

City Journal Delves Into the Crisis of Liberal Education

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2024/09/22/city_journal_delves_into_crisis_liberal_education_151662.html

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COMMENTARY

The degradation of liberal education in America is anything but a niche public-policy concern.

Like all rights-protecting democracies – and especially as a 21st-century great power with globe-spanning interests – the United States requires a host of highly-trained individuals to keep its government functioning, military operating, economy churning, and civil society thriving. Essential men and women perform manual labor, offer basic services, and run small businesses. In addition, the nation needs physicists, chemists, and biologists; lawyers, doctors, and business executives; teachers, software engineers, and architects; journalists and civil servants; military officers, politicians, diplomats, judges, and religious leaders; and many more.

To acquire the professional skills necessary to fill key roles in America's advanced industrial society, individuals must typically obtain a four-year college degree. Prestigious undergraduate programs, which incubate America's highly credentialed elites, purport to offer the requisite professional training – or requisite introduction to professional training – within the framework of liberal education.

When true to its mission – transmitting knowledge, invigorating the moral imagination, cultivating independent thought, fostering toleration and civility – liberal education serves the public interest by making experts of all sorts more informed, thoughtful, and judicious. When it betrays its mission – indoctrinating, administering political litmus tests, encouraging a haughty self-regard among those who toe the party line, and mocking and punishing dissent – liberal education subverts the public interest. A doctrinaire liberal education sends into the world young men and women who confuse their reflexes, preferences, aversions, biases, and conceits with the last word and only acceptable outlook on citizenship, government, and justice.

Consequently, remedying liberal education's rampant dysfunction – suppression of free speech, disregard for due process in cases involving allegations of sexual misconduct, and politicization and hollowing out of the curriculum – should unite left and right. Hectoring professors and sanctimonious administrators promulgating an illiberal campus orthodoxy – supplemented by a critical mass of students selected for their fervent illiberalism – involve a gross abuse of power. Over the long term, the higher indoctrination on campus diminishes elites' ability to meet their obligations as good citizens, as private sector professionals, as government officials, and as fair-minded human beings.

City Journal editor Brian C. Anderson summarizes the grim situation: “[P]oorly educated students, frequently facing lousy prospects for remunerative work and owing too much money, are not a source of future national flourishing, to put it mildly.” That assessment comes from “[A Crisis on Campus](#),” Anderson’s introduction to “[Which Way the University?](#)” Comprising ten short, crisp contributions, City Journal’s symposium on higher education performs a public service by examining the variety of problems that plague liberal education, offering proposals to repair existing colleges and universities, and articulating principles and objectives to guide the creation of new ones.

Conservatives, observes political scientist John Dilulio in “[Third Time’s a Charm?](#),” have been criticizing higher education in America for at least 70 years. The young William F. Buckley Jr. led the charge in 1951 in “God and Man at Yale,” which excoriated the university from which he had just graduated for preaching collectivism and atheism in the classroom. “The latest wave of conservative critiques of elite universities might make a real difference,” Dilulio nevertheless maintains, because of “a broader public awareness of the university problem.” The anti-Israel, pro-Hamas, atrocity-defending demonstrators roiling America’s elite campuses following the jihadists’ Oct. 7, 2023, massacres in Israel concentrated the minds of many – parents, legislators, wealthy donors – who had averted their gaze from liberal education’s steady deterioration.

In “[Free Speech Is Not Enough](#),” Hillsdale College history professor Wilfred M. McClay agrees that liberal education has been corrupted. He, too, condemns professors and administrators for the “imposition of an intellectual monoculture, driven by the imperious claims of identity politics, propounded by an activist faculty operating in ideologically committed disciplines, and resulting in a suppression of diverse points of view and a general deadening of intellectual life.” Yet, McClay cautions, it will not be enough to instill in higher education “a robust recommitment to one of America’s fundamental values: free speech.” Universities must do more than relearn how to serve as “a community of inquiry.” They must also regain the capacity to form “a community of shared memory, the chief instrument by which the achievements of the past are transmitted to the present as a body of knowledge upon which future knowledge can be built.”

