

The Crisis in Academic Standards

By Dr. Stephen H. Balch

The assault on academic standards should not be regarded as an assault on standards themselves, but as an effort to replace a set of standards appropriate to an intellectual community with those of a very different kind. In the last few decades the sense of what American academic life should be has been undergoing an accelerating shift from a mainstream view that prevailed through the 1940s, 1950s and most of the 1960s to a new one which, though still not embraced by a majority of faculty, is trumpeted loudly by a vocal and committed minority. This minority has been resourceful in finding allies within and outside the campus community, and has persuaded administrators, if they are not already of the same mind, to follow their lead out of a desire to maintain peace on campus.

The University, Old and New. What are these two views? What constitutes this paradigmatic shift? I would argue that until sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s the prevailing concept of the American university was that of a community of "scientists," each a specialist in his or her particular domain. (I include the humanities and the social sciences in this – since by mid-century the dominant modes of research in traditional humanistic disciplines had come much to resemble, at least in their method and outlook, the activities associated with the study of the natural sciences.) The university was supposed to be a place where knowledge was discovered and transmitted, where scholars were credentialed, and where experts delved more deeply than ever a layman could follow into the complex nature of reality. The result was to be a steady flow of powerful and innovative ideas about the world that these experts could defend on the basis of logic, evidence and theory, presented through rational argument. This is a view of the university that can be traced in America to the founding of institutions like Johns Hopkins in the late nineteenth century, has had many distinguished defenders, and in many ways, is quite appealing.

The new model of academic life rejects this view of the university, together with its concomitant emphasis on the need for open debate and accepted tests of evidence and argument. Rather, in this revised vision, the university is regarded as an ideological partisan, a force for advocacy and social change, and an example of what an ideal social community might look like.

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The shift of paradigm has been accompanied by a shift in rhetoric. When the academy was conceived as a scientific community, academic rhetoric sought to model itself on scientific discourse. But the rhetoric of civil liberties also had a place. As members of a scientific community academics were fearful of irrational and political intrusions into their work by outsiders who did not understand or wish to understand its scientific character. It was feared that such people would insist that their prejudices be used to set limits on or suppress the open process of inquiry. Among those specifically feared were the members of boards of trustees. These were well-heeled Babbitts, who might be very good at raising money, but who held many coarse and ignorant opinions, and would end up doing tremendous mischief if they meddled in things they did not understand. The early deliberations leading to the formation of the American Association of University Professors reveal quite clearly a fear of boards of trustees and others who reflected specific external social and economic constituencies. The question was, how could they be kept at arm's length?

As one answer, the principles of civil liberties were employed when the language of science failed. These maintained that even though an idea might seem strange or heretical – as was often true of professors' ideas – it still had to be given the opportunity to openly defend itself against criticism. How else otherwise could one know if it was true or in error? A classic formulation, founded on such arguments, is the definition of academic freedom, offered by Arthur Lovejoy and John Dewey, who were First Secretary and First President of the AAUP. Their definition of academic freedom is,

the freedom of professionally qualified persons to inquire or investigate, to discuss, publish or teach the truth as they see it in the fields of their confidence, subject to no religious or political control or authority, except the controls, standards, and professional ethics, or the authority of the rational methods by which truth and conclusions are reached in the disciplines involved.

Again, the message is, "Stay out of our affairs if you do not understand what we are doing. We are the people who are wedded to rational discourse; if you allow us to argue our points freely and fully, if you trust in our commitment to evidence, and logic – and we maintain that we are so committed – eventually we will advance not only our own knowledge, but that of society at large."

As the concept of the university has shifted from that of the community of scientists to that of the egalitarian partisan, the rhetoric has also changed, becoming less and less that of civil liberties or science, and more and more that of social justice, emphasizing the elimination of wrongs, the elevation of the victimized, the dislodging of the privileged, the equalization of human affairs and the elimination of distinctions, discriminations and hierarchies.

Activism Over Scholarship. The academy also now embraces the language of activism. The concept of the university as a tribunal of egalitarianism requires that it act in very specific ways to change the balance of power in the larger world. The university

is not primarily a center for discovering what is true. Instead, it is a place that reaches out and acts as an agency to direct change along certain lines. It not only examines arguments; it alters the course of events.

