

Beyond Narcissism – Curricular Challenges for the Postmodernist University

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Panel discussion, “The Ambitions of the Modern University”

As I was preparing for this panel discussion today, I was inspired – and I use the word advisedly – by two recent developments in modern academe. The first was outlined in an article outlining new trends in the academy that many of you may have seen in the *New York Times*. Entitled “Big People on Campus,” the lengthy piece by Abby Ellin outlines a new area of study – fat studies. “Nestled within the humanities and social science fields,” writes Ellin, “fat studies is emerging as a new interdisciplinary area ... on campuses across the country.”

“For most scholars of fat,” she writes, “it is not an objective pursuit. Proponents of fat studies see it as the sister subject – and it is most often women promoting the study, many of whom are lesbian activists – to women’s studies, queer studies, disability studies and ethnic studies. In many of its permutations, it is study of a people its supporters believe are victims of prejudice, stereotypes and oppression by mainstream society.”

While the article claims that fat studies is still a “fringe area” of scholarship, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee already offers a class in health sciences entitled “The Social Construction of Obesity.” And at least one graduate student at the University of Southern California is writing a dissertation in the field on the “intersection of queer and fat identities in the 20th century.”

The second development occurred just this week at Hamilton College in upstate New York – a small liberal arts college. Hamilton, you may remember, came into the public eye when it extended a speaking invitation to Ward Churchill (who has compared the victims of 9/11 to Nazis and is now due to be fired for gross fabrications among other things), and announced its intent to hire convicted felon Susan Rosenberg for writing instruction. After public outcry, neither decision was implemented, but the Kirkland Project which issued the invitations continues to exist under a new identity—the [Diversity and Social Justice Project](#)—whose mission includes fostering “intellectual activity necessary for social justice movements.”

Given this sorry set of events at Hamilton – events which prompted some concerned alums to run petition candidates for the board and to develop a group called Hamilton College Alumni for Governance Reform—you can imagine the excitement when Hamilton College earlier this fall announced a new center that was to study Western civilization and honor the school’s namesake – a center made possible by concerned alumni and a \$3.6 million pledge from a life trustee. It would have been a part of a growing group of such centers nationwide, including the renowned James Madison Program at Princeton headed by Professor Robert George.

Despite the high-level announcement by the Dean and President, the faculty voted overwhelmingly to condemn it. Their resolution mentioned the Center’s governance, but the student newspaper noted that many objections came because some thought the political views of the Center’s founders were “offensive.” One faculty member [told the media](#) that “there are people on the faculty who think this center has an explicit, right tendency” and that “it suggests that the left got slapped down and so the right is being encouraged.”

I wish the story had a happy ending. Instead, in the midst of the controversy, the dean sent an e-mail on Nov. 27 saying that “now is not the time to proceed with the establishment of the center on campus.” In the school newspaper, the student editors lamented the outcome and reminded the parties involved of the one piece missing –

namely the educational needs of the students. “The students have lost at Hamilton,” they wrote. “They would have benefited from the diverse ideas the Alexander Hamilton Center would have made available. But now they will not have the chance. Hamilton students have lost a great educational opportunity....”

While there are exceptions in many places in academe, what these stories underscore is a prevalent culture on the modern campus that is politicized, one-sided, coercive, and manipulative. This situation is the product of nearly three decades of postmodernist transformation of the academy. Whereas political bias used to be considered the enemy of dispassionate teaching and scholarship, postmodernism has turned partiality into a virtue. Quoting Stephen Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars in the article on Fat Studies, “In one field after another, passion and venting have come to define the nature of what academics do.”

Too often the ambitions of the postmodernist academy reflect narcissistic faculty interests rather than student needs; academic freedom without academic responsibility; political agendas in the name of teaching students to think critically.

While the “liberal” in liberal education means free, liberal education in the postmodernist society is anything but free. Thomas Jefferson’s academy and its glorious ambitions “based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind...to follow truth wherever it may lead” have been turned on their head. And taxpayers, parents and citizens have been left holding the bag.

