New York Times opinion page. Since Oct. 7, the Times has published several pieces declaring that our universities have gone badly astray and proposing measures to repair them.

These opinions are welcome, but tardy by several decades. They fail to identify the chief problem. They ignore the principal obstacles to reform. They propose reforms that provide the equivalent of band-aids for gaping wounds and shattered limbs. And they overlook the mainstream media's complicity in largely ignoring, downplaying, or dismissing repeated warnings extending back a quarter century and more – largely, but not exclusively, from conservatives – that our universities undermine the public interest by attacking free speech, eviscerating due process, and hollowing out and politicizing the curriculum.

On Oct. 16, in "The Moral Deficiencies of a Liberal Education," Ezekiel Emanuel proclaimed, "We have failed." As vice provost for global initiatives and professor of medical ethics and health policy at the University of Pennsylvania, Emanuel sees the failure as personal and professional: The transformation of our universities into boot camps for inculcating progressive opinions about social justice and disdain for other views proceeded under his watch.

Students blaming Israel for Hamas' massacres and praising the terrorists "have revealed their moral obliviousness and the deficiency of their educations," stated Emanuel. "But the deeper problem is not them. It is what they are being taught – or, more specifically, what they are not being taught." Universities "have failed to give them the ethical foundation and moral compass to recognize the basics of humanity."

A bioethicist, Emanuel calls for a two-course ethics requirement, and, more generally, the restoration of a curriculum built around required courses (he doesn't say which ones). Professors must cease their widespread dereliction of duty, he adds, which consists in refraining from challenging students' opinions for fear of discomfiting or offending them. The aim is to rebuild undergraduate education "around honing critical thinking skills and moral and logical reasoning so students can emerge as engaged citizens."

Emanuel's measures move in the right direction but are inadequate to the challenge because they overlook how a proper liberal education itself furnishes and refines minds and provides an ethical foundation and moral compass. The center of liberal education in America must consist in the study of the principles of freedom – moral, economic, and political – on which the nation is based and the constitutional structure and virtues of mind and character through which they are institutionalized and preserved. Since those principles and virtues have a

history, the broader Western civilization of which they are a part must also be studied. And since Western civilization revolves around the tension between individuality and our shared humanity, liberal education includes study of other civilizations.

On Nov. 8, in “How Are Students Expected to Live Like this on Campuses?” New York Times editorial board member Jesse Wegman observed that the numerous instances “of abhorrent speech by students and faculty members, mostly aimed at Israel, Jews and even Jewish students” raised pressing questions of free speech. “How should a university respond,” asked Wegman, “when members of its community express sentiments that are at odds with the values the school is trying to inculcate, not to mention with human decency?” His answer was good insofar as it goes. “Speech should be presumptively allowed, as a basic principle of free inquiry and academic debate,” he asserted, while drawing the line at expression that concretely threatens, harasses, or incites to violence.

But are university administrators and faculty members disposed to vindicate free speech? Are they competent to draw the necessary lines? Are they prepared to face the mob? Wegman skirts these questions.

He acknowledges that universities have eroded free speech on campus, not least by instituting speech codes and by affirming campus orthodoxies on controversial political questions. His principal recommendation is mandatory free-speech training for first-year students to build “a culture of basic respect and listening.” But who will educate the educators?

Having undermined respect for others and the art of listening by presiding over – or silently acquiescing in – the curtailment of dissenting speech for more than a generation, the current crop of administrators and professors seems ill-suited to fashion and implement free-speech training. Moreover, free speech is best learned not by didactic lectures and seminars but by practicing it in the reasoned consideration of competing ideas with those capable of challenging one’s assumptions and arguments. But where are the professors who can lead such conversations? Which faculty members remain capable of understanding their side of the argument because they understand the other side?

On Nov. 16, in “Universities are Failing at Inclusion,” Times columnist David Brooks also took grim, post-Oct. 7 realities as his point of departure: “Jewish students on America’s campuses have found themselves confronted with those who celebrate a terrorist operation that featured the mass murder and reportedly the rape of fellow Jews.” Brooks blamed higher education for betraying its mission. “Universities are supposed to be centers of inquiry and curiosity – places where people are tolerant of difference and learn about other points of view,” he wrote. “Instead, too many have become brutalizing ideological war zones.”

“How on earth did this happen?” asked Brooks, who mentioned that he has “been teaching on college campuses off and on for 25 years.” He faulted “a hard-edged ideological framework that has been spreading in high school and college, on social media, in diversity training seminars and in popular culture.” Although he said the framework lacks a name, it reflects a postmodern progressivism. It holds that group identity is more important than shared humanity; the fundamental social and political distinction is between oppressors and oppressed; a person in one group cannot understand a person in another; racism and bigotry are endemic to America; principles of freedom – free speech, due process, meritocracy – are tools of oppression; and affirming these dogmas of postmodern progressivism takes precedence over acquiring knowledge and developing intellectual independence and integrity.

It is not feasible, Brooks argued, to jettison the deeply entrenched campus diversity, equity, and inclusion bureaucracies that divide people into racial and ethnic groups, give preferential treatment based on group membership, and exclude dissenting views. Instead, he advocated the teaching of true diversity grounded in the remarkable achievements of American pluralism. To help students understand that they “live in one of the most diverse societies in history” and prepare them to cooperate with others from different backgrounds and with alternative perspectives, courses should “explore diversity, identity and history from a pluralistic framework” and assign “a range of books on the social and moral skills you need to see people across difference.”

Brooks rightly espouses study of diversity in America and the means of preserving and enriching it, but he makes the same mistake as Emanuel and Wegman. All three suppose that special classes – on moral reasoning, free speech, and diversity – will provide an antidote to our universities’ ills.

Liberal education is itself the best means available for cultivating toleration and civility, virtues conspicuously lacking on campus but essential to freedom and democracy. The sciences and the social sciences mustn’t be neglected. But serious study of literature, history, and philosophy – at once questioning and rigorous, patient and probing, and determined to understand before criticizing or extolling – provides an incomparable tutorial in the complexities and continuities of morality and politics, the competing conceptions of the good life, and the basic rights and fundamental freedoms that are inseparable from human dignity.

That campus dysfunction is now easy to recognize but difficult to cure does not revoke the obligation to do what is in our power to repair America’s colleges and universities by providing students with the liberal education they need and deserve.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.

