



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on March 31, 2015

Who Trashes Liberal Arts?

An op-ed piece titled “Conservatives, Please Stop Trashing the Liberal Arts” appeared last week in the *Wall Street Journal*. But it is not conservatives who trashed the liberal arts.

Liberal professors have trashed the liberal arts, by converting so many liberal arts courses into indoctrination centers for left-wing causes and fads, instead of courses where students learn how to weigh conflicting views of the world for themselves. Now a professor of English, one of the most fad-ridden of the liberal arts today, blames conservative critics for the low esteem in which liberal arts are held.



Surely a professor of English cannot be unaware of how English departments, especially, have become hotbeds of self-indulgent, trendy fads such as trashing classic writings — using Shakespeare’s works as just another ideological playground for romping through with the current mantra of “race, class and gender.”

Surely he cannot be unaware of the many farces of the Modern Language Association that have made headlines. And when our English professor uses a phrase like “critical thinking,” he must be at least dimly aware of how often those words have been perverted to mean uncritical negativism toward traditional values and uncritical acceptance of glittering catchwords of the left, such as “diversity.”

Diversity of political ideas is not to be found on most college campuses, where the range of ideas is usually from the moderate left to the extreme left, and conservatives are rare as hen’s teeth among the faculty — especially in English departments. Academics who go ballistic about an “under-representation” of ethnic minorities in various other institutions are blissfully blind to the under-representation of conservatives among the professors they hire. On many campuses, students can go through all four years of college without ever hearing a conservative vision of the world, even from a visiting speaker.

The problem is not political, but educational. As John Stuart Mill pointed out, back in the 19th century, students must hear opposing views from people who actually believe them, not as presented by people who oppose them. In the 18th century, Edmund Burke warned against those who “teach the humours of the professor, rather than the principles of the science.”

During my years on the lecture circuit, I liked to go into college bookstores across the country and see how many of their courses assigned *The Federalist* among the books students were to buy, as compared to how many assigned *The Communist Manifesto* or other iconic writings on the left.

The Federalist is a classic, written by three of the men who were among those who wrote the Constitution of the United States. It is a book of profound thoughts, written in plain English, at a level aimed at the ordinary citizen.



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It might even be called *The Constitution for Dummies*. There are Supreme Court Justices who could benefit from reading it.

My survey of college bookstores across the country showed *The Communist Manifesto* virtually everywhere, often required reading in multiple courses — and *The Federalist* used virtually nowhere. Most college students will get only the left's uncritical negativism toward the American form of government, under the rubric of "critical thinking."

The liberal arts in theory could indeed make valuable contributions to the education of the young, as our English professor claims. But the liberal arts in practice have in fact done the opposite, not just in the United States but in other countries as well.

The history of the 20th century shows soft-subject students and their professors among the biggest supporters of extremist movements, both fascist and communist — the former in central and eastern Europe before World War II and the latter in countries around the world, both before and after that war.

Those who want liberal arts to be what they were supposed to be will have to profoundly change them from what they have become. Doing that will undoubtedly provoke more denunciations of critics for "trashing" the liberal arts by criticizing those who have in fact already trashed the liberal arts in practice.

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