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Values Education and the Future of Our Colleges and Universities

Eric Bain-Selbo
Recent books like Frank Donoghue’s *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* and Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* have painted a bleak picture of the possible future of higher education. Donoghue’s dystopic and frighteningly convincing account presents us with the prospect of two systems of higher education—an elite, liberal arts education for the few and a largely vocational and diminished education for the masses. While Nussbaum champions America’s tradition of liberal education, she nevertheless offers us an equally cautionary tale. If guided solely by economic interests and concerns, she predicts the slow but steady decline of liberal education in the United States—with devastating consequences for our democracy and our citizens.

We already are seeing some of this future unfold in the stripping down of General Education programs and the dramatic rise of for-profit universities that often stress vocational training to the detriment of all other educational goals. The ever-present consumerist ethos turns higher education into a mere means to an end, with the mighty dollar becoming the measure of all goods. In the current environment, it can be difficult to talk about values education at our colleges and universities let alone work those values into our curricula and pedagogy. But if we fail to be explicit about the values at the very core of liberal education, if we fail to infuse those values into our work in the classroom and the residence halls and our board rooms, then we not only fail in our mission as educators but we fail our democracy and citizens as well. In this paper I will focus on the values of justice (economic, social, and political) and equality (including equality of opportunity, such as high quality college education for all qualified Americans). These values encompass other values like sympathy, generosity, and tolerance—values central to a democracy and to the good life of its citizens.

Of course, some folks think the teaching of these kinds of values are not the proper subject matter for an undergraduate education. The “poster child” so to speak for the elimination of moral and civic values in higher education is Stanley Fish. While he supports *academic* or *intellectual* values (as he understands these), he nevertheless criticizes the promotion of values like democracy and citizenship in higher education. He urges educators to do their jobs, don’t do other people’s jobs, and don’t let other people do your job. One thing that is *not* our job is to inculcate values in our students—at least not moral or civic values. Fish argues that “teachers cannot, except for a serendipity that by definition cannot be counted on, fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper. Or, rather, they cannot do these things unless they abandon the responsibilities that belong to them by contract in order to take
up responsibilities that belong properly to others.”¹ So what are our responsibilities? That is an easy question to answer for Fish. College and university teachers can (legitimately) do two things, introduce students to the knowledge of our disciplines and train them in the analytical skills to conduct research.² To teach anything else simply gets in the way or takes up the time that otherwise should be spent teaching what we are supposed to teach. Fish believes that attempting to teach students what is civically or morally responsible can only end in indoctrination. He argues that such indoctrination ultimately is arbitrary, since it “is performed in the service of the values favored by whomever is doing the indoctrinating.”³ We can objectively study values (he calls this “academicizing”), but we shouldn’t promote any other values than those intrinsic to the academic enterprise. It is little wonder then that colleges and universities that promote civic or moral values sometimes run afoul of legislators and the public, for these constituencies often see these institutions as going (illegitimately) outside the bounds of their responsibilities.

“It is a question finally of what business we are in,” he concludes, “and we are in the education business, not the democracy business. Democracy, we must remember, is a political not an educational project.”⁴ If we focus on the tasks appropriate to our job and defend the value of those tasks as such (in other words, not because they make for good citizens or increase the productivity of our state or any other external aim), then we will be more successful at protecting the intellectual values of higher education from the intrusion of others—like pesky trustees or state legislators. In other words, we will be better prepared to prevent others from wanting to come in and do our jobs. If our job is to inculcate values, then just about anyone can do that job. In other words, the expert on the literary criticism of the Victorian novel can claim a monopoly on teaching that subject, but cannot make the same claim in regard to teaching values.

Fish puts forth a powerful and compelling position—one shared undoubtedly by many faculty members across the country. And I certainly applaud his staunch defense of the intellectual values of higher education against those who really don’t know much about what we do.⁵ However, I think he is wrong and his argument fails not only our democracy, but higher education as well. Many people have identified the confusions and inconsistencies in Fish’s argument.⁶ For my part, I find at least five key problems. First, Fish essentializes the task of higher education. If you believe Fish, it seems to me that you must accept some kind of Platonic form of higher education in which its essential nature is to teach content of particular knowledge spheres and to train students in particular skills of interpretation and analysis. But higher education is not essentially anything. It is a social construct that we can will to do whatever we like. Second, the neat

