

Liberal Education and Social Responsibility
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The phrase "liberal education" is a pleonasm; unless it is liberal, what we provide is not an education, but mere vocational training. The purpose of an education in a democratic society is to prepare individuals to be discerning, rational citizens capable of evaluating the relative merits of competing claims in order to participate meaningfully in society. This view is hardly new. According to one ancient historian, the first surviving explicit written reference to liberal education dates to the fifth century B.C. Stesimbrotos of Thasos, referring to a successful military commander, said that he lacked a literary education and any "liberal and distinctively Hellenic accomplishment."

Athenian democracy depended upon the free exchange of ideas among free men. Women and slaves were, of course, excluded from formal participation. And the free exchange of ideas depended upon rhetorical skill, defined not merely as oratorical ability, but the ability to analyze a problem and propose a solution. A liberal education, designed to allow access to political forums, was afforded free men, and technical skills were provided to slaves.

The medieval liberal arts curriculum included rhetoric, grammar, and logic (the trivium) as well as geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music defined as a division of mathematics (the quadrivium). Contemporary notions of a liberal education usually include the humanities and the natural and social sciences. In establishing the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities, Congress included in its delightfully circular definition of the humanities: "Language, both modern and classic; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; the history, criticism, theory, and practice of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods."

For over two thousand years, a common thread in the definitions of a liberal education has been the primacy of language. Isocrates in 380 B.C. argued that a liberal education is manifested above all by skill in speech. To this day, both formal and informal measures of aptitude and

achievement rely heavily on verbal indicators. In initial encounters in the classroom and in job interviews, we make impressionistic assessments of a person's competence based on linguistic fluency. Formal measures, such as standardized tests designed to assess both verbal and quantitative aptitude and achievement, use words to pose their questions, and respondents must use language to answer them.

The term academic marketplace, which once referred to a place where ideas were freely and vigorously debated, has acquired a literal and venal meaning. Aware of the power of language to frame perception, the corporate hucksters who increasingly set the terms of both political and academic debate, have appropriated and distorted the vocabulary in profound and radical ways. They would have us cease to be professors and students engaged in a collegial enterprise leading to a critical and informed citizenry. Rather, they would have us be purveyors of canned packets of information to so-called customers who are, too often, unaware of the degree of their exploitation. A genuine education can be earned only by students committed to learning with the guidance of a faculty who, protected by tenure, are free to explore challenging and often unpopular notions.

Although overt attacks on tenure have subsided, the growth in the numbers of both part-time and full-time faculty hired off the tenure track is evidence of the magnitude of the fraud being perpetrated on students, their parents, higher education, and society by academic institutions. In the name of flexibility, and faced with financial crises, too many colleges and universities rely on hiring both part-time and full-time faculty off the tenure track and inflating the requirements for tenure to such an extent that few can meet them. The fastest growing component of new faculty hires is full-time, non-tenure-track. In the last decade, depending on how one views the data, between 52% and 55% of all new full-time faculty hires were off the tenure track. Part-time contingent faculty now teach more than half of all courses in some disciplines. All too often, the tenured faculty are complicit in perpetuating the problem. It is too easy to look the other way as our contingent, part-time colleagues are exploited when their exploitation allows us the luxury of taking sabbaticals and teaching only upper level courses. When we recommend tenure and promotion only for junior faculty who have published more than we have, who have virtually perfect student evaluations, stellar service records, and the potential to be stars in their field, we are guilty of

fostering a misplaced elitism. The pressure to pursue safe research, that is, au courant and publishable; to obtain outstanding evaluations from students; and to demonstrate collegiality by accepting onerous committee assignments is a real, if subtle, threat to academic freedom, meaningful shared governance, and the quality of the education we provide. It also serves as a deterrent to attracting recruits to our profession. How can any rational person expect highly qualified individuals to pursue graduate degrees at great personal and financial expense only to obtain underpaid, temporary positions with no hope of promotion or expectation of job security? Other professions that offer greater rewards for similar effort will skim off the best and brightest.

There are a few scattered and hopeful signs that a backlash is beginning. Students and their parents, forced to take up the financial slack as endowments shrink and state legislatures cut budgets, are taking a more critical look at the composition of faculties. They are understandably resentful when many, if not most, faculty are so marginalized that they are not listed in the faculty telephone directory, do not keep office hours because they do not have offices in which to hold them, and are forced to lower standards in order to receive the glowing student evaluations that serve as the sole basis for the renewal of their part-time contracts. In response, there are budding initiatives to convert part-time contingent positions to full-time tenure-track ones and to compensate part-time contingents on a pro-rated basis and to include them in the governance structure of the institution. When students realize that many of their professors are living at or near the poverty line, the message they receive is that education is a cheap commodity.

We teach, not only by exhortation, but by example. We must support efforts to provide equitable working conditions for all members of our profession regardless of their tenure status and to make our campuses welcoming to women and minorities.

We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.