



The Ideal of Liberal Learning vs. Academia Today

The ideal of liberal learning is among the most noble, the most beautiful, that has ever been thought. Though never perfected, it was an ideal toward which generations of academics strove.

Academia was always supposed to be a place devoted to “the disinterested pursuit of truth and knowledge,” a place where prejudice is subordinated to reason, wishful thinking to the demands of logic and a cultivated sensibility.

And because it is *the pursuit* of truth — and not Truth itself — for which a “higher education” prepares students, a liberal arts education, then, has always been interpreted, at least in part, as an education in certain types of *habits*, excellences of character or *virtues* without which the pursuit could never get under way. In pursuing truth, students (and teacher alike) cultivate the virtues needed to pursue truth.



In short, liberal learning is designed to produce a certain type of person — a person who, to put it in the terms in which the educated of the 18th century described it, could effortlessly navigate his way around “the conversable world.” A liberal arts education, that is, is an education into a conversation between the many academic voices — disciplines — that have defined and, in ways yet unbeknownst to us, will continue to define Western civilization.

Yet one disposition that is indispensable to this quest for truth is a particular orientation toward time. More exactly, liberal learning presupposes partiality toward the past and the present: To be “conversable,” to be conversant in the inheritance of his civilization, the educated person obviously needs to know its past. However, beyond this — well beyond this — he needs to genuinely appreciate his ancestors, for there can be no conversation with those toward whom one is contemptuous or dismissive. If his reverence may be too much for his ancestors to ask of him, his honor is not, for in paying them with this coin, the educated person humbles himself — an act in the absence of which he can hope to learn nothing.

The present is also of value for the educated person, for the pursuit of truth, this conversation across the generations, is not valued on account of anything other than its own intrinsic pleasures: It is delightful, even exhilarating, in itself.

How things have changed.

Whether today’s academic trains students for the labor force or for political activism, the point is that, all too frequently, students are supplied with a *training* — not an *education*. And whether it is for the



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on November 15, 2013

sake of making money or saving the world, this training focuses on — indeed, is obsessed with — *the future*. The past is either neglected or disdained, and the present is viewed as, at best, an unavoidable steppingstone to future bliss; at worst, a hindrance to be surmounted.

The great tragedy to have befallen our times is that liberal arts programs throughout the West have succumbed to this love for the future (at the cost of marginalizing the past and the present). But here, for the most part, academics are interested in producing good little activists.

And what this amounts to is good little political leftists.

The University of Pennsylvania's Anthea Butler is beyond a classic textbook illustration of the activist academic. In fact, she's bordering on being a caricature.

This past summer, immediately following George Zimmerman's acquittal of the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, Butler — a professor of religious studies — blogged that God is "a white racist god with a problem." She added that "he is carrying a gun and stalking young black men."

Racism in America has its underpinnings in Christianity, Butler wrote, and "the good Christians of America" are "some" of the country's "biggest racists ... who clearly are not for human flourishing, no matter what ethnicity a person is." She likened Christians to the KKK and blamed Republicans such as Governor Rick Perry of Texas, the NRA, "capitalism," and the Koch brothers for bringing about Trayvon Martin's death.

Not long ago, Professor Butler was at it again.

According to Campus Reform, she tweeted that *the Republicans* had shut down the government for no reason other than that of Barack Obama's *race*.

Unlike Bill Clinton, our country's first "fake black president" under whom the last shutdown transpired, Obama is America's "first real black president" that the GOP has had to "mess with." Butler told her followers that they must "be blind to think race does not play into this stupidity." If only Republicans such as House Speaker John Boehner — whom Butler charged with being "drunk — "would quit trying to regulate vaginas they could practice governance."

Sadly, Butler is not at all atypical of today's academic. For this reason, perhaps like the Western world itself, academia — traditionally *the place* where students could engage in the unhindered pursuit of knowledge by learning how to become conversant in the modes of imagination that compose their civilization — will be destroyed from the inside.



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