

A true liberal arts education is the most aristocratic and countercultural experience most of us will ever enjoy

Higher Education vs. Competency and Diversity: An Afterword

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This symposium features a variety of approaches to thinking about the impediments to genuinely higher education these days. Defending higher education is a conservative project, one that conserves the form and formalities that sustain human liberty. But it is not limited, of course, to those who vote Republican. Often Republicans are more part of the problem than the solution.

Consider, as does Thomas Hibbs, Senator Marco Rubio's contention that America needs more plumbers and fewer philosophers, and that our institutional priorities should be reconfigured accordingly. For one thing, there's no reason that plumbers can't benefit from the study of philosophy. They, like us all, have been called to live in the light of the truth. As St. Augustine says, all those made in the image of God should have time to reflect on their high and singular destiny, as well as not think of themselves as

too good to do worthwhile work to provide for their own and practice the virtue of charity. Contemplation and action are for us all, as they are for the wise, personal, loving, and creative God who is not too good to have become a carpenter. Zena Hitz reminds us that it was not so long ago that our best leftists had faith in the liberating power of the Great Books for us all.

Another problem with Rubio's observation is that it's not even practical. Most of what welders do right now will soon be done

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by automatons. The skilled labor that is welding will be a victim of disruptive innovation. And surely among the flexible skills required to flourish in the global competitive marketplace to come is living well with the unprecedented relational challenges that the gift of technology will impose on increasingly displaced persons. That might mean that philosophy (and religion and poetry and so forth) might be as indispensable for “lifelong learning” as the various technical competencies that will have to be constantly adjusted and upgraded. Some experts even predict that it won’t be long before all the labor we need will be done by a small cognitive elite collaborating with genius machines. The rest of us will be stuck with being, at best, marginally productive and so stuck, for the most part, living in leisure on the Universal Basic Income. That might mean we’ll be spending most of our time in front of the seemingly omnipresent screen, and God knows we’ll need something like a higher education to seize that opportunity in more than a degrading way. It might also mean that the virtues associated with voluntary caregiving will make a startling comeback, and they too can’t get the cultivation they need from a merely technical education.

Hibbs gives us the wholly exemplary Frederick Douglass as evidence that skills themselves are unrealistically empty when artificially detached from questions of character. The recent election reminded us that ordinary Americans are repulsed by members of our globalized cognitive elite inhabiting undisclosed locations and unable to connect the meritocratic privileges that flow from their productivity to civic responsibilities. Our Silicon Valley billionaires lack courage and commitment, and they squander precious resources in the service of their “nerd religion” of the Singularity. Not only that, employers complain far less that potential employees lack this or that narrowly technical skill than that they lack the qualities

of character and literate verbal dexterity required to be conscientious, reliable, and trainable members of the workforce.

From a culturally conservative view, the most pervasive trend opposing higher education in America is complacently bipartisan. It is facilitated by administrators academic and otherwise, foundations, bureaucrats, and experts. And finally, it is not even so radical, but deeply bourgeois. According to Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, we middle-class democrats are convinced, not without reason, of our superiority to all those who came before when it comes to justice and technology. We think that all science (all forms of knowing) are technological; we don’t see nature except as a resource to be exploited. And we’re even convinced we know what justice is. It is an egalitarian transformational project that complements the technological one.

Tocqueville didn’t object to the fact that most education in a middle-class democracy is techno-vocational. And he agreed that democratic justice rightly displaced the aristocratic privileging of the greatness of the few. He saw the truth of the democratic claim that all human beings have interests, and nobody is above or below working to sustain himself or his own. It’s just that we’re all beings with interests *and more*, and there’s a lot more to education than technology and justice. Higher education properly understood is all about aiming higher than being middle class, about having a high enough opinion of ourselves to search for the truth about love, birth, death, citizenship, friendship, sublime beauty, our place in the cosmos, and God.