A few examples. Here is an extract from a brochure published by one of our prestige institutions, Tufts University, which describes a program launched four or five years ago in something called Peace and Social Justice Studies. In justifying their program, the brochure's authors argue, "Universities traditionally consider their major responsibility to be providing information and theories about the world. We would ask how our education can prepare students to change conditions in that world, rather than merely accept it as it is." Notice the supposition here that the world would be better if things were changed. Further it asks, "How can our education instill in students the desire to act, the antidotes for personal despair, and a sense of personal responsibility for improving our world?" Finally, returning to the mission of the peace studies program, the brochure concludes, "If we desire peace, we must teach peace — and do it now. This will necessitate a new set of priorities and educational aids."

Another example: a description of the introductory Women's Studies course at the University of Minnesota. (It would seem as though women's and peace studies, as well as ethnic studies courses, are typically most deeply imbued with a partisan sensibility, but it increasingly colors the more traditional disciplines as well.) The description begins with a revealing, unapologetic statement, "This course is designed to be an introduction to the basic concepts essential to feminist work, both inside and outside the academy." They are telling you up front that the course will prepare soldiers to fight the war for greater equality.

These examples were drawn from specific kinds of programs that are more politicized than most. Let us now take a look at what the broader authorities within academic life are saying at some key institutions. These are not faculty militants but university administrators, and therefore their words are less forthright, sometimes representing efforts to obscure rather than clarify the paradigm shift that is under way. Yet they are still quite revealing, showing how the older set of arguments for supporting university life are gradually being turned inside out. For example, here is a statement from the Office of the Chancellor of the University of California at Santa Barbara, apparently defining the sense of mission of the leadership at that institution. "The role of the university," it begins, "is to further knowledge." A bow to the old model. But then the shift, as it continues that "the advancement of knowledge gains impetus from human diversity." "Just as all scholarship benefits from the interplay of research and teaching in a variety of disciplines" — again, a momentary bow to the past to make some of those senior faculty feel a bit more assured — "the entire campus community learns and profits from diverse cultural and ethnic perspectives. From its historical origins as an academic cloister for the elite, the university has evolved into an institution that reflects the myriad needs of modern society and attempts to meet those needs through inclusion rather than exclusion." Then it goes on to list the historically victimized — classified by gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, disability, and so forth — as those who have to be brought in.

What are the intellectual mechanics of this shift? The traditional concept of education emphasizes output. We are searching for knowledge. We organize an institution to be as effective as possible in finding new knowledge. By way of contrast the new model for the university places its emphasis on input. We *know* what knowledge has been overlooked. We *know* what perspectives have to be brought in; and they are the perspectives of those who have not been given their equal chance or achieved their equal outcome. They are the perspectives of those who are victimized and marginal; and the university will do its job when, in the proper egalitarian manner, it brings them into the inclusive community and allows them to take their rightful share. Thus, a transformation has occurred: instead of focusing on acquiring knowledge through an open-ended type of inquiry, we have to focus on the kinds of perspectives that must be included so as not to perpetuate victimization.

Another instance: this comes from Tulane University. This is not yet policy, it is a draft for discussion that was circulated at Tulane. Here is the introduction:

These university-wide initiatives offer the purpose of augmenting and facilitating the process of race and gender enrichment at Tulane University. They represent efforts at approaches to a complicated, far-reaching concern which cannot be ignored. The United States and its institutions are characterized by two basic traits – they are largely Caucasian, and largely male. Higher education in general, and Tulane in particular, are not exceptions.

Once again a bow to the past: “Within the American context, liberal education is intended or designed to foster an understanding of ourselves and the world around us.” “However,” once more looking forward, “this cannot be achieved if *what* we study and *how* we study, how we see ourselves and our institutions, and how we relate to the past, present, and future, are defined by one, small segment of society.” So once more we have this terrible hierarchical situation in which a small hegemonic group must be put in its place so that others can be uplifted. “Tulane should seek to remove such limits to knowledge...and find some way or another to conflate these two rather different objectives. In light of the future needs confronting our campus and our nation, it seems appropriate to enrich our institution with a variety of perspectives, values and divisions which are increasingly representative of American society.”

