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Who Owns Our Values? Back to School

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WHO OWNS OUR VALUES?

BACK to SCHOOL

Sixth in a series
of occasional papers from
John Strassburger, President

URSINUS COLLEGE
The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) has been sending the news media and college and university boards of trustees warnings about how higher education is "failing America." ACTA's recent fundraising appeal highlights—without identifying the speakers except by department and institution—comments apparently made on campuses that are at odds with its view of patriotism. Despite its stated purpose of defending "the unfettered life of the mind," whatever these speakers (now rendered anonymous) may have had in their minds is of no interest to ACTA beyond the sensational quotations.

Far more troubling than the random excerpts, however, is ACTA's own failure to examine with any thoroughness the real learning of students in college after college. I thought it might help to balance the picture if I were to report what life looks like from one classroom.

Let me add a little more about my perspective. For the first time in a decade, I taught freshmen this fall. The course I taught recently became a two-semester sequence required of all Ursinus first-year students. It has a common reading list for all and select "uncommon hours"—plays, concerts, a movie, and lectures that all of us attend together. After a summer participating in an intensive seminar studying the course readings with twenty-five of my colleagues (scientists, humanists, social scientists), this fall I faced sixteen new students—my section of CIE 1 (the Common Intellectual Experience).
The easiest way to describe the substance of the course is for me to relate how the students dealt with the events of September 2001. On September 13th I walked into my section of sixteen first-year students. That week we were supposed to be reading Plato’s *Euthyphro*. Clearly it was a traumatic and unsettled time for everyone, perhaps especially so for first-year students, including the son of a New York City firefighter. We had watched some of the attacks the previous Tuesday in class, in horror, together.

On Thursday, I decided to start, at least, with a conversation about the reading. The decision was fortuitous, but it was the students who made the class work. And in the process they gave me a glimpse of why liberal education is still so powerful, and in a democracy, so necessary. And equally important, the students that day reminded me of how much hope the graduates of our high schools afford us.

For that September class I hardly needed to formulate a first question. The first student to talk—articulate, always ready to test the rest of us—made the provocative statement that if anyone, bin Laden or anyone else, thought that God or the gods spoke to him, there was no way to prove otherwise. She was gently challenged by another who noted that in the dialogue, Socrates was saying that we need to analyze, we need to use our reason to measure and test what we think gods might be telling us. Since gods disagree and our understandings of them err, we should not just act without figuring things out for ourselves. It was easy to swing from those observations, however, to the competing notion that not everyone believes reason provides the ultimate answers.
Like any of our own best conversations, this one worked like a pendulum, students trying one side of the issue, then the other, with some overstatement, but with a willingness to listen to each other. Then, having cast the issue as a choice between believing in either revelation or reason, we did as we had done in previous classes: we turned to the reading, the only common ground we had.

In Plato’s dialogue, Socrates leads Euthyphro to understand that in the welter of conflicting messages gods might be sending, there are ways to evaluate each of them. In particular, he suggests that we should agree that the gods, or God, has decreed the value of families, and the naturalness of our love of our children, and our obvious desire to live in communities. And if we recognize these values as universal—the product of some divinity beyond our own powers—then acts which destroy children, or families, or community, cannot be undertaken simply and only as enacting the wishes of the gods, who cannot wish to destroy that which is essential to their creation. He makes a powerful case. Plato is not the last word, but for us at that moment, his words provided both succor and a shard of hope.
HOPE,
THE HEART OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

For all of us there is something inexplicable about the enormity of the September 11th tragedy. What offered hope to me was to be with a group of new college students and to join with them in reasoning toward a principle that can serve them, and me, in a whole jumble of intercultural conflicts from now on.

That hope is worth noting. As one of my colleagues most responsible for crafting the CIE stated to me, it is hope which lies very nearly at the heart of liberal education—the hope that through reflection, assisted by the thought of those wiser than ourselves, we can begin to understand and confront situations in our lives which might otherwise remain inexplicable and irredeemably tragic.

Not all of our classes were as focused as I remember that one to have been, and thus not necessarily as hopeful. So while that September conversation continues to toss around in my mind, I do not mean to dwell on it. And while there were other memorable classes, in fairness I need to add that there were many days when discussion did not come easy for my crew.

