Values Education and the Future of Our Colleges and Universities

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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. Even more, we put the very survival of liberal education at risk.

When I refer to values education, I have in mind those values that bind us together as a community locally and nationally and that put us in the best position possible to live a prosperous and fulfilling life. I have in mind the values of justice (economic, social, and political) and equality (including equality of opportunity, such as high quality college education for all qualified Americans). Justice and equality encompass other values like sympathy, generosity, and tolerance—values central to a democracy and to the good life of its citizens.

Of course, many people think the teaching of these kinds of values are not the proper subject matter for an undergraduate education. On many campuses, values education has become an object of cynical derision at worst and, at best, something we pay homage to in our institutional mission statements, cover in a single course that we force students to take, or leave

3 Research indicates that when the focus is on vocational training, higher goals of critical thinking and assessment fall by the wayside. See Rethinking Teaching in Higher Education: From a Course Design Workshop to a Faculty Development Framework, edited by Alenoushi Saroyan and Cheryl Amundsen (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2004), 60.
up to those folks in student affairs or residence life. 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.”

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. 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 civicly 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.”

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 outside the bounds of their responsibilities.

“It is a question finally of what business we are in,” Fish concludes, “and we are in the education business, not the democracy business. Democracy, we must remember, is a political not an educational project.” 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 it. In other words, the expert on the literary criticism of the Victorian novel can claim a monopoly on teaching about the Victorian novel, but cannot make the same claim in regard to teaching values.

Fish puts forth a powerful and compelling argument—establishing a position shared by many faculty members across the country and by many critics of higher education. 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. However, I think he is wrong and his argument fails not only our democracy, but higher education as well.

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4 Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.
5 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).
6 Fish, *Save the World*, 68.
7 Fish, *Save the World*, 71.
8 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).
Many people have identified the confusions and inconsistencies in Fish’s argument.\(^9\) In my view, I find at least five key problems with a position like his, and I think working through these problems can help us in thinking about our work in higher education in our particular social and political climate.

First, such a position 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. And we should be pragmatic enough to build and shape higher education in order to address our current needs.

Second, a position like Fish’s ignores the rich history of educational theory that grapples with questions of social or civic values, a history that resists any essentializing move. Fish engages in historical “cherry picking” to defend his position. On closer examination, however, we find that his ideal of a value-free college or university (fundamentally drawing from a scientific paradigm of knowledge) is far from the norm. In fact, we might even say it is a historical oddity.\(^10\) There certainly is a strong case for learning for its own sake—for the value of education regardless of its other consequences, 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.

In the 19th century, John Henry Newman famously and valiantly defended the ideal of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, education as its own end. Fish, in fact, quotes Newman approvingly. Newman says of knowledge that it is “valuable for what its very presence in us does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end.”\(^11\) He adds that “there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does” and that the “object” and “mission” of the university is “intellectual culture.”\(^12\) 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.”\(^13\) 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

\(^9\) 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).


\(^12\) Newman, Idea, 85, 92.

\(^13\) Newman, Idea, 125.
and when to trifle, and he has a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and to be serious with effect.\textsuperscript{14}

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 20\textsuperscript{th} 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.”\textsuperscript{15} For Dewey, education (higher or otherwise) necessarily has a political dimension and necessarily shapes our social and economic 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.”\textsuperscript{16} Producing a just and meaningful future society 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, Martha Nussbaum has made the case for the social and political benefits of education (particularly higher education) in works like \textit{Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education}\textsuperscript{17} and the aforementioned \textit{Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities}. 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.\textsuperscript{18}

In his recently published \textit{Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities}, Mark C. Taylor likewise rejects the sharp dichotomy between intellectual inquiry and values education. He notes that “there are practical implications to the most theoretical inquiry, and therefore questions of value are unavoidable.”\textsuperscript{19} He also insists:

> Higher education . . . has a responsibility to serve the greater social good, and in today’s world this can be accomplished most effectively by cultivating informed

\textsuperscript{14} Newman, \textit{Idea}, 126.
\textsuperscript{18} Nussbaum, \textit{Not for Profit}, 2.
citizens who are aware of and open to different cultural perspectives and are willing to engage in reasonable debate about critical issues.\textsuperscript{20} In short, those of us engaged in the work of educating for democracy are inheritors of a rich tradition—one from which we can and should draw liberally.

My third criticism of any Fishy position is that the neat 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. Values education, education for democracy, certainly is not the sole purview of colleges and universities. But neither is it simply the task of families or churches or elementary schools. To borrow Fish’s language, it is everyone’s job.

Fourth, Fish’s position can lead to some counterintuitive if not non-sensical conclusions. 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 in the classroom. 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.\textsuperscript{21} Here, Fish turns cowardice into a courageous act. I’m not sure I need to say any more. At points like this, I think Fish becomes a caricature of himself.