Further along we find a passage that rejects the old concept of the university as a place where people actually know what they know, i.e., are understood to be fully conscious of their knowledge and capable of articulating it – an assumption at the root of any concept of rational discourse. It says, “First, racism and sexism are pervasive in America and are fundamentally present in all American institutions. Second, racism and sexism are subtle, and for the most part subconscious, or at least sub-surface. Third, it is difficult for us to see and overcome racism and sexism because we are all a product of the problem.” In other words, since we are all racists and sexists, the progeny of a racist and sexist society, this erstwhile community of experts must be told, “You really do not know what you know. You really are acting upon sub-conscious motivations. And so, our university cannot be a forum for rational debate, and before it can be transformed into an effective agency for social change, it must first become a therapeutic community

which lifts people out of their benighted and retrograde consciousness, helps them to understand their socially sinful selves, and that finally turns them into right-thinking men and women.”

The Abandonment of Excellence. The radically egalitarian creed which is central to the ideologically partisan conception of the university is at war with the goal of intellectual excellence that was the core of the vision of the university as a scientific community. The ideal of science, the ideal of a search for truth, presupposes that there are some things more worth knowing than others, that there are certain ideas and theories that more closely approximate the truth than do others, that there is a hierarchy of ideas, and that some ideas are better than others. It also presupposes that there is a hierarchy of individuals: some people know more than others and they are the ones who should run an academic institution. But you have to reject hierarchy if you want to have an egalitarian institution and are committed to changing the rest of society along the same lines. Such a goal tempts one to suppose that things are more or less equal or should be, in terms of their factual and normative truth. And this leads to an inclination to settle for far less than excellence, as does a Harvard professor named Charles Willie, who argues that the basic objective of higher education should not be excellence, but simply adequacy. Now any of you who have had teaching experience will realize that if you *aim* for excellence, you are lucky to get adequacy. So you can imagine what is likely to happen if you aim for adequacy.

There are several other consequences of this shift of paradigm. First, are curriculum changes leading to the introduction of what Kenyon College professor Thomas Short has designated “oppression studies,” i.e., courses or programs that are geared to showing how unequal and iniquitous our society is, how badly certain groups have suffered, and what should be done to change this.

One illustration of the conversion of traditional academic programs into “oppression studies” occurred last year at the University of Texas. The University has only one campus-wide graduation requirement: basic English composition. And students must take this course in composition unless they can test out of it. About 40 percent of them do so. For many years this was a traditional course. It was taught as a means of introducing students to writing, and helping them to improve their grammar and style. To accomplish this students would read different types of essays which illustrated various forms of narrative, expository and descriptive writing.

Last summer the department decided to change the entire course. It eliminated the traditional collections of readings and replaced them with a reader entitled *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Analysis*, which includes about 40 essays, virtually all extremely polemical in style. This reader was made mandatory for all instructors teaching sections of English composition at Texas. Now this is not only a clear politicization of the curriculum, it comes close to being an instance of consumer fraud. Students intending to take an English composition course have little idea that this will be thrown at them. And certainly when the University entrusted the English department to create a composition course, it did not anticipate that the department would use the course to communicate a narrow political message. Fortunately, in this case, several members of the Texas affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, led by a particularly

courageous professor of English, raised a hue and cry. The resulting embarrassment was sufficient to make the higher administration veto the course, and soon after the dean who had blessed it announced his resignation.

There are many other instances of this kind occurring across the country. Carleton has what is called a "recognition and affirmation of difference" requirement. You don't have to take World History at Carleton or Introduction to English Literature, but you do have to take a course that falls under the "recognition and affirmation of difference" requirement. It has just been put into the catalog. By the way, the initials for this requirement – and this is how it is designated in the catalog – are RAD. Maybe this is meant to suggest something.

Hiring policies are now also very much keyed to race and gender. Memoranda appear that say if you cannot hire a woman or a minority, then you cannot hire anyone, or you cannot hire anyone for at least a year. At Duke every department is mandated to find at least one new minority faculty member by 1992 or show at great length why it cannot.

Admissions procedures have changed in similar ways. You probably know about the ethnically driven admissions policies at the University of California. If you look at the SAT scores of minority and non-minority students the actual over-lap between the scores is only about fifteen percent. That is to say, only fifteen percent of the students admitted in one category rank higher than the lowest students admitted in the other category. You can imagine the effect this is likely to have on campus life. Students talk about the ethnic and racial tensions on campus. Well, I would say this probably has a lot to do with – among other things – the very different levels of preparation of the students who are admitted.

