

# Liberal Education

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## ACADEMIC FREEDOM



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GRANT H. CORNWELL AND EVE WALSH STODDARD

# Freedom, Diversity,

FEATURED TOPIC

A LIBERAL EDUCATION depends upon—presupposes—unfettered thought, inquiry, and expression.<sup>1</sup> This is necessary not only for the production of knowledge but also for the preparation of citizens in a diverse democracy. A vital campus is one where ideas meet, mix, conflict, engage, and emerge changed by the interaction. But genuine dialogue is a difficult, even fragile, human endeavor. It entails both speaking and listening, articulating one's views and earnestly considering those of others.

Campus communities need both to

protect the rights of all members to think and speak freely and to foster the conditions that make dialogue possible.

On campuses, as in society, open debate is silenced as rhetoric hardens into fixed political positions, drawing impassable lines in the sand between groups. The multiple pressures on freedom of expression include the discourse of patriotism created after 9/11 to legitimize the war on terrorism, the backlash against multiculturalism and affirmative action, the increased diversity of U.S. campuses, and the increasingly corporate management and service orientation of universities. While these social changes suppress free expression, popular media discourses model either radical ideological indoctrination as practiced by Rush Limbaugh and all his imitators on both sides of the political spectrum or forms of oppositional discourse that are either outlandish and irresponsible, as in *The Jerry Springer Show*, or merely reinforce the viewers' biases, as in *Crossfire* and its imitators. Within this

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St. Lawrence University

# and Global Citizenship





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context, campuses need to support and teach practices of critique and contestation as central to civic engagement, *but* these practices of freedom need to respect the dignity and value of all members of society.

### Diversity

The word “liberal” in “liberal education” originally meant education for free men, an education to prepare men for the exercise of freedom within their polity. For this reason the practice of freedom on campus is deeply tied to the practice of freedom in the larger society and internationally, as well as individually and interpersonally. Yet in every society that called itself a republic or a democracy in the past, free persons or citizens were a privileged minority. This includes the republic of the United States, which did not have universal suffrage until 1920. At the founding of America’s oldest colleges, the civic dimension of the mission of higher education, though framed in a discourse of democracy, was elitist and exclusive. Those who were imagined to require the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in democratic deliberation, those who had access to this form of education, where white men.

As Orlando Patterson (1991) has argued, the Western belief in freedom as a revered and almost uncontested value arose dialectically out

of the social structures of slavery and serfdom. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Dubois observes that

few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. (1969, 47)

But achieving freedom in the sense of citizenship and enfranchisement turned out to be a lengthy struggle for African Americans, one still mired in the obstacles posed by voting machines, faulty registrations, and felony laws. The civil rights achievements of the 1960s have also shown that there is more to freedom and citizenship than formal equality under the law.

On U.S. college campuses, the inclusion of women and persons of color as full members of the community of learners has complicated the pedagogical project of liberal education, including especially those dimensions related to civic participation and responsibility. These new members of the academy, first as students and then as professors, brought with them, in their bodies and in their minds, very basic challenges to the tradition. As Renato

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Rosaldo puts it, “initial efforts concentrated on getting people in the door.

Institutions of higher learning appeared to tell those previously excluded, ‘Come in, sit down, shut up. You’re welcome here as long as you conform to our norms.’” He goes on to make the point that

in order to democratize higher education, people need to work together to change the present situation where the higher the perceived social status of the room the less diverse its membership. When people leave a decision-making room and one hears that a consensus was reached, remember to ask: “Who was in the room when the decision was made?” Introducing diversity in such rooms will slow down the process. (1993, xi-xii)

Implicitly, Rosaldo raises here the question of civic discourse, of verbal and social processes of deliberation and communication.

In the fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, this nation has experimented with various models of integration and exclusivity. *Brown v. Board* was decided on the grounds that “separate but equal” has no place in public education and that students of color in segregated schools, even those with equivalent facilities and resources, are deprived of equal educational opportunities. Turning to higher education today, we find an ironic reversal in the terms of the *Brown v. Board* reasoning. It is now believed that the most privileged white students attending selective private colleges and universities are deprived if they receive an all-white education (see Bowen and Bok 1998). The belief fifty years ago was that there was something called education, the transmission of knowledge and skills, that was race-neutral and apolitical, and that could be made equally available to all Americans. As a result of integration, especially at the college level, there has been an explosion of new knowledge and pedagogies created by the inclusion of women and people of different classes, races, and cultural backgrounds in the academy. These changes have been hard-won, as the metaphor of the “culture wars” suggests.