¹ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.
² He states: “(1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills—of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over” (Fish, *Save the World*, 12-13).
³ Fish, *Save the World*, 68.
⁴ Fish, *Save the World*, 71.
⁵ To such individuals or groups Fish says: “We do what we do, we’ve been doing it for a long time, it has its own history, and until you learn it or join it, your opinions are not worth listening to” (Fish, *Save the World*, 165-6).
⁶ For a good discussion of these general issues and Fish’s work (including a response by him), see *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
compartmentalization of tasks across institutions in a society (universities do two specific tasks, with, we suppose, churches, government, families, and more all having their own specific and different tasks) is inadequate to the reality around us. Institutions in our society are engaged in many different but overlapping tasks. Third, Fish’s position can lead to some pretty counterintuitive if not non-sensical positions. For example, Fish agrees with a critic who claims that Fish’s position would prohibit a faculty member in the South in the 1950s from denouncing segregation. According to Fish, such a faculty member would have been wrong to “co-opt” the classroom to promote a political position on an ongoing political and legal issue in his or her society. Fish’s position can lead to some pretty counterintuitive if not non-sensical positions. For example, Fish agrees with a critic who claims that Fish’s position would prohibit a faculty member in the South in the 1950s from denouncing segregation. According to Fish, such a faculty member would have been wrong to “co-opt” the classroom to promote a political position on an ongoing political and legal issue in his or her society. Fish’s position can lead to some pretty counterintuitive if not non-sensical positions. For example, Fish agrees with a critic who claims that Fish’s position would prohibit a faculty member in the South in the 1950s from denouncing segregation. According to Fish, such a faculty member would have been wrong to “co-opt” the classroom to promote a political position on an ongoing political and legal issue in his or her society. Fish’s position can lead to some pretty counterintuitive if not non-sensical positions. For example, Fish agrees with a critic who claims that Fish’s position would prohibit a faculty member in the South in the 1950s from denouncing segregation. According to Fish, such a faculty member would have been wrong to “co-opt” the classroom to promote a political position on an ongoing political and legal issue in his or her society. Fish’s position can lead to some pretty counterintuitive if not non-sensical positions. For example, Fish agrees with a critic who claims that Fish’s position would prohibit a faculty member in the South in the 1950s from denouncing segregation. According to Fish, such a faculty member would have been wrong to “co-opt” the classroom to promote a political position on an ongoing political and legal issue in his or her society.

Fourth, Fish (like most people arguing from an essentialist position) provides us with an either/or choice that is patently false. We need to teach content and skills, but doing such does not exclude the teaching and promotion of values that are critical to our democracy. Fish claims, “agendas imported into the classroom from foreign venues do not enrich the pedagogical task, but overwhelm it and erode its constitutive distinctiveness.” There undoubtedly are cases where such “overwhelming” and “eroding” occur and Fish provides anecdotes to support his case, but he hardly comes close to providing compelling data to support this claim. And there is no reason to assume that civic education is either imported “from foreign venues” (whatever that means) or necessarily “overwhelms” and “erodes” other academic aims or values.

Let me expand on this connection between higher education and democracy. If we lived in a healthy democracy in which other institutions effectively trained us for citizenship and effectively established just and productive relationships, I perhaps could live with Fish’s position. But we do not live in such a democracy nor do we have such effective institutions—and there is increasing evidence of this fact. Who is teaching our young people the critical skills and capacities that promote a healthy democracy? Fish claims that saving the world is not the faculty member’s job. Why not? It’s as if Fish is the cook on a sinking boat who, when asked to help bail out the ship, replies “But that’s not my job.” In other words, if not the chef, if not us, then who? As Cornel West says, there “is a deeply troubling deterioration of democratic powers in America today.” He wonders if perhaps we are entering a “postdemocratic” age, and concludes that “the great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy.” How are citizen-soldiers going to be prepared for this battle? Why should higher education not help to train them?

One need not look far to see the deteriorating condition of our democracy, and there is plenty of social science research to confirm what we are seeing all around us. Robert Putnam’s groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* details the decline of civic engagement, and thus the decline of democracy, in the United States. Published in 2000, Putnam concludes that “Americans are playing virtually every aspect of the civic game less frequently today than we did two decades ago.” The data indicate that during the first two thirds of the 20th century,

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7 Fish, *Save the World*, 29.
8 Fish, *Save the World*, 169.
Americans were increasingly involved in civic life, and that in the last third they slowly became less and less involved.\textsuperscript{11} Putnam considers a number of factors that help to explain this phenomenon, but perhaps the most important are the advent of television culture and rampant consumerism—cornerstones of today’s popular culture. Television served and continues to serve as an anchor that tethers us to our homes—joined now by our computers and home entertainment centers. Putnam notes that between 1965 and 1995 Americans gained approximately six hours of leisure time in their weekly schedule and devoted almost all of it to watching television.\textsuperscript{12} Husbands and wives spend six to seven times as much time watching television as they spend “in community activities outside the home.”\textsuperscript{13} In short, we are very private citizens—more private than we have been for a long time.\textsuperscript{14}

Another cause in the decline of civic engagement is the rampant consumerism of our culture, in which we increasingly are identified more by what we own than by our relationships to other people. Individuals increasingly are focused on the pursuit of wealth and the consumer products that it can purchase.\textsuperscript{15} Little time may be left for engaging with one another to solve community problems.