The final consequence of the changing model of the university is its effect on the intellectual climate on campus. Increasingly, there is a willingness to label, stigmatize, and suppress points of view that are contrary to the radical egalitarian creed. Let me read from another document, from Smith College. This document comes out of the Office of Student Affairs.

The document defines various types of oppression thought to exist and gives the student a list of actions considered oppressive. It begins with a discussion of factors of oppression: "Prejudice," it tells us, "is a pre-conceived judgement or opinion about issues, behaviors, or groups of people." OK. "Discrimination". "Treating an issue, person, or behavior differently, based on prejudice." "Institutional Power." Here we come to the tricky part. Institutional power is defined as "access to resources and privileges within the dominant culture and its institutions." Finally, "Oppression." What is oppression? "Oppression is discriminating against a person, or group of people, on the basis of certain stereotypes, generalizations, and attitudes." And now the clincher: "Oppression of groups of people is possible *only* with the component of institutional power." This all comes from the Office of Student Affairs which, I suppose, does not regard itself as having institutional power and hence is not capable of being oppressive. But note, oppression can only come from those in groups that have institutional power.

Next, you have a list of what are called the “specific manifestations of oppression.” And, if you were wondering, there are eleven of them. Groups that do not have institutional power cannot, of course, be guilty of them. For example, racism, one manifestation of oppression, is only properly attributable to those groups considered to have institutional power, which by definition excludes minorities and women.

Let me identify some of the other types of oppression: religious discrimination, sexism, hetero-sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and ageism. But there is also “ableism.” Have you heard of it? Ableism is the oppression of the differently abled by the “temporarily abled.”

The next one, “lookism,” is new even to me. Lookism is the belief that “appearance is an indicator of a person’s value. The construction of a standard of beauty and attractiveness.” If you have a standard of beauty and attractiveness you are among the retrograde. And, by the way, if you try to look better yourself, you’re equally guilty. So, “plain people liberation” has finally arrived – and I might say it is long overdue. I do not know how they punish lookism at Smith. But other institutions do have panels and tribunals of various sorts that can make appropriate inquiries.

Obstacles to Reform. What can be done to reclaim the earlier notion of the academy as an institution that searches for what is true, or its best possible approximation? First we must recognize that there are three obstacles to saving the situation. I would define these obstacles collectively as the three fearful asymmetries of contemporary academic life.

The first fearful asymmetry is the asymmetry of temperament. The proponents of the partisan and egalitarian conception of the academy are usually individuals who have gone into academic life because they feel it is a good place to do politics. They like politics. They are true believers. They have few doubts. They often are also fairly aggressive and exhibitionist personalities. They are vocal and they make things happen. In contrast, those people who went into the academy to search for or to help transmit knowledge are frequently quiet people. They often were looking, in part, for shelters from the full rigors of ordinary life, or seeking quiet, reflective environments where they could be let alone to pursue their interests. This then produces the kind of conflict you might expect if a company of Marines was suddenly admitted into a convent and a struggle for power ensued. (When I used this hypothetical in an earlier lecture somebody said I was obviously not a Catholic, but you catch my meaning, nonetheless.)

The second asymmetry is the asymmetry of constituency. Those who want to change the university into an egalitarian partisan can offer benefits to specific groups. They can offer, or claim to offer, benefits with respect to admissions, hiring, and the curriculum. They can offer benefits to various ethnic groups, to women, and to others who have a self-identity and are politically organized. On the other hand, those who are interested in the old idea of the university as a scientific community are trying to protect an institution that serves a very general interest. They have in mind a common good, the preservation of an environment of rationality. And, as is true in political life generally, if you have a well-organized, tangible constituency, you are better off. You can combine

the high moral ground by advocating a new egalitarian order, with the ability to pass out spoils. And that is always the best combination.

Third, there is the asymmetry of ideals. Complete equality is an ideal that people can imagine. They can visualize a world of equal outcomes, even if they can't imagine all its ramifications. In practice, of course, such a world self-destructs. But we still believe we can imagine what equal outcomes would offer. Everyone would have everything that was valuable and all would be happy. In contrast, defenders of rational inquiry are advocates of a process, not an outcome. Their ideal is harder to imagine, and thus harder to find support for.