Given that democracies and republics have always had their suppressed others, whether internally or in colonies abroad, we wonder whether the attempt to enfranchise, metaphorically speaking, a diverse and historically

unequal population is straining a system dependent on having in-

siders and outsiders, speaking subjects and alien others. The insiders’ club had rules of engagement that did not need to be spoken, and the outsiders had their own systems of resistance and survival. Rosaldo characterizes well the kind of reaction that occurs when new kinds of people are included in a previously homogeneous group:

One reaction is predictable. People who once had a monopoly on privilege and authority will suddenly experience relative deprivation . . . they will feel diminished and may in certain cases find themselves drawn to nativistic movements, perhaps to the National Association of Scholars or other groups bent on practicing curricular apartheid. When people become accustomed to privilege, it appears to be a vested right, a status that is natural and well deserved, a part of the order of things. In the short run, the transition to diversity can be traumatic; in the long run, it promises a great deal. (1993, xii)

Whereas the federal government in the 1960s intervened to integrate the University of Mississippi, there have been subsequent periods of backlash, including the culture wars of the 1980s as well as the current curtailment of civil liberties and charges that academia is a haven for leftist faculty members who seek to indoctrinate students.

Thus, while the battle for integration has been more or less won, despite rearguard actions against affirmative action, the contest has shifted to the nature of the curriculum and pedagogy, and implicitly, the ultimate goals of liberal education. Moreover, the very ability to discuss and debate differences of viewpoint in an open environment has seriously diminished as the larger social climate of neoconservatism has come head to head with increased multiculturalism in the curriculum, pedagogy, and demographics of the campus.

One of the watchwords of groups like Students for Academic Freedom is “intellectual diversity.” This is held up as the true diversity that colleges should seek out. While most educators would rally around this concept, since it appears to transform the traditional value of multiple ways of knowing into a contemporary appreciation of cultural diversity, in fact it is

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deployed as a weapon against diversity understood as the inclusion of underrepresented groups in the campus and the curriculum. Its main referent is a narrowly construed ideological diversity—Republican vs. Democrat, conservative vs. liberal—and it assumes that liberals are the majority on college campuses; hence, conservatives need “affirmative action” to ensure they are represented. This notion of intellectual diversity also implies that the curriculum needs defending against the allegedly hegemonic forces of political correctness.

It is the case that the portmanteau word “diversity” tends to conflate bodies with perspectives, and this is an issue that needs constant critique. The conflation exists because there are, in fact, at least two very different justifications for diversifying campuses. One is a social justice or restitution motive that applies most clearly to African Americans and Native Americans (though arguably to many others as well), two groups that have been systematically excluded from advancement in U.S. society since the nation’s inception. This is the motive behind affirmative action as it applies to women and these historically excluded groups.

The other motive has two subcategories. One concerns demographics and the intercultural skills required by an increasingly heterogeneous society. The other is the liberal arts notion that good knowledge and thinking

result from exposure to many different perspectives and ways of knowing. In her book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, the feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding (1991) argues that adding the perspectives of underrepresented or unrepresented groups to scientific inquiry plays a huge role in knowledge production by adding new vectors of critique. The first things to be revealed are the most basic, and therefore most hidden, assumptions and presuppositions of inquiry. Thus, even in the realm of science, thought by many people to be abstracted from socio-cultural influences, new insights are fostered by making scientific inquiry more inclusive.

Nonetheless, the assumption tends to be made, perhaps too easily, that different skin colors bring this diversity with them. “Positionality” is about more than skin color. It describes a specific set of coordinates produced by geography and power, by social class, and by a number of kinds of identity. Most importantly, diversity only adds to a collaborative project of knowledge production if the participants retain a principled openness, a commitment to listening for and across differences. This openness, in turn, presupposes an ethic of respect.