Television and consumerism lead to a decline in social connectedness, and thus a decline in social capital—the resource that is critical not only to solving community problems but for creating communities where people can thrive. Putnam shows that children are better educated, that neighborhoods are safer, that economic prosperity is higher and more equally distributed, that children and adults are healthier, and that people generally are happier in communities with high social capital (i.e., where people are more socially connected). One consequence of this deterioration of civic life is that we’re not nearly as happy and healthy as we should or could be. Putnam cites evidence that indicates that the “younger you are, the worse things have gotten over the last decades of the twentieth century in terms of headaches, indigestion, sleeplessness, as well as general satisfaction with life and even likelihood of taking your own life.” While he cannot attribute all of these negative indicators to the “generational decline in social connectedness,” there are good reasons to make such an attribution.\textsuperscript{16}

So a thriving democracy, which is only possible through active and effective civic engagement by everyone, is not just some theoretical aim or good. It literally is good for us—good for our bodies and our souls. So the values of good citizenship are worth teaching and inculcating in our students—for their good and for ours. And in this period of great crisis in our democracy, our colleges and universities cannot sit idly by.

Let’s take it a step further. Putnam makes the case that the more social capital there is the more social equality there tends to be, and the more social equality there is the more easily social capital can be generated—a cycle that leads to stronger communities.

\textsuperscript{11} Putnam, \textit{Bowling}, 183.
\textsuperscript{12} Putnam, \textit{Bowling}, 222-3.
\textsuperscript{13} Putnam, \textit{Bowling}, 224.
\textsuperscript{14} And this move to a more private existence impacts other activities. Even when we are engaged politically, it increasingly is an individual act performed out of our home (e.g., signing an online petition) rather than a communal act in which we are face-to-face with other people. See Putnam, \textit{Bowling}, 229.
\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps the best work on this phenomenon is Juliet Schor’s \textit{The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need} (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).
\textsuperscript{16} Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone}, 263, 265.
and healthier and happier citizens. In their book *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett draw upon an amazing wealth of data and studies to show that social *inequality* has negative impacts on a wide range of social and personal problems, including community life and social relations, mental health, drug use, physical health and life expectancy, educational achievement, teenage pregnancy, violence and crime, and social mobility. The thrust of the book is that these negative impacts are less dependent on a population’s average income (at least in developed countries) than it is on the *disparity* of incomes across economic classes. And these impacts cut across all economic classes. Social inequality is bad for us—rich and poor. Social equality is good for us—rich and poor.

So, should justice and equality simply be studied as Fish would have us do? Or should they be studied and encouraged? Should justice and equality be interesting topics for analysis in some idealistically objective classroom? Or should they be analyzed and promoted? As with all the democratic values identified earlier, I choose the “both/and” option—study and encourage, analyze and promote.

Given the failure of too many other institutions to inculcate the values of citizenship (particularly social and economic justice and genuine equality), is it appropriate for higher education—an institution through which an increasing number of our citizens pass—to simply ignore the situation and assume our values crisis will just work itself out? Obviously, higher education should not and cannot ignore the situation. So the question is not a matter of whether or not we need to infuse our campuses and classrooms with a renewed values conversation (we already know that to be the case). If higher education is not in the business of inculcating democratic values, then it fails our society. But it also fails itself, because it simply will become a means to economic ends (for example, the Gross National Product, high salaries, etc.)—ends that are not inherently wrong but nevertheless can run afoul of our deeper democratic aspirations.

So how can we effectively talk with our faculty and administrators about the need for a concerted values discussion?

First, we need to share with other folks the research that shows that our declining civic engagement, the increasing absence of democratic values in our society, not only means that we end up with crappy politicians but that we end up with diminished lives.

Second, we need to share a narrative about higher education that is different from the dominant value-free, scientific paradigm. The value-free college or university is far from the norm. In fact, we might even say it is a historical oddity. There certainly is a strong case for learning for its own sake—for the value of education regardless of its other consequence, whether for society or for one’s personal income. Few if any...
significant theorists of higher education, however, make a hard and fast (and false) split between intellectual and moral values—the kind of split that Fish and many of our colleagues so naively accept. We need to emphasize that there are competing narratives about the nature and role of higher education. As progressive educators committed to the infusion of democratic values in higher education, we must know our narrative and our

(Newman, *Idea*, 85) and that the “object” and “mission” of the university is “intellectual culture” (Newman, *Idea*, 92). I agree. But Newman also argues—an aspect of his work that Fish and others often neglect—that university education has practical and social effects (see his discussion of the “good” of education in section 5 of Discourse VII). He argues: “If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society” (Newman, *Idea*, 125). Indeed, what Newman describes in the following passage is a varied collection of civic skills.