Overcoming the Obstacles. So, the question is: how do you overcome these asymmetries? I would suggest three approaches. First, with respect to temperament. The National Association of Scholars has to assume that eventually people in academic life will start to resist – even if that is not what they set out to do in life, even if temperamentally they feel disinclined. I did not undertake this work because I loved it; I began because I felt disheartened by the direction in which the academic environment was evolving. And I can see around me many colleagues who are reacting the same way. The most interesting episode in the history of NAS thus far took place at Duke University. There, a group of first rank faculty led by the political scientist James David Barber, one of the leading students of the American presidency, created a chapter of our organization. Barber is a former president of Amnesty International and his political sympathies are not what many who think stereotypically have assumed is typical of the NAS. But we are an organization defending something broader than any of the positions debated by the two major political parties, and we are open to scholars of many reasonable dispositions. In any event, a very successful scholar like James David Barber saw the university in danger and decided to depart from his normal scholarly preoccupations and do something about it. His example has already stimulated others to do the same, and as excesses of politicization continue to multiply, we expect that still more will be roused to action.

We also place a lot of emphasis within the organization on creating what you might call systems of support, a sense of community. NAS activities often bring our members together at events that combine sociability with intellectual content. Someone will make a presentation, but there is wine, cheese, and mixing. Friendships develop and people get the sense they are not alone. They begin to realize that what they are facing is happening elsewhere. And they also learn that it may be possible to resist. This can be dismissed as hand-holding, but I think it's an essential activity.

Let me move to the second asymmetry, the asymmetry of constituency. It would be terrible if, as supporters of the ideal of pursuing and transmitting knowledge, we aped the tactics of the other side and started organizing our own little insular constituencies to do battle on campus. That would really be a loss. We are now seeing on campus the beginnings of a backlash among so-called majority students. The creation of white students organizations. It's frightful. But clearly, as Chester Finn has argued, if you are moving toward a Beirut-style university where everyone has a piece of turf, it is possible to imagine the kind of disintegration in which it will be every group for itself, and every group potentially at war with every other.

The alternative is a different kind of organized effort, which can find its foundation in those colleges and universities that see an opportunity for themselves in the default of their competitors. One interesting point about the transformation of universities into partisan advocates is that they are advocating ideas that most Americans do not believe. I think, therefore, that it is safe to assume that there are many parents who will want to send their children to institutions that are educating and not engaging in this form of indoctrination. Here is an opportunity for perceptively led colleges and universities to form a counter-current, building themselves up, and becoming marketplace alternatives.

The NAS is also encouraging the creation of student guides that will give consumers a detailed and intelligent look at the state of the campus and curriculum at various institutions. This will allow consumers to recognize which schools are getting away with murder and which are living up to their responsibilities. And within our own office we are conducting a curriculum survey based on a close reading of catalogs, whose results will be available shortly.

So, I think it is possible to find a concrete constituency for reform that will consist of those principled colleges and universities that see an advantage for themselves in assuming the role of market alternatives. Their visibility will then come to the attention of consumers — the parents and students who want to find decent institutions.

Finally, there is the asymmetry of ideals. This is a real problem, but I think we can nonetheless give tangible embodiment to the idea of the process of truth-seeking as an essential and prized ingredient of academic life and we can do it in a way that demonstrates its power without being misleading or inappropriate. And that is by connecting that idea to what we now see in the world: the triumph of the liberal democratic institutions broadly conceived. The liberal variant of Western civilization is predicated on the idea of freedom for the individual as the ground of moral and political life, just as the ideal of the university should be predicated on intellectual freedom as its moral ground.

The kind of education that we champion is an education that while not partisan, is very much based on the notion of preparing people for freedom. It exposes them to different ideals and arguments. It teaches them how to think critically. It provides them with an adequate fund of knowledge. It prepares them for life as free individuals and free citizens. I think it is therefore not illegitimate to seek to profit from the obvious successes of the liberal variant of Western civilization. It embodies ideals to which you can appeal and be on the side of history. And certainly it embodies ideals that a great many people share, consumers of education as well as academics. This is the case that we must make, and at the National Association of Scholars we are making it through our publications and our pronouncements. If we are successful we will eventually, even if more slowly than we would like, see results. While we will not totally redeem the American academy, we will be able to restore a large share of it. And it is on this expectation that the National Association of Scholars, and like-minded people, rest their hopes.