The whole experience of teaching in that course, though, was a revelation for me about what our faculty colleagues are aspiring to do; and what it is that students are capable of, and what they are interested in. This is only one person’s report from the front lines of college education, but let me pass along a few other observations as well. I am eager to do so, in part, because it seems to me that the ACTA members, not least of whom are William J. Bennett and Lynne Cheney, are not capturing much at all of what happens on a campus.
What strikes me, at least, as so odd about ACTA's campaign is the assumption that the values it promotes are somehow the property of ACTA alone. Over the years, I have had thoughtful faculty colleagues of every political persuasion imaginable—one of my graduate mentors was even accused of being a royalist, and his work on 16th century England describing the role of the royal bureaucracy in advancing civilization there lent a modicum of credence to the suggestion. But I think the ACTA folks and their political counterparts are missing the boat if they do not see that concern with values and character, as well as issues surrounding the questions of what kind of society we are and what kind of society we might become, are the same issues that all of us in higher education wrestle with all the time.

In fact, the whole stream of American literature reinforces the conclusion that the preoccupations which the ACTA group likes to claim as theirs and theirs alone have shaped our entire cultural life, especially for the past half century. Certainly, this era could take as its beginning the publication in 1951 of The Catcher in the Rye. I mention it not just because Salinger went to Ursinus (although he did), but because the quest for morality is what drives the entire novel. Recall, if you will, Holden Caulfield's thoughts on Romeo and Juliet. And it is reasonable to see John Updike's whole output as an effort to hold up a mirror not just to our fallibilities but as a weaving of a kind of Joycean fabric of moral possibility—describing a world of flawed human beings who ultimately are held accountable (and I do not mention him simply because his mother and father met here and then both graduated from Ursinus). Indeed, there are
plenty of non-Ursinus authors that will come to everyone's mind as well: Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Hellenga and Toni Morrison to name only three.

So it strikes me as contrary to the best traditions the ACTA leaders are claiming to uphold, for them to be so divisive and shrill, when finding the common ground would serve their own ideals more exactly. For example, one of their most recent publications included a case from Gov. Frank Keating of Oklahoma in favor of students studying engineering at state schools in order to avoid the contamination of women's studies offered at Harvard and other private institutions. It is sad, indeed, when people think they are defending the most precious part of the American tradition by discouraging students from examining the historical transformation in the lives and roles of women. I could not help but wonder whether he regretted that women had been granted the right to vote, or whether he thought that struggles for the nineteenth amendment, or the struggle more recently of indigenous peoples in Central and South America—he pokes ridicule at a course at Vassar dealing with their beliefs—are somehow outside of Jefferson's universal ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Does he think that engineers will be better citizens for being ignorant of the struggles in the past and present of women and indigenous peoples?

That governor got his information from scanning a couple of college catalogues, looking for the most outrageous examples he could find. Basing an indictment on such casual methods flies in the face of what education ought to be teaching about how we evaluate evidence and frame conclusions.
A FEW SURPRISES FROM THE TRENCHES

I suspect part of the problem, though, is that those of us in or near the educational trenches do not report often enough what is going on. So let me tell you just a little more about this course at Ursinus and then its larger context, because it offers vivid stories of what both students and faculty members are thinking about these days.

People who remember their undergraduate days as consisting of a midterm exam, a final, and a term paper slipped under an office door on the last day of the semester will be surprised to discover how much actual work students these days are doing, not just in CIE at Ursinus, but everywhere. And if they were to see examples of student writing, they would be surprised by how good it is. This opinion is not just mine: when the late Richard Marius was still directing the writing program at Harvard he made the same observation. At Ursinus we undertook a systematic look at student writing going back fifty years and the faculty doing the review had no doubt that papers have improved, dramatically.

I constantly hear faculty colleagues grumble about student writing. My affliction is that I can recall too much of my own student writing: it was awful! I still remember the comment on one of my papers: “You are attempting to build a cathedral with palm fronds.” I also have vivid, albeit painful, memories of the writing I received a quarter century ago from first-year college students. I must admit, however, that I still get e-mails from students that are embarrassingly poorly written, but that may be the nature of the genre.

On the other hand, this fall, counting drafts, brief informal assignments and final papers, I received from the sixteen students over 170 separate
examples of student prose. And the majority of these samples were first rate. Of course there were the abstract nouns where concrete was needed, but that aside, take the following sentence as an example: “Learning about various things is what makes liberal education so interesting and joyful.” And yes, first-year students are often too tentative: “I tend to agree with Aristotle’s belief that the highest form of education is intrinsically valuable and has no end but the joy of learning itself.”

So I do not mean to imply that the writing was flawless. Yet in reading the students’ prose, I kept coming across thoughtful, balanced, complex sentences: “Descartes believed God set up the world with the laws of science, and then let nature take its course, a theory similar to today’s theory of evolution.” Or referring to the warring, often jealous gods of *Gilgamesh*: “While these gods are easier to relate to than one perfect God, they are not examples of how our lives should be lived.”

