

Higher Education Reform, Civic Thought, and Liberal Education

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COMMENTARY

For decades, American colleges and universities have desperately needed reform. The urgency of the moment may create openings to mitigate the damage and restore the basic elements of liberal education.

Over the last few months, turmoil on campus has provoked outrage among wealthy donors, members of Congress, parents of college and college-bound students, and no small number of ordinary citizens. The sympathy exhibited by students and faculty for Hamas' barbaric Oct. 7 attacks on Israelis, mostly civilians, along with the vacillating and mealy-mouthed response of many elite university administrators to students' championing jihadist genocide threw into sharp relief how badly higher education has lost its way.

Notwithstanding the recent intensification of interest, clear and constant signs of decay have been apparent since the 1990s. The decline can be traced back beyond the politicization of teaching and scholarship stemming from the upheavals of the 1960s to at least the mid-century subordination of the university

curriculum and scholarly research to the imperatives of progressive politics.

The tenuring of the 1960s generation in the late 1980s and the population of the faculty ranks with their students and their students' students over the last 40 years, however, has accelerated the deterioration.

Our colleges and universities have been policing speech. They have been curtailing due process, particularly concerning allegations of sexual misconduct. They have been relaxing to the point of eliminating core curriculum requirements. And they have been packing course offerings, particularly in the humanities, with classes aimed at indoctrinating students in leftist articles of faith: The one and only prism for viewing moral and political life is the distinction between oppressor and oppressed, chief among oppressors on the global scene is the United States, and chief among oppressors within the United States are white people.

Responsible higher education reform must consider the depth and breadth of the dysfunction. And the remedies must accord with the governing aim of liberal education, which is to cultivate citizens who understand the principles that undergird, and who can contribute to the maintenance of, free and democratic political institutions.

Now may be just the time for concerted action. It is already being led by the one campus minority that campus authorities permit faculty and students to revile.

"Conservatives have an extraordinary opportunity to reform higher education," husband-and-wife team Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey write in "Follow the Left's Example to Reform Higher Ed," which appeared recently in the Wall Street Journal. "Universities face a perfect storm of falling enrollments, souring public opinion and political scrutiny. They need friends. Prudent administrators should be eager to work with those whose opinions they might previously have ignored."

Senior fellows at the American Enterprise Institute and research fellows at the University of Texas' Civitas Institute, the Storeys urge conservatives to take a page from the left's playbook and "think academically." Professors on the left, the Storeys observe, "create new disciplines" such as women's studies to address topics "overlooked by existing modes of inquiry." These new disciplines give rise to new "ways of thinking" which, in turn, give birth to and are eventually supported by academic associations, professional journals, dedicated funders, and freshly minted students.

Those on the right, advise the Storeys, should follow suit: "To make enduring change in the academy, conservatives must identify important areas that aren't getting attention and create programs to study them."

The Storeys offer encouraging news on that front. Conservative reform has commenced, mainly in the neglected area of civic education. With Arizona State University's School of Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL) – launched by the Arizona legislature in 2016 and, until recently, led by founding director Paul Carrese – as a model, public-university initiatives in Florida, Texas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Utah, North Carolina, and Ohio are well underway.

The Storeys call the model informing these programs “Civic Thought.” It encompasses the wide range of issues with which responsible citizens must grapple – “everything from war to education.” Establishing such programs requires partnerships among “trustees, donors and policymakers.” They must cooperate to identify and hire scholars with learning in the humanities and social sciences and with the administrative skills to design curricula, recruit faculty, and create and maintain communities devoted to learning and scholarship.

The ambitious, multi-arena reform contemplated by the Storeys – I take part in a small way as a member of the Academic Advisory Board at the University of Florida’s Hamilton Center – has great potential. By re-grounding higher education in the principles of individual freedom, reasoned inquiry, and self-government, civic thought programs can put our colleges and universities in the service of – rather than in opposition to – the public interest.

At the same time, salutary higher education reform must dodge several temptations and pitfalls. The Storeys rightly advise conservatives to learn from the left’s success in working within the academy. However, conservative reformers must also recognize and repudiate the left’s abuses of academic institutions, which have fueled the progressive takeover of university curriculum and administration and degraded higher education.

First, conservatives should reject the left’s conceit – common in women’s studies, African American studies, and many of the other fashionable “studies” – that neglected topics require the creation of new methods of inquiry and new modes of thinking. Down that path lie pretentious jargon, obfuscatory discourse, and the erection of barriers to criticism and accountability. Nothing more is necessary for the flourishing of civic thought than the conscientious application of the traditional forms of inquiry in the humanities, the best of contemporary social science, and the experimentation and rigor of the natural sciences to the challenges of freedom and democracy.

Second, conservatives should reject the left’s penchant for affirmative action. Notwithstanding that they are often a small and despised minority on campus, conservatives should not seek to make or receive appointments based on political beliefs or party attachments. To inquire into the voting preferences of candidates for faculty positions is antithetical to the university’s mission. Faculty hiring must concentrate on scholarly accomplishment, classroom excellence, and curricular need. As it happens, programs in civic thought will attract a disproportionate number of conservatives to their faculty. That’s because these days conservatives are disproportionately drawn to the topics at the heart of civic thought and essential to the formation of well-educated citizens: political philosophy; political economy; jurisprudence; foreign affairs and national security; religion; and constitutional, diplomatic, and military history.

Third, conservatives should reject the left’s conviction that higher education’s aim is to prepare students to change the world. Understanding the world comes first, particularly for teachers and students. University programs in civic thought should not seek to mold conservative political activists to counter the progressive political activists that many African American studies, women’s studies, and the like endeavor to produce. Rather, programs in civic thought should strive to form more thoughtful citizens, whether of the left, center, or right.

Fourth, conservatives should reject the left's compartmentalization of the curriculum. While short-term advantage may be derived from emulating the left's leveraging of academic proclivities and protocols to create new disciplines, civic thought should not seek status as a separate field of study like literature, political science, physics, much less like women's studies, African American studies, and the like. Instead, civic thought should bring to bear on the myriad challenges of citizenship in a free society – including the status of minorities, the role of women, and changing sexual mores – the wisdom that is gleaned from, and the toleration and humility that are developed by, study of history, languages, literature, the principles of politics and economics, and the leading opinions about ethics and faith. Such intellectual exploration begins close to home with one's nation, broadens into a study of one's civilization, and eventually encompasses other peoples, nations, and civilizations. Civic thought must be grounded in liberal education.

Fifth, conservatives should reject the left's politicization of teaching and learning. Conservatives should not conceive of civic thought programs as conservative, at least in the narrow partisan sense of furthering a right-wing political agenda. Civic thought programs should be conservative in the larger sense – devoted to preserving the treasures of Western civilization and other civilizations and transmitting them to the next generation. Such preservation and transmission, it must be emphasized, can only be accomplished by those who have learned to weigh the evidence, seek out and grasp the truth in contending opinions, and craft persuasive arguments. Conservatives should emphasize that civic thought programs are the best means in the present circumstances for restoring a traditional liberal education, one which serves the public interest by forming young men and women capable of exercising their rights effectively and preserving and improving free and democratic institutions.

The extent of the disrepair of U.S. colleges and universities and the urgency of the moment necessitate the recovery of the traditional principles of liberal education to guide the long, arduous work of higher education reform.

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