The point of higher education is counter-cultural; it’s the counterweight, as Hitz shows us, to our techno-restlessness and dogmatic activism. It’s also the counterweight to the somewhat thoughtless uniformity of middle-class thought; Tocqueville was astonished to see so little real difference of opinion in



Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has an opportunity to end the accreditation scam

America and almost no tolerance at all for real intellectual dissent. Higher education is, finally, a source of the virtues we need, such as magnanimity, generosity, charity, and love of theory for its own sake, that can't be reduced to productivity or justice. The point of the residential liberal arts college—the most leisurely and aristocratic experience many of us will have—is to be a countercultural experience that teaches us more than we could ever pick up on the streets of our middle-class country.

The project of our bipartisan administrative class is to reconfigure all higher education according to the standards of *competency* and *diversity*—or to technological productivity and justice. The animating dogma is less political correctness than corporate correctness, although corporate correctness now incorporates political correctness. And, as Benjamin Ginsberg and John Seery explain in different ways, it is the foundation of a transfer of intellectual labor on campus from professors to administrators, deploying, among other means, the monopolistic accrediting associations. That means, conservatives need to know, that the main

source of progressive energy on campus is no longer “tenured radicals.” There are, for one thing, fewer and fewer tenured professors of any kind, and, for another, those remaining have often been tamed by both the perks of careerism and the fear of being regarded as having compromised their egalitarian commitment. Mark Bauerlein shows us how humanities professors manage, with seeming sincerity, to reconcile progressive administrative demands with maintenance of their aristocratic privileges, and how administrators prove endlessly adept in catering to their bad faith.

Competency means that all higher education must be justified by measurable learning outcomes relevant to the twenty-first-century competitive marketplace. That means the study of history, literature, philosophy, and so forth can remain in the curriculum only as ways of students acquiring skills such as critical thinking and effective communication. Competencies are technological means that can serve any ends. The study of history, literature, and so forth must have technological value, and it's up to the professor to prove to a skeptical audience that they really have that.

Now, professors of history, philosophy, and so forth are often relieved to discover that they still have a place in higher education. And so they are often pleased to submit to the imperative of competency, and they work hard, even if ironically, to give the administrators what they want. They often don't see that they are digging their own graves. Students figure out soon enough, after all, that it's easy to pick up this or that competency without all the annoying baggage of historical or literary content. And even if they must study history, the History of Hip-Hop gets the competency job done as well as some boring narrative about their country's founding. So, it turns out, the imperative of the competency supports the mindless relativism described by Bauerlein as the official dogma of many historians today: there's no reason to privilege one kind of historical content—such as that of one's own country or civilization—over another. The administrators see better than the historians do that there's no need to privilege history at all.

What has always distinguished “the humanities,” including the more philosophical social sciences, is a concern with content. For any real historian, “method” is never more than a means to achieve the end of genuinely understanding our past and its relevance for us now. And, for the student, history serves indispensable civic and cultural literacy as ways of discovering “who I am and what I'm supposed to do.” Freedom never means inventing yourself out of nothing, just as it never means being just another word for nothing left to lose. As E. D. Hirsch constantly reminds us, a shared knowledge of content is the foundation of our shared sense of belonging as citizens and free and dignified persons.

Well, it is true that some humanists do try to justify their discipline as just another form of technology, as in the “digital humanities” movement. The effort here is to use the

quantitative techniques of science to reveal that the key cultural products—such as Shakespeare's plays—are the result of collaborative, market-driven efforts situated in a particular time and place. The scientific evidence allegedly deconstructs “the myth of genius.” For Tocqueville, it is almost stereotypically democratic to want to believe that the excellence or greatness of a particular person couldn't possibly be a real cause. That doubt of personal authority, Tocqueville adds, ends up taking out all claims for personal significance, for the dignity of the singular destiny of each particular human life. The person becomes a mere part in a technological process beyond his comprehension and control, and the study of the humanities become just another form of “undergraduate research” in which the student becomes a specialist without spirit or heart as part of a team. There is, of course, no “I” in teamwork, and the humanities are deprived of their true attractiveness as the place where the technological issues are subordinated to the existential ones.