### Triangulating differences

Citizens of today’s world need to recognize that people situated in different spatial, cultural, economic, and political locations will inevitably perceive events and relationships differently from each other.<sup>2</sup> We need to teach students to seek out understandings from these multiple perspectives and not to rest content with the self-serving views presented in the mainstream culture. Power and interests intervene in the act of seeing, such that differently situated observers actually see different realities.

We are not arguing for a relativist position. Rather, we are proposing a process for creating a complex and multiple “truth” or “reality” that requires understanding and negotiation. Within such a collaborative epistemological process, multiplicity would not be replaced by unity; different viewpoints would be placed in rhizomatic conversation with each other. Using the metaphor of a GPS (Global Positioning System), we argue that the epistemology required of today’s global citizens demands triangulation; it demands readings taken from as

many locations as possible, especially readings that reflect the knower as viewed from outside. This is why study abroad and second language learning are so valuable. Both forms of knowledge and experience reflect back to the student how the country and its citizens look to those outside the U.S. This can be both very disturbing and very liberating for American students.

On our campus, we teach a seminar for students who have been abroad that attempts to model the epistemology represented by a GPS. It is an inquiry into the ethics of global citizenship, focusing on debates over whether “human rights” are a product of Western culture or have universal validity. The students research the politics and discourse of human rights in the nation where they studied, and we read in common a multiplicity of perspectives on human rights. What we find is that, although the specific discourse of human rights is rooted in Western liberal metaphysics of the person, the politics of signing on to a human rights agreement are rich, complex, and offer hope for ways to negotiate across deep metaphysical and epistemological differences.

### **Freedom as non-domination**

Even as we struggle to shift pedagogy and curricula toward issues of civic engagement, the politics of positionality constrain and vex discourse on college campuses—not uninfluenced by the dynamics of national politics. The educational value of what is called “diversity” today is an extension of a core value of liberal education: the emphasis on multiple ways of knowing, on different methods of intellectual inquiry and analysis. The measure of vitality in any intellectual community is the scope and variety of perspectives it can sustain in dynamic engagement. It is the changing nature of knowledge that makes universities dynamic, and change comes about primarily through the productive encounter, the challenge, of differences. Any stance that forecloses the free discussion of differences also forecloses the quest for learning and knowledge creation sufficient to the complexities, both national and global, of the twenty-first century.

One of the major changes brought about by the inclusion of women and people of color in

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the academy is the degree to which difference is not abstracted from the individual but carried in his or her body, often a marker for a powerful sense of identity. This has posed a fundamental challenge to the ideal of disinterested debate. Where is the line between an abstract debate over the merits of affirmative action and the implication that a particular group of people, possibly including the professor, should not be in the classroom having the debate? Free discussion has probably never been easy, but it has become very difficult today, closed sometimes by outside political forces, by both racism and so-called political correctness, and by disrespect. While freedom is absolutely essential to higher education and to the exercise of vigilance required by democracy, freedom must be exercised with respect toward all members of society.

The political philosophy associated with the republican form of government in Western societies has always emphasized the need to remain vigilant against the power of the state. One of its chief spokespersons today, Philip Pettit, redefines freedom as non-domination to connect the personal, the interpersonal, and the political. Contestation, understood as a relational participation in a collective group process, is essential. “Freedom as non-domination,” Pettit writes,

supports a conception of democracy under which contestability takes the place usually given to consent; what is of primary importance is not that government does what the people tells it but, on pain of arbitrariness, that people can always contest whatever it is that government does. (1997, ix)

Implicit in this is the fact that citizens must know what a government is doing in order to be able to contest it or to protect themselves against abuses of power.

A college is like a small republic, a space where we should be able to practice the kinds of contestation and vigilance that maintain and support freedom as non-domination, that model this kind of vigilance for our students, and that strengthen our ability to participate critically in the politics of the state.

On the other hand, speaking out in opposition to the state’s policies or to the established position in one’s field or to any kind of power structure is not necessarily pleasant. It may entail being responded to with dismissal or

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hostility. However, this is what Pettit is getting at in defining freedom as non-domination. If you know that speaking out according to your conscience or your analysis of a situation means you will be shunned for doing so, are you free or not? There is evidence on campuses across the country that some faculty and students feel that they cannot express their views because they are too solidly opposed by the majority view.

