

ACTA
Higher Ed Now
The Unkindest Cut

Christine: Welcome to Higher Ed Now. The American Counsel of Trustees and Alumni's podcast on issues concerning higher education. Thanks for listening today, I'm your host Christine Ravold. I have Eric Bledsoe in the studio with me. He's ACTA's Program Officer for Curricular Reform.

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Eric: Hello Christine. It's great to be here.

Christine: Thanks for joining us today Eric.

Eric: Today we're talking about Shakespeare. It's the 400th anniversary since his death, so what better time to be talking about Shakespeare, his works and whether or not he's prevalent in higher education today.

Christine: ACTA has been interested in Shakespeare almost since the beginning. We had our first exploration into Shakespeare in 1996. The first report was called, "The Shakespeare File. What English majors are really studying." Then in 2007 we followed up with the "Vanishing Shakespeare," and just last year we had, "The Unkindest Cut, Shakespeare in exile in 2015." There is kind of a theme here.

Eric: Unfortunately, and unfortunately that theme is a little more tragic. What we found in "The Unkindest Cut," from the 52 institutions that we studied, now these were the top liberal arts colleges in the top universities overall, deemed so by US News and World Report. What we found was that of those 52 institutions, only four require a course in Shakespeare of their English majors.

Christine: That's not encouraging.

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Eric: Not at all. Those institutions were Harvard, Wellesley, University of California at Berkley and the Naval Academy in Annapolis. They are the only four of those institutions that require Shakespeare.

Christine: What is everybody else studying?

Eric: We should say that at these schools courses in Shakespeare are certainly offered in the English Departments, but they are only optional. Instead of a course in Shakespeare, a student at University of Pennsylvania can take a course called, Popular Romance from Chaucer to Tarantino, as in Quentin Tarantino.

Christine: As in Macbeth is equal to Reservoir Dogs?

Eric: According to that curriculum's design. We also have, at Dartmouth, literary theory and criticism requirements, their course called Digital Game Studies, which is a study in gaming culture, as in your X-Box and PlayStation.

Christine: That somehow doesn't seem to me to be quite the same thing.

Eric: No. Even worse, at Bates College in Maine, a part of their general education requirement: you could take a US film in the 1970's course where instead of your Shakespeare anthology or Know your Oxford, you're required to have a Netflix subscription.

Christine: At least that's cheaper than Norton. I still have my Norton.

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Eric: So do I. It is cheaper than that anthology, but when you start considering the tuition that you're paying at some of these liberal arts colleges, I don't think that's a good cost benefit.

Christine: At least all that gold doesn't glisten.

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Eric: That's absolutely right but what you have is what's getting to the heart of, "Why study Shakespeare?" When an English major goes in and gets that English degree they should expect to be reading the best of what's been written and said. That really isn't much to ask of a student that, if they're going to be paying the equivalent of a Ferrari in tuition that they should be reading great works of literature.

Christine: As opposed to attending a great feast of languages and stealing the scraps. Wow!

Eric: That's right. Really, when that report came out the media and professoriate reactions were pretty different.

Christine: The media was pretty favorable in the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Associated Press, San Francisco Chronicle, Chicago Sun-Times all reported on this finding and were fairly outraged and lot of people took note. But, they also interview professors at institutions that didn't require Shakespeare. I think this is actually what kind of shows the greater malaise in academia today. At Penn they claim that students already arrive at these top colleges knowing Shakespeare, having been steeped in Shakespeare, so there's no need to continue a requirement. At Northwestern they're saying that Shakespeare's so prevalent in the course catalog that students are going to take Shakespeare anyway, but

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they're leaving a lot up to chance. Assuming that some 18-year-olds are going to make good and long-run choices about their future education.

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Eric: That's right. Really, it goes back to what Hamlet says: The readiness is all. These universities have a responsibility to prepare students an engaged and informed citizenship in a democratic society. To say that you are going to get the equivalent in depth study of language, history and culture in high school that you are at that university is fairly telling of the quality of education that they're providing.

Christine: What fools these mortals be.