Despite lip service to the free-ranging pursuit of truth, the postmodernist campus is not a place where truth is reliably pursued. In today’s postmodernist academy, objectivity is typically regarded as an impossibility; consequently, the classroom has become a place for advocacy, and there are professors who argue openly that students should be molded into “change agents” to promote a partisan political agenda. At the same time, it has become commonplace, as we saw at Hamilton, to balk at the teaching of Western

civilization— even though it gave us the ideals of democracy, human rights, individual liberty, and mutual tolerance on which life in America is based.

Until the 1960's, colleges typically required students to take survey courses in Western civilization. Since then, those courses have been supplanted by a smorgasbord of virtually unlimited choice—often narrow, trendy and tendentious classes such as Fat studies – and incoherent requirements that do not convey the great heritage of human civilization.

The Hollow Core, a study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, found that 48 percent of the colleges surveyed, including the Big 10, the Big 12, the Ivy League, and the Seven Sisters, require no more than two core courses, and 24 percent require one or no core course at all.

Is it any wonder that recent surveys document a serious lack of literacy in our country— where citizens are more likely to know the Simpsons than they are the content of the First Amendment.

And this is not the end of the problem. Courses that are offered too often represent a very narrow part of the disciplinary spectrum. Brooklyn College Professor Robert “KC” Johnson has documented the consequences of postmodernism in his field – history. Compared to the history departments of old, the postmodernist history department is one where many advocates of the new social history have been successfully pushing fields like diplomatic history, military history, and constitutional history to the margins of the profession. “The neo-Progressive interpretation of American history is now hegemonic,” Johnson ironically relates. “The nation’s past is emplotted in terms of conflict; the meta-narrative is one of oppression, resistance, and emancipation; the analytic triumvirate of race, class, and gender rules supreme.”

The lack of disciplinary diversity is not because these fields have no merit but because they are dismissed as studying dead white men. Explains Brown’s Gordon Wood: “For much of the academy, constitutional history, with its concentration on the actions of dead

white males, is much too old-fashioned, and not to be compared in importance with cultural and social history, especially of the sort focusing on issues of race and gender An understanding of our constitutional past would seem to be an integral part of a liberal-arts education, but few of our undergraduates have an opportunity to gain such an understanding.”¹

Citizens who fail to know basic landmarks of history and civics are unable to reflect on their meaning. They lack an understanding of the very principles which bind our society—namely, liberty, justice, government by the consent of the governed and equality under the law. In a time of global competition and conflict, this serious ignorance has wholesale implications for our ability to be informed and thoughtful citizens and to sustain our civilization.

Indeed, when the American Council of Trustees and Alumni conducted a survey of America’s elite college students, *Losing America’s Memory*, we found that they were woefully ignorant of American history and even failed to understand such fundamental concepts as separation of powers.

Embarking on the experiment of a democratic republic, the Founders viewed public education as central to the ability to sustain a participatory form of government. They had great and important ambitions for education—ambitions that included a belief that shared understanding, shared knowledge would help unify and advance civilization.

In the postmodernist academy, there has been a breakdown in the belief that higher education has a public purpose, that shared learning is important. Quoting former Harvard Dean Harry Lewis in his book, *Excellence without a Soul*:

Universities are having a hard time making the case that the education they offer is about anything in particular. “Breadth” and “choice” have become goals in themselves. When colleges talk about how broadly students will be educated or how much they will enjoy their freedom of choice, they conveniently avoid saying much

¹ Gordon Wood, “The Founders Rule!,” *The New Republic*, 7 Nov. 2005.

about what students will learn. And breadth and freedom in academia are like lower taxes in politics – it is hard to be against them, even if they come at the cost of important sacrifices. (25)

In the past, faculty themselves could be counted on to focus on education's public purpose; to remember that academic freedom is both the faculty member's freedom to teach as well as the student's freedom to learn.

Indeed, after the first World War, Jacques Barzun relates that *faculty* at Columbia determined the imperative public need to develop a core curriculum that would "teach the new generation the ideals and the history of Western civilization, in hopes that when they were leaders of opinion and makers of policy they might avoid the ghastly mistakes that had brought the Continent to self-destruction in total war." Quoting from a recent article on the program by Judge Jose Cabranes, *Fostering Judgment*, Cabranes relates that the core's "common course of study for all freshmen served another closely-related purpose—to introduce the children of newly arrived immigrants... to the culture they would all inherit and share.... The post- World War I Columbia curriculum was designed in part to sustain what Dean Frederick Keppel had described as early as 1914 as the new 'social diversity' of Columbia College."

