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Winning the Values Debate and the Future of Higher Education

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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 and particularly the humanities. We already are seeing some of that future unfold in the stripping down of General Education programs and the dramatic rise of for-profit universities that stress vocational training above all other educational goals. In this brief paper, the author argues that reclaiming and winning the values discussion on our campuses will be critical in reversing some dangerous trends in higher education—trends that threaten to forever alter the character of American higher education. The values that need to be championed are both intellectual (the value of knowledge as its own end) and democratic (the value of education for justice and social responsibility). These values are not necessarily in opposition, as some people suppose. But they are in opposition to consumerist values that view education as a means to personal consumption and, subsequently, a mere cog in the economic system.

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 disturbing 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. 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. General Education programs are shrinking and being weakened. The dramatic rise of for-profit universities too often stress vocational training to the detriment of all other educational goals. In the current environment, it can be difficult to talk about values education at our colleges and universities—values like justice (economic, social, and political) and equality (including equality of opportunity in higher education). It is even harder to work these values into our curricula and pedagogy. After all, what do such values have to do with getting a high-paying job and buying a big screen, high-definition television? But if we fail to be explicit about such values, if we fail to infuse such 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.

Of course, some folks think the teaching of these kind 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. For Fish, the job of college and university teachers includes two objectives, introduce

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1 Such values encompass other important values for our democracy, such as sympathy, generosity, and tolerance.
2 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. He argues: “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” (Save the World on Your Own Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14).
students to the knowledge of our disciplines and train them in the analytical skills to conduct research. To teach anything else is to fail to do our job. “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.” 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.

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. 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

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3 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).

4 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” (Fish, Save the World, 68). 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 see higher education as going (illegitimately) outside the bounds of its responsibilities.

5 Fish, Save the World, 71.

6 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).
inconsistencies in Fish’s argument, but I want to highlight this connection between higher education and democracy.\(^7\)

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.” But if not the cook, if not us, then who?\(^8\)

\(^7\) 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 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 nonsensical 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, *Save the World*, 29). 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 that “agendas imported into the classroom from foreign venues do not enrich the pedagogical task, but overwhelm it and erode its constitutive distinctiveness” (Fish, *Save the World*, 169). 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. For other good responses to Fish, see the essays by xxx in *Debating Moral Education*.

\(^8\) 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” (*Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, New York: Penguin Books, 2004, 2, 8, 22). 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.\(^9\) The data indicate that during the first two thirds of the 20\(^{th}\) century, Americans were increasingly involved in civic life, and that in the last third they slowly became less and less involved.\(^{10}\)

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.\(^{11}\) In short, we have become very private citizens—more private than we have been for a long time.\(^{12}\)

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


\(^{10}\) Putnam, *Bowling*, 183.

\(^{11}\) Putnam, *Bowling*, 222-3. He adds that husbands and wives spend six to seven times as much time watching television as they spend “in community activities outside the home” (Putnam, *Bowling*, 224).

\(^{12}\) 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.
wealth and the consumer products that it can purchase. Little time may be left for engaging with one another to solve community problems.

Where there is a decline in social connectedness, there also is 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. 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 they are values that counter the dominant consumerist ethos and can save our democracy while saving ourselves.

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 *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett draw upon an amazing wealth of data and studies to show that social inequality

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13 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).

14 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 (Putnam, *Bowling*, 263, 265).

15 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).
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. 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? I choose the “both/and” option—study and encourage, analyze and promote.

Given the failure of too many other institutions to teach the values of citizenship (particularly social and economic justice and genuine equality), it is obvious that higher education should not and cannot ignore the situation. So the question is not whether 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 instilling 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 counter to our deeper democratic aspirations.

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16 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.
17 And by values, I don’t mean how to be a gentleman on a date or whether or not we should abstain from drinking. While these may be worthy values, they hardly get to the heart of our democracy.
In conclusion, 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 only as consumers. And if we are a nation of only consumers, then both higher education and democracy are greatly endangered.\textsuperscript{18}

\footnote{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).}