

The Comedy and Tragedy of Attacks on Academia

By John K. Wilson

The conservative Young America's Foundation (YAF) this fall issued its ninth annual report on college course titles, "Comedy & Tragedy, 2003-04: College Course Descriptions and What They Tell Us About Higher Education Today." Written by Rick Parsons and Roger Custer, "Comedy & Tragedy" is full of misrepresentations used to denounce higher education.

The Young America's Foundation (www.yaf.org) examined 50,000 course catalog entries at elite universities and selected 300 course titles it didn't like. From this, YAF concludes: "Academic standards continue to deteriorate." Of course, YAF can't tell anything about how a course is taught (or the standards used) from its title and a one-paragraph description. Even if course titles were a reliable measure of content, YAF's methodology would be worthless: You can't list less than 1% of the courses sampled and claim that they represent anything. This is an ideologically-motivated hatchet job against higher education.

The tiny group of 300 "bizarre and biased" courses decried by YAF sound like innovative, specialized courses about "Diversity in the Workplace" (Cornell), "Feminism and Philosophy" (Dartmouth), "Muslims in Multicultural America" (Harvard), "Race and Ethnicity" (Princeton), "Race, Racism and American Law" (Penn), "Homelessness and the Urban Crisis" (Penn), "Multiculturalism and Education" (Bucknell), "Gender Inequality" (Duke), "Spike Lee" (University of Chicago), and "Women in the Bible" (DePaul). The classes denounced by YAF include "Environmental Stewardship" (Brown University), which examines ways to improve campus policies and present these ideas to the administration, and "Christians in Crisis" (Duke), which promises "Christian thought and debate on, and theological analysis of, such contemporary issues as abortion, creationism, homosexuality, liberation, poverty, racism, and sexism." YAF dismisses almost anything mentioning prisons, sex, diversity, inequality, race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, environment, justice, Elvis, witchcraft, Muslims, hip-hop, television, and hate crimes.

Some classes denounced by YAF are apparently based on a misinterpretation of the course titles. "Taking Marx Seriously" (Amherst College) is in fact critical of Marxism. The course description asks, "Should Marx be given yet another chance?...Has Marx's credibility survived the global debacle of those regimes and movements which drew inspiration from his work?" According to the description, the course requires a "critical reading of Marx's texts."

"How to Be Gay" (U of Michigan) is not some training class for converting straights, but instead is about how gay culture is institutionalized. It examines "the plurality of ways in which people determine how to be gay" in contrast to the stereotypes about homosexuals. Yet this class is number one on YAF's "Dirty Dozen" and Michigan legislators and the American Family Association have sought to cut off funding for the course.

According to YAF, "if students have a desire to graduate in four years, they are more likely to have no choice, but to take these kind of courses." That's nonsense: all of these classes condemned by YAF are specialized, elective classes. No student is ever forced to take any of these classes.

The YAF claims, without evidence, that "almost completely absent from the curriculum are courses that examine conservative intellectual ideas or the free market." In fact, the free market is the most widely indoctrinated idea on college campuses, often without any dissent permitted. The biggest field in higher education is business, with more than 20% of student majors. Business and economics majors take economics classes where the free market is typically presumed, not debated. (Admittedly, it is often a neo-Keynesian view of the free market rather than the Austrian or Chicago School variation preferred by the far right, but still is in support of the free market.)

YAF presents no evidence that conservative views are excluded. After two minutes' searching on the web, I found various conservative classes. This fall, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government is offering "Understanding Conservatism" with readings from Russell Kirk, William Buckley, and Barry Goldwater.

Johns Hopkins has “American Conservative Political Thought.” Georgetown has “Contemporary Conservative Political Thought.” And every college includes conservative ideas in various other classes.

The YAF study makes other distortions. According to the YAF report, the University of Colorado English Department has twice as many multicultural and gender studies courses this year as American literature courses. According to the University of Colorado English Department (Colorado.edu/English) listings for Fall 2003, Colorado has twice as many traditional literature classes (51 without including contemporary literature and literary analysis) as multicultural literature classes (26).

Although YAF claims that they don’t advocate censorship, their report speaks with pride about how previous reports “may be responsible for the elimination of some frivolous courses.” The headline of YAF’s press release is, “*How YOU Fund a Radical Agenda on America’s Campuses*” and their clear implication is that funding for colleges should be cut until colleges get rid of all these classes on race, class, gender, sexuality, and inequality: “Universities across the nation continue to raise tuition rates and complain they are not receiving enough funding from taxpayers,” YAF says. “But, how are these schools spending the money in their ‘tight’ budgets? They continually promote leftist ideology.”

The only comedy here is the laughable idea that a right-wing foundation can pretend to survey the state of higher education based on a quick scan of a few course descriptions. The much greater tragedy is YAF’s effort to ban all courses mentioning race, gender, class, sexuality, and popular culture. This increases pressure on universities to restrict academic freedom and threatens the quality and innovation of higher education.

Courses at Illinois universities considered objectionable by the Young America’s Foundation’s 2003 Report:

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO:

Anthropology 329: Introduction to Theories of Sex and Gender

Art History 274/374: Feminism and the Visual Arts

Cinema and Media Studies 261: Spike Lee

English 103: Problems in Gender Studies

Gender Studies 177: Social History of US Sexual Subcultures

Political Science 260/350: Race and Politics

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY:

American Studies 270: Gay and Lesbian America From the Forties to the Nineties

Liberal Studies in Education 210: Multiculturalism and Education

Religious Studies 270: Women in the Bible

Religious Studies 370: Feminist Theologies

Sociology 248: White Racism

Sociology 271: Population Problems

Sociology 282: Rock Journalism

Women’s Studies 312: Contemporary Feminist Sex Debates

Women’s Studies 316: Representations of the Body

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY-CHICAGO:

Communication 227: Social Justice and Communication

Communication 329: Environmental Advocacy

History 295: Gender, Race and Class in U.S. History

Social Work 370: Cultural Diversity

Theology 330: Liberation Theology

Theology 344: Theology and Ecology

YAF offers no explanation for the specific inclusion of these courses, except for DePaul University’s history class on Gay and Lesbian America (because the “subject and intent are contrary to Catholic beliefs”) and its class on “White Racism” (because it allegedly has a “get whitey” philosophy based on the title).