The blight of ideologically driven scholarship and teaching extends well beyond the humanities, argues City Journal contributing editor John Tierney in [DEI v. Science](#). The diversity, equity, and inclusion industry has turned the social sciences into “political monocultures.” The Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP), for example, weaves a requirement for ideological conformity into its determination of worthy scholarship: “Since 2022, it has evaluated papers submitted for presentation at its annual convention by asking each researcher to explain how the work ‘advances the diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism goals of SPSP.’” Meanwhile, “even the hard sciences have been [politicized](#) by demands to meet diversity quotas and to ‘decolonize’ physics and mathematics by introducing ‘indigenous perspectives.’” In biology, chemistry, and physics, writes Tierney, “younger professors, administrators, and journal editors are more likely to

champion the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) regime: they value ethnic and gender diversity over originality and productivity, and they are far more eager to silence and punish scientists daring to challenge progressive orthodoxy.”

In “[Demystify the Ivies](#),” Manhattan Institute senior fellow Allison Schrager stresses the difficulty of reforming universities where “some academic departments are overrun with true believers, and university staff is dominated by administrators who will resist any change.” However, this “disgraceful spectacle” – made vivid by the “anti-Israel (and often anti-American) frenzies” that “seemed tolerated, if not supported, by university administrations and even encouraged by some faculty” – presents an opportunity. “A loss of trust and stature could be just what our elite universities need in order to fix themselves,” Schrager argues. “The recent campus tumults thus might be the best thing for these universities in the long run. If a degree from a great state school like Texas A&M is seen as no less valuable than one from an Ivy League university, then America’s top colleges might finally get out of the elite-minting business and return to their original mission of education and research.”

Furthermore, it is wrong to suppose that “college is a surefire ticket to a better life,” argues Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity senior fellow Preston Cooper. Yes, “college can be a path to upward mobility,” Cooper writes in “[Is College Still Worth It?](#),” but “plenty of four-year college pathways aren’t, and some even leave students worse off.” As economic realities sink in, undergraduate enrollments will continue to drop.

“Accreditation is a problem that gets comparatively little attention, even as it slowly erodes the foundations of higher education,” contends Cato Institute research fellow Andrew Gillen in “[Accreditation is Broken; Can it be Fixed?](#)” University accreditors are drawn from faculty elsewhere. According to Gillen, they largely accept universities’ definition of quality – which tends to focus on inputs and process rather than learning and reasoning – and determine how well universities live up to their formal standard. To make matter worse, accreditors’ knowledge that they and their institutions will be reviewed by colleagues from the universities that they review compromises their independence. In addition, accreditors increase costs, since colleges and universities are, on pain of losing federal funding, compelled to adopt their recommendations, which typically push a progressive agenda. Gillen envisages no easy way out, but he sees promise in promoting competition through the establishment of alternative accreditation organizations.

In “[Make Schools Bear Some of the Risk of Student Loans](#),” Manhattan Institute legal policy fellow Tim Rosenberg argues that the federal government should rein in reckless spending on costly undergraduate education that leaves students ill-equipped for the workplace. Washington could do this by “making student-debt indemnification a feature of school accreditation.” Rosenberg also wants the federal government to “require that all universities guarantee the most recent ten years of student aid (loans and Pell Grants) received by the institutions.”

Other efforts are more ambitious. In the “[The Difficult Work of Academic Reform](#),” Manhattan Institute senior fellow Christopher Rufo explains the transformation of New College of Florida in Sarasota. Appointing a new slate of trustees in Jan. 2023 – including Rufo – Gov. Ron DeSantis has sought to turn the “left-wing activist haven” into a center of liberal education. And Joe Lonsdale, managing partner at venture capital firm 8VC, highlights the admirable purpose of the University of Austin, which he co-founded in 2021. In “[Building a New University on Firm Foundations](#),” Lonsdale directs attention to UATX’s constitution, which establishes “an institution of higher learning that champions the pursuit of truth, scientific inquiry, freedom of conscience, and civil discourse, and that is independent of government, party, religious denomination and business interest.”

The degradation of liberal education harms multifarious aspects of America’s well-being. It erodes elites’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities, impairs their performance of their professional tasks, and constricts their minds and hearts. Reform can’t wait and must proceed simultaneously on many fronts.

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