**NEW CHALLENGES, A NEW CAMPUS COMMUNITY**

Much of the improvement in writing can be attributed to technology. At Ursinus all new students are given laptops, which they use constantly. With word processing programs it is easy to ask students to write two or more drafts of a paper, and it is far, far easier to correct a paper than it was in my student days. Even so, the spell checking program produces the occasional anomaly—this fall we had more than one Noah’s Arc floating around. Yet, thanks to technology, and thanks, too, to the seriousness of teachers (including the one I know best, who is absolutely passionate about getting her students to write well) and that of students in high school tired of being
told they write poorly, students I saw are writing more, and they are writing better than ever.

Some of the flap about grade inflation ignores the question of whether student work has improved, but the description of some of the work students were doing in my section of CIE suggests how much work students are generating—far more than in my day, and certainly far more than was dreamed of at the Harvard of 150 years ago—which Henry Adams characterized as excelling mainly at NOT inculcating students with ideas. Although ACTA does not pay attention to such things, on our campus we are extremely interested, in fact, in how hard students are working, and in the level of academic challenge. When I talk to other presidents and deans they say the same thing. Whether such courses as our CIE are for everybody, it is true that since it became a full-blown requirement, first-year Ursinus students on a National Survey of Student Engagement put Ursinus in the 99th percentile among national liberal arts colleges in terms of the level of academic challenge. Their sense that they are being challenged is itself a great argument for such courses.

There is a ripple effect from such courses as well. For us the CIE course has created a wonderful intellectual community within the faculty. It has been achieved, certainly, through extraordinary effort on their part—one foundation executive said simply that she had never seen a faculty working so hard on teaching. Perhaps even more important, such a course creates a powerful sense of community among the students. No matter with whom they are rooming or where they live on campus, they are necessarily conversing about profound ideas—especially as assignment deadlines draw near. The sad truth is that eighteen and nineteen year olds everywhere are asking the right questions about values, meanings, obligations in relationships, purpose, but it is easy for me to imagine that in engineering courses those issues are not dealt with at all, except when the students stop
studying and engage in their bull sessions. Faculty members here, as at good liberal arts colleges everywhere, are committed to informing those inevitable late night dorm conversations with the wisdom of those who have gone before. Here, at least, they are succeeding. Liberal education works.

**THE BEST MODEL, DEBATED BY SCHOLARS**

Before saying any more however, about what students are doing, let me put the Ursinus CIE course in its larger context, to indicate how remote from reality ACTA is. First of all, the CIE course was not the product of administrators. It was proposed, planned and approved by faculty members—the evils incarnate of the ACTA universe. I have taught at two other liberal arts colleges in the past thirty years, and at both colleges, my faculty colleagues also debated, almost annually, the trade-off between such a common course, and the alternative of a series of small seminars for first-year students. There are clearly tradeoffs, and anyone presuming that all the evidence is on one side or the other has not heard as I have the best cases that brilliant faculty—brilliant teacher/scholars—will make on each side of the argument.

Sometimes it is charged that such common courses disappeared because faculty members have become too preoccupied with their own specialties. That accusation is a half-truth at best. The faculty at Ursinus, for example, has never been more scholarly. Major academic presses including Oxford and Princeton publish our books; our scientists have received some of the most prestigious grants from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation going to undergraduate institutions. But
faculty everywhere have debated whether the path to understanding works best on the Oxford model—through the disciplined dialect found in a single subject—or through a less expert, more sweeping assault on the broadest possible questions. That debate, in fact, works best when it is in the hands of successful scholars.

At Ursinus at least, some of the leading scholars on the faculty led in the creation of the CIE. What they created does derive from an American educational tradition that goes back to the Contemporary Civilization Course created at Columbia early in the last century as an antidote to American isolationism, and to Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago at the beginning of the Depression and the great humanities course that he created there. But like other more modern courses, the CIE has to take into account that we live in a different world. The challenge is no longer what was perceived at Columbia—the threat of our indifference to European problems; it is that so many of the world’s problems and the world’s cultures intersect right here on American soil. All of us of a certain age can recall the comment that there was not a senior official in the Kennedy or Johnson administrations who had ever spent even a week studying Vietnam.

**Fostering multicultural understanding**

Thus Lynne Cheney’s recent call in response to September 11th for less study of Islam and more of American history certainly harks back to the very isolationism almost all of us in education hope to prevent. By way of contrast, in order to insure that students from different cultures, and students aware of different cultures, would have an opportunity to discern where there might be differences as well as where there might be universal
principles, the faculty at Ursinus shaped the new course around questions. These questions allow for answers from several cultures to be put side by side: What does it mean to be human? How should we live our lives? What is the universe and how do we fit into it?