Fifth and finally, Fish and those in his camp provide 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.”\textsuperscript{22} 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 defend his 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 briefly 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.”\textsuperscript{23} How are citizen-soldiers going to be prepared for this battle? Why should higher education not help to train them?

\textsuperscript{20} Taylor, \textit{Crisis}, 6.
\textsuperscript{21} Fish, \textit{Save the World}, 29.
\textsuperscript{22} Fish, \textit{Save the World}, 169.
Given the failure of too many other institutions to inculcate the values of citizenship (particularly social and economic justice and genuine equality), it is wrong 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.\(^{24}\) Higher education should not and cannot ignore the situation.\(^{25}\) If higher education is not in the business of inculcating democratic values, then it fails our students and our society. It simply becomes 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.

But here too is the vicious twist. When higher education neglects its role as an important institution that teaches and cultivates civic values, it sows the seeds of its own destruction. Here is where Fish is fundamentally wrong in regard to the politics and the future of higher education. He believes that values education is destructive of the educational project—that it ultimately will be the undoing of liberal education. My claim is the opposite. Without values education, we increasingly will see the disappearance of anything that resembles the educational project—at least the one in the classical liberal education tradition.

Let’s face it. Students generally can find all the knowledge they ever need to know in their pockets. Everything is here [hold up cell phone]. The worldwide web and instant access to information is fundamentally changing the nature of higher education and the role of the faculty member. No longer are faculty needed to provide content for students. They can provide content, but the web makes them redundant in this regard. And online, for-profit universities can provide that content much more efficiently and cheaply than can your stereotypical faculty member in a physical classroom. This situation is why Taylor, in the aforementioned Crisis on Campus, predicts that either colleges and universities and their faculties will change, or they will die.\(^{26}\) So what can we do? Taylor argues that the future of higher education will focus on the ways that faculty can facilitate students in their efforts to distinguish good from bad information, to relate information from different disciplines to each other, to ask critical questions and analyze information, and to apply information in changing circumstances. And, I would add, the role of the faculty in a society like ours is to help our students to use information and their developing critical and analytic skills in the service of values central to achieving a good life (including serious reflection about what constitutes a good life) and preserving our democracy.

Of course, many of our colleagues at our home institutions are apt to ask: What is the big deal? Does it really matter if values education continues to be squeezed out of the curriculum? Well, if by “really matters” they mean relative to the history and size of the universe, then of course not. Even in the history of our tiny planet it does not “really matter.” We can continue down the path to Donoghue’s dystopic vision. We can continue to emphasize vocational training to prepare another generation of workers for relatively meaningless lives of consumption, disposal, and re-consumption. We can continue to live alone together, with more and more of the most important decisions about our lives left in the hands of national and transnational corporations and the political “leaders” that they buy. We can continue to define ourselves as

\(^{24}\)Zygmunt Bauman makes a compelling case in a number of works why we shouldn’t simply leave it up to the dominant consumer culture to straighten out our democracy.

\(^{25}\)I think it is important to keep in mind this point from Ruth W. Grant: “students arrive on campus with the most important tasks of character formation already completed. They are not blank slates or balls of putty. In fact, many of them are already better people than many of us will ever be” (Kiss and Euben, Debating Moral Education, 286.

workers and consumers, but increasingly never as citizens. We can continue to do all these things, but let us at least open our eyes and see that this is what we are doing.

Values education in our colleges and universities—on its own—will not prevent a dystopic future. Values education begins in our families, our churches, and our elementary schools. It begins in our earliest communities. But values education in our colleges and universities cannot hurt. And at this critical time in our culture’s history, we cannot sit idly by. David Hoekema, a past President of the Society for Values in Higher Education, writes:

The absence of any effective ethical content in the university curriculum may produce a future generation of parents and corporate leaders who are no better prepared or qualified to solve the urgent problems of the day than physicians would be to perform surgery if they had learned medicine from their friends and conferred their own diplomas.27

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.28

Appendix

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.”29 The data indicate that during the first two thirds of the 20th century, Americans were increasingly involved in civic life, and that in the last third they slowly became less and less involved.30

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.31 Husbands and wives spend six to seven times as much time watching television as

28 An excellent treatment of this issue can be found in Benjamin Barber’s Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).
30 Putnam, Bowling, 183.
31 Putnam, Bowling, 222-3.
they spend “in community activities outside the home.” In short, we are very private citizens—more private than we have been for a long time.

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. 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). So the deterioration of civic life leads us to be less happy and less healthy than 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.

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 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.

33 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, *Bowling*, 229.
34 Perhaps the best work on this phenomenon is Juliet Schor’s *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).
36 Putnam notes that the generations that lived through the Great Depression and World War II experienced a great leveling in economic terms. These generations also were some of the most civically engaged in our nation’s history (Putnam, *Bowling*, 271).