

Reforming Higher Education's Hollow Core

Presented at the 93rd Annual Meeting

of the Association of American Colleges and Universities

Conference Title -- The Real Test: Liberal Education and Democracy's Big Questions

By Dr. Anne D. Neal, President,

American Council of Trustees and Alumni

It is a pleasure to be here today and I want to thank AAC&U and Carol Geary Schneider for making this discussion possible. We share a commitment to a quality liberal education and a belief that such an education is essential to address democracy's Big Questions. We are delighted to participate with you and others in this conference. Parenthetically, I should say that we also greatly appreciated the opportunity to address and respond to AAC&U's Statement on Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility and look forward to continued dialogue on this important topic.

Let me begin by telling you a bit about the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. We were founded in 1995 to unite thoughtful alumni and trustees on behalf of rigorous general education, good teaching, high academic standards, affordable tuition, and academic freedom. Working with governing boards of colleges and universities, concerned alumni and donors, Governors and other higher education leaders, ACTA seeks to promote strong liberal arts curricula and the free exchange of ideas.

ACTA has members in all 50 states who are informed and committed to education improvements and accountability in higher education. Our quarterly publication, Inside Academe, goes to over 12, 0000 readers, and we produce regular studies on curricular and other issues, some of which we will talk about in the course of our panel. We also have a lively blog, ACTA Online, spearheaded by my distinguished panelist Dr. Erin O'Connor and I urge you to visit us.

Our work has been featured by the New York Times, Fox News, The Washington Post, Inside Higher Ed, and The Chronicle of Higher Education and we are pleased to be a part of the community of organizations addressing challenges and opportunities in higher education.

In line with the conference topic, ACTA is concerned, that in too many ways, we are failing to educate the next generation for leadership in a liberal democracy.

As the U.S. Education department refined its report on the future of higher education, one issued that vanished was the curriculum. In so doing, both ACTA and AAU&P noted that the Commission had skirted a most important question: What do contemporary college graduates need to know and be able to do? What is learning in a liberal democracy?

As this conference outlines, at a time of internal and external challenges, there is a unique opportunity for higher education to examine and rededicate itself to the broader public purpose of educating students for life in the 21st century. A strong liberal arts education can provide a core of common knowledge and common experience – a curriculum that prepares students for informed citizenship, diverse careers, and lifelong learning in a democratic society – and that purposefully ties higher education to what is learned in K-12.

Too often, the pervasive call for critical thinking and interpersonal skills offers a prescription without content. Similarly, the widespread substitution of “distribution requirements” for a defined set of required general education courses allows students to pick and choose from a vast menu of courses without actually guaranteeing real exposure to broad areas of knowledge. While this may be fun for students, it means that today’s graduates too often know less about the world, our nation, and our culture than high school students were expected to know 50 years ago. Four out of five college seniors cannot pass a basic high school level history test. One out of four college students can’t name a single freedom protected by the First Amendment. 75% of colleges graduates lack the reading skills needed to function capably in our society.

Over the last thirty years, many forces have been at work. Concerned about enrollment and retention in a time of rising costs, many institutions have shaped the curriculum to appeal to students. Operating according to a model of student-as-consumer, some

schools have abandoned a larger vision of what every educated graduate should know in favor of keeping students satisfied and getting them to graduation day.

There is thus evidence that many institutions are failing to provide students with a broad and balanced exposure to general areas of knowledge. Indeed, some colleges and universities may actually be doing more to foster illiteracy and incompetence than they are to produce thoughtful, aware graduates capable of living meaningful and constructive lives.

This is not a partisan problem, and it should not be solved by partisan means. People and organizations from across the political spectrum can find common cause in restoring a strong liberal arts education. It may surprise some of you to know that film director Michael Moore sounds quite a bit like ACTA when it comes to higher education. Just turn to page 94 of his *New York Times* bestseller, *Stupid White Men ... and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*, and you'll see what I mean:

So what if not one of these top universities ... requires that they take even one course in American history to graduate? Who needs history when you are going to be tomorrow's master of the universe? he says

Who cares if 70 percent of those who graduate from America's colleges are not required to learn a foreign language? Isn't the rest of the world speaking

English now? And if they aren't, shouldn't all those damn foreigners GET WITH THE PROGRAM?

To borrow from Mr. Moore, isn't it time for all of us to demand a new program?

A liberal education is not expendable, and it should not be left to chance.

Embarking on the experiment of a democratic republic, the Founders viewed public education as central to the ability to sustain a participatory form of government. They had great and important ambitions for education – ambitions that included a belief that shared understanding, shared knowledge would help unify and advance civilization.

In recent decades, there has been a breakdown in the belief that higher education has a public purpose, that shared learning is important. Quoting former Harvard Dean Harry Lewis in his book, *Excellence without a Soul*:

Universities are having a hard time making the case that the education they offer is about anything in particular. "Breadth" and "choice" have become goals in themselves. When colleges talk about how broadly students will be educated or how much they will enjoy their freedom of choice, they conveniently avoid saying much about what students will learn. And breadth and freedom in academia are like lower taxes in politics – it is hard to be against them, even if they come at the cost of important sacrifices. (25)

Of course, it was not always this way. There are, in fact, many inspiring examples of faculty and administrators focusing on education's public purpose – much as we do here today.

After the first World War, Jacques Barzun relates that administrators and faculty at Columbia determined the imperative public need to develop a core curriculum that would “teach the new generation the ideals and the history of Western civilization, in hopes that when they were leaders of opinion and makers of policy they might avoid the ghastly mistakes that had brought the Continent to self-destruction in total war.” Quoting from a recent article on the program by Judge Jose Cabranes, *Fostering Judgment*, Cabranes relates that the core's “common course of study for all freshmen served another closely-related purpose – to introduce the children of newly arrived immigrants... to the culture they would all inherit and share.... The post- World War I Columbia curriculum was designed in part to sustain what Dean Frederick Keppel had described as early as 1914 as the new ‘social diversity’ of Columbia College.”