Yale's Directed Studies program arose after World War II out of a similar sense that faculties had an obligation to prepare students to defend liberal democracy. Yale President Charles Seymour observed with urgent awareness that higher education needed to regain a sense of overarching purpose that "a New opportunity has been given to us which now and hereafter we must firmly resolve we shall not waste. The occasion demands of us, both old and young, qualities which, as we were wont to boast, are those of a liberal democracy but which are achieved only through tireless and selfless effort." He added: "We must confess that over the years we have erred and strayed from the virtues essential to democracy and we must pray for power to return to the pursuit of them." The wars had, in Judge Cabranes' words, "reminded Americans of how fragile our institutions could be and how easily our system of ordered liberty could be threatened."

I would submit that we are at just such a juncture today. In the wake of 9-11, we are presented, as Cabranes relates, with a “‘struggle for men’s minds’—a struggle between conflicting visions of a good society; a struggle of ideas” about our own system of ordered liberty.

Future leaders need to know the history and ideas that have shaped the West in order for our country to protect itself and adhere to our ideals. And yet, instead, they are offered a curriculum where anything goes and where, too often, the history and ideas that shaped the west are distorted or maligned. No less a figure than Stanley Katz, in a piece entitled “What Has Happened to the Professoriate?,” takes his colleagues to task:

We have lost a sense of commonality as professors, the sense that we are all in this together – “this” being a dedication to undergraduate teaching and not just specialized research. We have lost a belief in the relevance of teaching undergraduates for the health of our democracy. (Chronicle of Higher Education, Oct. 6, 2006).

Our colleges and universities have an obligation to direct the next generation of Americans, especially in the first two years of their college careers, to the most important courses – the foundational subjects—that ensure informed participation in our democracy. And that means that our colleges and university faculties must return to a more prescribed course of study—committed to “the idea that education is about choices”—again quoting Judge Cabranes, “about informed choice, about hierarchies of choices established by reason, ...experience and ... the good sense of teachers, ...choice[s that value] the lasting over the ephemeral; ... the thought-provoking over the merely self-affirming” or narcissistic. (4) This is the curricular challenge of the postmodernist university.

At very little cost, college and universities—and, yes, essentially their faculties—should engage in a process of curricular self-examination. The prevalent smorgasbord approach to the curriculum, allowing students to pick and choose among hundreds of courses,

results in a hodgepodge that fails to prepare students for informed citizenship, diverse careers, and life-long learning.

And if faculty will not revisit the overarching educational mission of their institution, we must *welcome and demand governance bodies that will promote academic excellence and public accountability.*

Conclusion

For too long, constituencies such as alumni and trustees have been expected to remain outside the walls of the ivory tower, particularly when it comes to issues of academic quality and accountability.

The logic behind the tradition is deceptively simply. Academic decisions should be made on academic grounds—hence they should be made by academics. But as I have attempted to outline, the focus of the modern academy—the ambitions of postmodernist faculty—are too often narcissistic and without relevance to education for a liberal democracy.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni was launched a decade ago to focus on those conditions and to mobilize thoughtful alumni and trustees on behalf of rigorous general education, good teaching, high standards, and academic freedom. Alumni and trustees know and understand that, to remain competitive, our institutions of higher learning must remain focused on academic standards, academic excellence and transparency. They are seeking appropriate oversight of an educational system that relies on their support, while too often vigorously rejecting their input.

Most institutions—and their internal constituencies—need checks and balances and higher education is no exception. Since the 1960's, shared governance—too often—has not been “shared” due to the vast delegations made by many boards to faculty and administrators. That is why ACTA exists: to articulate the concerns of trustees and

alumni who believe that certain trends in the postmodernist academy threaten its future stature and to train and guide those who serve as fiduciaries to refocus the academy—and its faculty—on its educational and intellectual mission for students.

Universities hold a privileged place in American society. They receive special privileges such as subsidies and tax exemptions on the condition that they serve the public purpose. It is a trust conveyed with the understanding that academic freedom entails both a right and a responsibility.

It is incumbent that our colleges and universities—ideally through faculty initiative, but, if not, through oversight by trustees—make certain that they are living up to their end of the bargain by providing the coherent and quality education that future citizens and leaders in a democracy require.