There is also evidence that sometimes when people do speak out they feel crushed by the response. And often that response is not a direct engagement with the point but a communal sense of outrage that the speaker has violated some unspoken code of politeness or niceness. Shunning and dismissal are extremely damaging non-responses. They effectively remove the person they are aimed at from the community, hence taking away freedom understood as *civitas* or participation in the discourse and action of the *res publica*. Although often done in the name of politeness, that kind of dismissal or negation of a person's actuality, his or her belonging, is politely vicious. It is often done to people who don't fit in because they are different in some way, whether in their sense of manners or their cultural background or their politics.

While vigilance and contestation are essential to freedom in Pettit's view, so is some

identification with the common good, with the need to promote liberty for all. Pettit argues, in relation to the concerns of marginalized groups, that when freedom is defined as non-domination, the common good has to mean that no member of society "can achieve it fully for themselves without its being achieved for all members: no member can hope to achieve it fully for themselves except so far as membership of the group ceases to be a badge of vulnerability" (1997, 259). He is not promoting a liberal notion of color-blindness or a giving up of particular identities. Instead, he is arguing that people have shifting and partial identifications and that they need the capacity to identify *in part* with the common good of the whole society—though not to relinquish their own racial or gendered or regional identities. So civility does not mean being nice and polite; it means participating in and valuing the collective group, the common good; most importantly, it means believing that everyone's full and equal freedom to participate must be actively supported and protected.

This may seem like a realistic goal, but it is nonetheless a challenging one. It is easy to practice freedom as non-interference. You don't have to listen; you don't have to do anything. Practicing freedom as non-domination asks more of us, but it also promises a higher level of well-being for the collective group.

Our highest professional duty, the ethical commitment most essential to our mission as educators, is to create and maintain a climate on campus that goes beyond a silent and silencing, begrudging tolerance of a diversity of views and is instead a climate of respectful engagement. If we do not—if we cannot—model the method we endorse, we can hardly lament its absence in society at large.

Because ideas are passions for teachers and scholars, differences are often engaged passionately in the academy. But one person's "passion" may be another person's aggression. One person's enjoyment of vigorous argument or debate may be experienced as intimidation by other people. The sine qua non of deliberative dialogue is to create a climate of engagement where passion and respect are mutually reinforcing. Certainly there is a place in serious, respectful dialogue for passion, for ardent expression, for pointed criticism, sometimes even for anger. Colleges and universities should be communities that are able to model modes of dialogue and deliberation, modes of respectful conflict resolution, modes of public debate that productively draw upon diversity to achieve more complex understanding. These are communities situated within the context of a larger society sorely in need of positive models, and we could do no better than to graduate students who have developed their capacities for respectful dialogue on critical issues, especially with others who think differently.

### Conclusion

We expect members of our community to be passionate about ideas; in fact, we would be troubled if they were not. But passion and commitment serve our purpose only to the extent that they promote lively engagement, not shut it down, and to the extent that they foster compelling expression, not impede the capacity to listen. To this end, we must continue both to defend the campus as a place of free inquiry and exchange and to encourage modes of discourse that respect the basic human dignity of all engaged in its mission.

If education for citizenship is indeed a goal of American higher education, students have to learn both how to locate themselves, to think critically about their own positionalities, and how to engage various other perspectives on the issues they seek to understand and to

judge. And this need for multiple perspectives as the grounds of a global epistemology is also the most basic argument for diversity in liberal education. The curriculum can represent diverse points of view, but that is not enough. Precisely because the world looks different from different vantage points, the students and faculty who comprise a campus need to have different life experiences and different social locations that they can bring to the table in a collaborative or dialogic process of knowledge creation. They also need to get outside the campus, to gather perspectives from the local communities, the nation, and from other parts of the world, and then to subject those triangulations to interpretation and evaluation. This method of inquiry will be both the basis of and the actual process of an ethics of global citizenship. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the authors' names on the subject line.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of a lecture presented at Roanoke College in October 2004 and subsequently published in the *Roanoke College Journal*.
- <sup>2</sup> The ideas in this section are developed more fully in our article "Peripheral Visions: Towards a Geo-ethics of Citizenship."

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