It [Liberal Education] shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself; he is ever ready, yet never in the way; he is a pleasant companion, and a comrade you can depend upon; he knows when to be serious and when to trifle, and he has a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and to be serious with effect. (Newman, *Idea*, 126)

So Newman does not present us with an either/or choice for higher education—either learning for its own sake or learning merely in the service of other ends—but recognizes the mutual and complementary relationship between education and the social good. John Dewey carried such an argument into the 20th century. Of course, he is much more of a proponent than Newman of the progressive, democratic aspects of education. As he says, “It is the aim of progressive education [the only education worth doing] to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (*Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 119-120). For Dewey, education (higher or otherwise) necessarily has a political dimension and necessarily shapes our social, economic and political lives. So, “the problem is not whether the schools should participate in the production of a future society (since they do so anyway) but whether they should do it blindly and irresponsibly or with the maximum possible of courageous intelligence and responsibility” (*Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), 692). This problem is not going to be solved by chance, but requires the concerted attention and effort of a wide range of social institutions—including our educational institutions, from elementary schools through universities.

The kind of progressive educational philosophy advocated by Dewey also is found in more contemporary works. For example, Paulo Freire and bell hooks argue for a vision of education as liberatory praxis. In addition, philosopher Martha Nussbaum has made the case for the social and political benefits of education (particularly higher education) in works like *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) and her new book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010). In the latter work, she identifies our current situation as a critical crossroads:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance. (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 2)
tradition in order to combat one-sided accounts of higher education like those of Fish and others.

Third, we need to have folks read their institutional mission statements and then hold the faculty and administration accountable for it. University mission statements often are subject to ridicule, but they also embody the highest aims of the institution. They generally are more conducive to our objectives than they are to the mundane (though legitimate) concerns of students and parents that the university provide credentialing services in order to lead to a good job and high salary.

Western Kentucky University, my home institution, has been a leader in higher education on issues of civic engagement. This is reflected clearly in some of the language found in the institution’s Mission Statement, in which the university accepts responsibility “for stewarding a high quality of life throughout its region.” This is not simply an educational aim or wise political position, it is a commitment to a particular value.21

Recent years have seen the development and implementation of a commitment on the part of the institution to be a “regional steward,” affirming our responsibility to the area in which our teaching and learning occur and to the people of the area who experience the impact of our institution in their lives (economically, politically, etc.). The WKU commitment to stewardship entails educating our students to be stewards in their own right. They are the ones who will live and lead in our southern Kentucky region. If they are to be stewards of their communities, they will need not only knowledge of particular content areas and skills of analysis, they will need particular civic skills and values. As a co-founder and current co-director of WKU’s Institute for Citizenship and Social Responsibility, I think we effectively have brought these elements of the mission statement to the fore—challenging both faculty and administrators to live up to them.22

Finally, we need to appeal to faculty and administrator interest. Most if not all educators have social or political concerns about which they are passionate. Finding out what these are, particularly through one-on-one conversations (in other words, through organizing techniques) can help in bringing colleagues into the kind of work in which we are engaged. Many of these people originally went into higher education with the idea that it makes a positive contribution to the democracy of our country and to the world. In other words, they thought and perhaps continue to think that higher education makes our society better—not just that it makes private lives better. Yet, many of them will be hard-pressed to explain exactly how their teaching or work with students produces that impact. Their answers often are vague at best. We can challenge our colleagues to be more explicit and intentional about the social and political impact of their work. In other words, we need to challenge faculty and administrators about the big picture. Why do we do what we do? What is the ultimate point of the existence of colleges and universities? How does higher education fit in to the big picture that includes our individual pursuits, the collective good, and the global village? Such questions necessarily bring us to a

21 In the university’s Statement of Purpose, the institution elaborates on this commitment when it claims that its faculty will “contribute to the identification and solution of key social, economic, scientific, health, and environmental problems within its reach, but particularly throughout its primary service area.”

22 I would add one more note here. As a public institution in Kentucky, I believe we can make a special appeal to our state lawmakers in regard to the democratic function of education. Our commonwealth has a vested interest in having its educational institutions produce effective citizens. Thus, in fulfilling our mission statement, I believe we also meet our responsibility to the leaders and the taxpayers of Kentucky.
conversation about values—values that are critical to our pedagogy and our educational missions.

In conclusion, we need to begin a vigorous debate about values education on our campuses and we must win that debate. Higher education must be a vehicle for the teaching and promotion of democratic values in a culture increasingly dominated only by economic and consumer values and where democracy is crumbling all around us. If higher education does not teach and promote democratic values, then it simply will continue to be co-opted in the service of economic interests and a culture industry that has profit as its primary end and that treats citizens as only consumers. And if we are a nation of only consumers, then both higher education and democracy are greatly endangered.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{23} An excellent treatment of this issue can be found in Benjamin Barber’s \textit{Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).