The real subject is justice

The atrophying of the existential dimension of liberal education is typically traced to the sixties. Concern moved from the inwardness of the particular seeker and searcher to activism on behalf of social justice. The student radicals, such as the authors of the 1962 Port Huron Statement, criticized our institutions of higher education for “sacrificing controversy to public relations.” They were alive to the democratic view that technology is for justice, and so they dismissed the other concerns of liberal education as diverting them from their idealistic commitment. But soon enough their radicalism was tamed and institutionalized, ultimately becoming part of the establishment agenda of higher education.

Consider that requirements in liberal education are being trimmed or becoming wholly optional, in accordance with the logic of the competency. Meanwhile, courses in “diversity” are becoming more commonly required. Now, the diversity course is typically a course on justice, insofar as its content is typically the oppression past and present suffered by this or that class of people. The more general thought is that diversity should become the point of all courses in the humanities, insofar as they all should focus primarily on outing racism, classism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and so forth, even or especially among the greatest of authors and other cultural accomplishments. Conservatives, let me emphasize, do or should acknowledge that injustice past and present is a real concern that animates authentic human inquiry. They object only to reducing all higher education to justice and technology.

Another criticism of saying diversity when you really mean justice is that it’s deeply misleading, if not mendacious. The Supreme Court, we can say, allowed our educational experts to do that. In deliberating about the constitutionality of affirmative action in higher education, the court concluded that the pursuit of justice—by overcoming the effects of discrimination past or present or displaying our commitment to equality through the representation of marginalized groups in our key institutions—doesn’t trump the race-blind individualism of our Constitution. Achieving the educational goal of invigorating the classroom experience through having diverse viewpoints represented in the classroom does. So affirmative action no longer is a matter of justice, and its merits no longer can be a matter of legitimate political controversy.

There’s been little real controversy over the educational benefits of a diverse classroom, partly because nobody truly thinks that educational enhancement is the real issue. The best criticism of detaching the jus-

tification of affirmative action from justice is that the minority or marginalized students present to ensure classroom diversity are reduced to a means for the experience from which the privileged benefit. Their just demands for equal opportunity are no longer the official issue. Now conservatives try to make the point that, if the educational goal is viewpoint diversity, affirmative action should extend to endangered species on the elite campus such as Republicans, observant Christians, poor white males, and principled conservatives. That point, however reasonable, hasn’t resonated with much of anyone. It’s easy to see the hypocrisy of conservative individualists against affirmative action as such now whining to get their group special privileges. And, of course, proponents of “diversity” believe that the subtext is justice, and conservatives and so forth are among the privileged oppressors. They also believe that conservatives, Christians, and such are stupidly and selfishly stuck on the wrong side of history.

The pursuit of diversity hasn’t been, as Scruton reminds us, the political project of our country, nor has it even been the special concern of “faculty governance.” It’s been yet another vehicle for transfer of power to administrators, who, after all, are usually in charge of designing the composition of the student body, faculty, and staff. As Benjamin Ginsberg points out, “diversity hires” give administrators control of faculty selection, and diversity experts on student-affairs staffs script faculty syllabi and performance in class through such mechanisms as trigger warnings, avoidance of microaggressions, safe spaces, the ferreting out of implicit bias, and the proliferation of pronouns. What diversity requires becomes ever more amorphous, as the issue isn’t officially justice but sensitively opening oneself to the dignity to marginalized views.

Diversity—as the only part of higher education that is not a technique or

method—becomes the whole of morality, and it requires the silencing of controversy or criticism. It becomes wrapped up in the extreme consumer-sensitivity of today's residential college; every claim for dignity or autonomy must be affirmed or beyond criticism. Students have the right not to hear viewpoints that assault their dignity, because the student-customer is always right. But that's not quite right, because the subtext remains justice: only the claims of those who can present themselves as victimized by legal or social oppression must be honored. That's why the whining of straight males or orthodox Catholics or Jews that their opinions are marginalized on campus is an offense against diversity. So, at least at our elite schools, it's often reported that there's less real diversity in classroom discussion than ever. Even the Socratic method—especially as practiced by Socrates himself—has to be abandoned as one microaggression after another. So much, as Scruton laments, for our great tradition of freedom of speech.