These questions allow the course to range over various cultures. Readings included an ancient Sumerian myth with its own flood story, Biblical texts, The Bhagavad-Gita, the intellectual biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th century Mexican nun, Dante, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, and Descartes. Such eclecticism is necessary. Like most good liberal arts colleges Ursinus is far more diverse than almost any of the leading liberal arts colleges were thirty years ago. For example, over 12% of students at Ursinus are black or Hispanic. Ursinus has more students now from the one small country of Jordan than the total number of international students at any national liberal arts college of forty years ago.

It is not just international students coming to the United States. Ursinus students are still studying in England, Spain, France, Mexico and Germany, but now they are also going to Madagascar, Senegal, Ghana, Japan and countries around the globe. Students know there is a fascinating other world out there, no matter their background. Recently Ursinus College became one of fifty national liberal arts colleges to be invited to participate in The Thomas J. Watson Foundation Fellows Program. Seniors at Ursinus are now candidates for Watson fellowships. Watson Fellows spend a whole year abroad after the senior year, undertaking original projects and investigations away from institutions of higher learning. At Ursinus over forty seniors showed interest, and those who formally applied had fascinating projects that spanned the globe.

In both background and interest the faculty is far more diverse these days as well. We simply cannot ignore our engagement with a whole world
out there. So at Ursinus we have specialists in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Indeed we just expanded our international relations department through the addition this semester of the Honorable Joseph Melrose, who most recently served as the U. S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone.

The yearning, therefore, for the restoration of Western Civilization "great books" courses is in part a yearning for an age that no longer exists. Some might well contend that modern students are superficial, but students are far more knowledgeable at some level about the different cultures out there than we were when I was in college. Therefore, any realistic starting point has to embrace their breadth. Indeed, sometimes the old courses disappeared because tough-minded faculty thought embracing so much breadth was impossible.

*FINDING PRIDE AND MEANING IN INQUIRY*

Breadth alone does not an education make. That, too, is obvious. Critics of contemporary higher education hardly ever talk about the scholarly work students are doing. And courses, such as Ursinus CIE, in and of themselves do not make for a complete education. At the other end of the college experience, in the senior year, at more and more colleges across the country students are doing extraordinarily sophisticated work, again, work that is far more substantial than most students were doing a half century ago. I will not belabor the point, but I do not think Ursinus is exceptional in giving about 25 percent of its rising senior class $2500 fellowships each to support them for an entire summer working one on one with an individual faculty member. Last summer here students pursued, relentlessly I might add,

Both the written work and oral presentations students complete at the end of the summer leave me tremendously enthusiastic about the state of American higher education. Anyone seeing the work of these students or hearing them present it would recognize not just their scholarly ability but also what is almost a naïve integrity, but an integrity nonetheless. They are proud that the work is theirs, but they are equally pleased that they learned how to sustain a life of inquiry at least for a summer, and in that life of inquiry they report, if asked, that they find a heightened sense of meaning.

Perhaps my own reactions are not typical, but I am inclined to think they are. So let me conclude by inviting others to counter some of the glib critiques of higher education with their own stories, recognizing again that surveys and rankings do not get at the reality of what we are doing any more than sensationalized readings of college catalogues. Based on my own teaching and reading of student work, let me report that the news from the academic front lines is good, whether we are asking whether faculty are committed to the values of liberal education, whether students are invested in addressing the central issues of our humanity or whether students can grapple with complexity in discussion, and perhaps more surprisingly in their writing. Finally, we should understand that, whether it is at the end of the undergraduate years, or even just at the end of a summer fellowship after their junior years, students are producing substantial and sophisticated scholarly works.

Yes, there is good news.
Thanks to my colleagues on the Ursinus faculty for working to make me a better teacher in the seminar last summer, especially to Paul Stern for both his grace and the clarity of his vision in orchestrating the process. And I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Charles Rice, who was a full partner as we sought to teach and learn together. Finally but most importantly, I owe a debt of gratitude to our sixteen members of the Ursinus Class of 2005 who were members of CIE, section D: Theodoros Bouikidis; Jennifer Davies; Emily Diloia; Dana Hills; Elliott Hulley; Kevin Kresse; Scott Newitt; Erin O’Hara; Christopher Paciente; John Paton; Theodore Piotrowicz; Cristina Polinsky; Marcus Ressler; Marissa Rotz; Regina Willett; and Danielle Williams.
ABOUT THE SERIES

This is the sixth in a series of occasional papers about the challenges confronting students and what Ursinus is doing to help them enter adult life.

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