Eric: Right. I don't know that anyone can seriously say that at the age of 14 or 15, when they're going into their high school English class that they have these same intellectual and emotional maturity that they do at their junior or senior year of college. So, I don't know how we can say that a study of Shakespeare at both of those time periods is the same.

Christine: Well, it certainly isn't. I know Rosemont required all its English majors to study Shakespeare. That mean I studied Julius Caesar twice. I studied it as a freshman in high school and then as a junior in college and I learned a lot more the second time around than if I'd just done it once or hadn't just picked it up when I was college. It bears rereading. It bears fruit. Totally valid to hit it one more time. Once more into the breach.

Eric: When I was at Catholic University here in Washington, DC I encountered my first really problematic and ambiguous play, which has since become my favorite, which is Measure for Measure. In that play you really have these deep

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and essential questions of our experience. What does individual morality look like? What is society's role in our lives? What does a good leader look like?

Christine: We don't need to worry about that question. Right?

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Eric: Not in 2016, for sure.

Christine: No, the election is going just fine.

Eric: I don't know that we can really say with any seriousness that a high school student is thinking about these things on that deep of a level that they are at 18 or 19-years-old, or even older after they graduate.

Christine: It's all so relevant. We suffer from this presentism of what recently came out. Guess what. What's recently out is Sons of Anarchy and Breaking Bad and I guess that's a tip of the hat to the old bard. These questions are still valid and it's a great and really valuable first venture into those timeless and difficult tensions.

Eric: Right. We haven't even really discussed the flip side of that coin either, have we? Which is that we're training future English teachers.

Christine: We are but they're not ready.

Eric: No, of course not because if an English teacher in high school's last experience with Shakespeare was their own high school course, I don't know that any school can say with seriousness that they're preparing the future generation of English teachers well.

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Christine: It's certainly not enough and we need to consider making these requirements a best practice at the university level.

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Eric: Speaking of what's happening at the university, kind of going to a broader trend, what have you heard lately on campus?

Christine: We have seen better days. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, we had a very loud and disruptive group of protests for the [indiscernible] of Milo Yiannopoulos Christina Hoff Summers and Steven Crowder. They have been going around campuses across the country, talking about political correctness. The title of their presentation is called: "The triggering, Has political correctness gone too far?" The students answered that question.

Eric: How did they answer it?

Christine: They answered it by, indeed, it has gone too far because they were unable to sit and listen to ideas that they disagreed with. That they found triggering.

Eric: Perhaps they should read a little more Shakespeare. They would then be exposed to the line: A fool think himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool.

Christine: Absolutely. You don't have to agree with everything you hear, but you probably owe it to yourself and your education to entertain an idea and listen to see if there is something worth pulling out of that. Instead, disrupting the presentation the way they were, they were not only depriving themselves of a

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learning opportunity, they were infringing on the right of other students to listen and learn.

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Eric: Right. I mean education, it really goes to the heart of what our higher education is in this country. Is it a narrowing where we come up with that one single formulaic idea that we're going to use for the rest of our lives to explain everything and shut out all other ideas? Or, are we going to truly broaden our world vision and see what other ideas are out there, whether or not we disagree with them?

Christine: Perhaps by listening to people we might not agree with, we could find a certain unifying factor. At the end of the day, if you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? There's a golden thread of humanity that we're almost purposely ignoring when we shout down people we disagree with or when we ignore great works on the human condition. I think we owe it to higher education to do better.

Eric: Absolutely. I mean at the core of that question really is empathy. Can we sit down and understand one another, not only in what makes us different, but also in what binds us.

Christine: Absolutely. Let's come full-circle. Let's require both Shakespeare and a solid policy on free speech and the free exchange of ideas. That's a nice formula to really improve higher education and that could be done pretty easily.

Eric: Certainly a start.

Christine: Well, I hope you guys enjoyed today's discussion on Shakespeare. If you did enjoy it, we ask you to take a look at your calendar and mark down, not the

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Ides of March, it's going to be October 28th. We're holding the Athena Roundtable and Gala, our annual conference at the Folger Shakespeare Library. I hope to see you next time. If you have any questions or comments, please send them to info@goacta.org. Talk to you soon guys.

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