If the issue were straightforwardly justice, you might discuss whether same-sex marriage is properly a constitutional right or a choice left for legislative deliberation, just as you might wonder whether *Roe v. Wade* was rightly decided or to what extent affirmative action serves or impedes the achievement of our constitutional ideal of a classless and casteless society. But when the issue ceases to be explicitly political, it's turned over to the administrators and their expert guidance. They know best what compliance to the demands of diversity means at any particular moment. And they get away with implicitly branding deviations from their diversity scripting as offenses against justice, as if they were wise men and women in possession of the whole truth about that political virtue. On an increasing number of campuses, prospective faculty must, in effect, pledge allegiance to diversity as a condition for employment. That's not about not being

racist or sexist or homophobic or whatever. It's about agreeing in advance to submitting to whatever the administrative scripting to come might bring.

The conservative and radical takeaway that the reduction of higher education to competency and diversity is all about the sacrifice of controversy to public relations. They are, after all, the twin standards of our multicultural corporate world dominated by our cognitive elite. The real point of being guided by those two standards alone is to reduce the amount of real moral and intellectual diversity that has been the saving grace of the American system of higher education. The real problem at many or most of our elite schools was captured well by William Deresiewicz in the *American Scholar*: "Unlike the campus protestors of the 1960s, today's student activists are not expressing countercultural views. They are expressing the exact views of the culture in which they find themselves (a reason that administrators prove so ready to accede to their demands)." I'm not dissing the longing of activists to find the way to make a real difference on relatively soulless campuses; it's just that they're now serving the establishment cause.

Let the market be the market

Still, a good criticism of the overall tone of this symposium is that it makes the American system of higher education seem worse than it really is. The powerful impetus to leveling uniformity is real, but our system remains the best in the world because of its authentic diversity. As Seery reminds us, there's still some real liberal education at elite Pomona and Middlebury, not to mention the Ivies themselves. More importantly, students in our country, unlike any other, can pretty much get any kind of higher education they want, usually at surprisingly reasonable prices. So conservatives should be all for this

deal: let Middlebury be Middlebury. But in return, the administrators and their experts should back off and let BYU be BYU, Berea be Berea, and let Morehouse, The Citadel, St. Johns, Azusa Pacific, Calvin, Agnes Scott, Baylor, Yeshiva, Hillsdale, Antioch, Christendom, Texas A&M, and so forth be what they want to be. Many of our schools still have distinctive and genuinely content-laden missions that cause them to soar high above the realm of competency and diversity. Let all disciplining of our elite schools and the administrative agenda be done by market forces, by the reasonable choices of young people to go elsewhere. Maybe our principal concern should be sustaining diversity among institutions and their missions, realizing that “viewpoint diversity” is an impossible dream on many of our campuses.

Is there anything to be done politically right now? Well, one way in which the national government is facilitating standardization is by encouraging the increasingly intrusive process of accreditation by the monopolistic regional accrediting agencies. The accrediting agencies are dominated by the class of administrators, and their tendency is to want to use the alleged imperative of accreditation to script the behavior of all colleges, leaving no safe space for real liberal education and other genuinely mission-driven countercultural diversity. When beleaguered professors, rendered ironic or worse by the infantilizing (and proletarianizing) tendencies of the bubble called “the

culture of assessment” (which has just been given the more intrusive name “the culture of improvement”), complain to administrators, the latter blame the federal government.

Secretary of Education DeVos should deprive our class of administrators of this excuse for their scripting. Given that accreditation doesn’t reveal anything important about the excellence of this or that institution, and that plenty of pretty sketchy places get accredited, she should make it clear that she would be fine with a far more minimalist system of accreditation, one reduced to the proper function of ensuring that an institution is “good enough for government money.” The new system shouldn’t involve, as does the present one, a huge waste of institutional time and treasure—much less any intrusive impetus to reconfigure institutional priorities.

In the service of equal citizenship, DeVos trumpets school choice. The same opportunities for all kinds of quality education should be available to everyone—and not just the rich folks in their bubbles. And so government has to side with the people against the monopolists who run teachers’ unions, accrediting associations, and schools of education—and the elite educational experts who defend them. At the college level, the array of choice is already there, because everyone has access to the whole national market. The job of government, at every level of education, is to defend real diversity through the right kind of deregulation. †