Yale's Directed Studies program arose after World War II out of a similar sense that faculties had an obligation to prepare students to defend liberal democracy. Yale President Charles Seymour observed with urgent awareness that higher education needed to regain a sense of overarching purpose that “a New opportunity has been given to us which now and hereafter we must firmly resolve we shall not waste. The occasion demands of us, both old and young, qualities which, as we were wont to boast, are those

of a liberal democracy but which are achieved only through tireless and selfless effort.” He added: “We must confess that over the years we have erred and strayed from the virtues essential to democracy and we must pray for power to return to the pursuit of them.” The wars had, in Judge Cabranes’ words, “reminded Americans of how fragile our institutions could be and how easily our system of ordered liberty could be threatened.”

I would submit that we are at just such a juncture today. In the midst of challenges – at home and abroad -- we are presented, as Cabranes relates, with a “a struggle between conflicting visions of a good society; a struggle of ideas” about our own system of ordered liberty.

How then – and I quote from AAC&U’s materials – should we direct our efforts to “prepare students to be responsible citizens and leaders in times of both crisis and tranquility.” Surely, for starters we must outline and underscore the nature and importance of a coherent general education in a free society and a liberal education based on reasoned debate “unconstrained by political, religious, or other dictums.” (AAC&U language).

No less a figure than Stanley Katz, in a piece entitled “What Has Happened to the Professoriate?,” sounded this tocsin:

We have lost a sense of commonality as professors, the sense that we are all in this together – “this” being a dedication to undergraduate teaching and not just specialized research. We have lost a belief in the relevance of teaching undergraduates for the health of our democracy. (Chronicle of Higher Education, Oct. 6, 2006).

Our colleges and universities have an obligation to provide the next generation of Americans, especially in the first two years of their college careers, exposure to the most important courses – the foundational subjects -- that ensure informed participation in our democracy, as well as a learning environment that is open to diverse disciplinary approaches and the robust exchange of ideas. And that means that our colleges and universities must return to a more prescribed course of study – committed to “the idea that education is about choices” – again quoting Judge Cabranes, “about informed choice, about hierarchies of choices established by reason, ...experience and ... the good sense of teachers, ...choice[s that value] the lasting over the ephemeral; ... the thought-provoking over the merely self-affirming.” (4) This is our curricular challenge if we are to address Democracy’s big questions.

At very little cost, college and universities should engage in a process of curricular self-examination. The prevalent smorgasbord approach to the curriculum, allowing students to pick and choose among hundreds of courses, results in a hodgepodge that fails to prepare students for informed citizenship, diverse careers, and life-long learning. At a time of great national divisions about how to apply democratic principles to controversies

at hand, a strong general education can help provide us with a vehicle for a common conversation. And while Dr. O'Connor will outline the contours of this program I want to underscore the particular importance of understanding America's history and heritage – something that Harvard has commendably acknowledged in its ongoing curricular review.

As Brown University professor and ACTA National Council member Gordon Wood has outlined: “We Americans have a special need to understand our history is what makes us a nation and gives us our sense of nationality. A people like us, made up of every conceivable race, ethnicity, and religion in the world, can never be a nation in the usual sense of the term. It's our history, our heritage, that makes us a single people. ... Up until recently almost every American, even those who were new immigrants, possessed some sense of America's past, however rudimentary and unsophisticated. Without some such sense of history, the citizens of the United States can scarcely long exist as a united people.”

We should offer for students what the distinguished Aspen Institute Faculty Seminar – featured in your conference materials – offers to faculty: the opportunity “to explore significant texts for the power of ideas on fundamental issues in our society.”

Conclusion

That is why we are pleased to participate today.

Since 1995 when ACTA was founded, there has been a growing consensus that attention is needed -- from *the inside and outside* -- if American higher ed is to address democracy's great questions.

You do not need to go far to see what I mean. *Excellence Without a Soul* by former Harvard dean Harry Lewis and *Our Underachieving Colleges* by current Harvard president Derek Bok depict colleges and universities that lack a cohesive curriculum, students who cannot write and have little understanding of what it means to be an American, trustees asleep at the switch – and they are written not for an academic audience, but for the public at large.

By addressing the public, these authors and ACTA acknowledge that the public, alumni, and trustees can help address these challenges. If I may quote from Professor Lewis: “The stakeholders can force change The alumni, trustees and professors who recognize what has happened can apply enough pressure to steer the ship to a new heading” (18). “Universities were never truly ivory towers ... they are privileged with independence and public support because they serve society. Thus public scrutiny is appropriate and important” (15).

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni was launched a decade ago to focus on those conditions and to mobilize thoughtful citizens -- alumni and trustees -- on behalf of rigorous general education, good teaching, high standards, and academic freedom. Alumni and trustees know and understand that, to remain competitive, our institutions of

higher learning must remain focused on academic standards, academic excellence and transparency. They are seeking appropriate oversight of an educational system that relies on their support, and reasserting the proper role of trustees as fiduciaries of the academic and financial well-being of institutions of higher learning.

Universities hold a privileged place in American society. They receive special privileges such as subsidies and tax exemptions on the condition that they serve the public purpose.

It is incumbent that our colleges and universities –through faculty and administrative initiative, but, if not, through initiative by trustees – make certain that our colleges and universities provide the coherent and quality education that future citizens and leaders in a democracy require.

I am now pleased to turn to my fellow panelists and I look forward to further discussion.