

Illinois Conference – AAUP

The Value of Liberal Education

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I first want to say a big thanks for the invitation to speak to you. It feels really good to be in the company of right thinking people after a side trip into the world inhabited by administrators. To have made that trip was to have been controlled for the briefest of moments by what I now realize was “momentary insanity”. But that is another story for another day.

Second, a disclaimer. I am now officially retired – both from toils in the academic area but also from official duties in the AAUP – save from serving as a consultant to the Committee on Accreditation, formerly known as Committee D. That status brings with it a certain freedom – the ability to speak as an individual and not have my views taken as official AAUP policy. I can be free to express all my views and as frankly as I feel necessary.

Now to the subject of the day – The Value of Liberal Education. To be asked to speak on this topic is a source of enormous frustration to me in some senses. How did we ever get to the point in our history when we had to talk about the value of liberal learning? What happened to the understanding of the common good that results from liberal learning? Have I been so insulated in a career devoted to liberal learning that I did not really understand the growing concern about the work that has been my life-long work? But talk about the value of liberal learning we must! The skeptics are not only biting at the edges of our enterprise, they want to devour the whole pie.

We need only look around to understand that the Illinois Conference has been insightful in scheduling a meeting devoted to this topic. Others have begun to feel a need to examine liberal learning with a goal to defending its importance. James Freedman, retired President of Dartmouth published a book this year entitled “Liberal Education and the Public Interest” this year. In the January-February issue of *Academe* this year, the AAUP devoted the entire issue to “Liberal Learning”. Our annual meeting theme in Washington this coming June is “Liberal Education and Social Responsibility”. Clearly the time is ripe for a defense of liberal learning.

What do I mean by liberal learning? I mean a course of study that opens the student to the breadth of academic disciplines, that exposes that student to the history of our culture and

shows her or him the fact that there is more to be learned at the cutting edge. I mean a course of study that not only exposes the student to the great thinking of the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences but that generates the understanding that real synthesis sometimes occurs when the understandings of one area are brought to bear on the problems of another. I mean an education that provides the essential context for a life of learning and an understanding of extraordinary complexity of the world we live in and of the beauty to be realized when we begin to appreciate the diversities in our world. I mean an education in breadth and one which exposes the student to depth in at least one area. I mean an education that empowers the student to gain critical analytical skills and helps them understand how those skills can be used in exploring the unknown.

Why would ask about the value of such an education?

I think several things have been responsible for the climate of siege we are experiencing. First we saw and are seeing with increasing intensity the need to save money at the federal and state levels. When you look entitlements in state and federal budgets, you begin to realize the degree to which flexibility in spending is limited. About the only areas of the State budget that is flexible is support for higher education and even the entitlements understood to support K-12 education are now no longer being seen as sacred. And aside from pork-barrel appropriations which continue unabated despite any financial crisis, programs originally funded by the federal government have since the late 1980's been shifted to the States which have seen their budgets strained to the limit. It has not helped that we have experienced an economic downturn and new governors are being forced to make painful decisions about what to fund and what to cut. Higher education is often a target of cuts because it represents a flexible part of the budget.

But spending does take place – priorities are established. I was listening to the news two nights ago and heard the American in charge of bringing order to Iraq say to Iraqis that if they needed furniture to replace destroyed classroom desks, we the US would buy it for them.

Given this belt tightening, it is easier to withhold funding from education if it is seen as not doing its job. In the early to mid 90's, we began to see attacks on higher education of a magnitude not seen before. Faculty members were not working hard enough (remember the observation that professors were at home mowing their lawns on a Wednesday afternoon). We were portrayed as “only teaching” twelve hours a week”, though no one leveled similar attacks on clergy for “only working one hour a week” on Sundays. At the same time. University Board of Trustees were being selected by Governors who have been from one party. In Ohio when I left in 2000 the entire Board of Trustees of the University of Akron was from one political party – the Republican Party. I do not question the integrity of those from the Republican party (some of my best friends are Republicans), but when there is such uniformity in selection of Board members, there is a tendency for the philosophy of that party and the way managers see workers to prevail. For the first time in Ohio history, a collective bargaining contract was questioned over provisions of workload with a mandatory increase in class-hours of 10% linked to funding by the legislature. And more, claims were being made that students were not graduating from our institutions with the skills they needed in the workplace – specific computational skills and those which would allow them to write well.

At the same time this was happening, other developments were occurring. There was a logarithmic increase in the use of adjunct/part-time teaching at all our institutions both public and private. If we could not afford complete funding of our institutions, then we could squeeze our budgets by being exploitive and offering positions to individuals at a fraction of the cost and without benefits. New ranks of administrators were being developed, often people with no academic experience were being hired to run our institutions and the argument for doing this was that educational institutions are not just involved with education anymore – they are involved with running student services, the food services and building and grounds. Gone was the day that faculty rose to the ranks of administration and saw their primary job as being to make possible the work of the faculty. I made the jump to the ranks of the administration because I believed that faculty have the responsibility to see to it that faculty could do their work in a supportive environment. I knew I had made a serious mistake when I attended an administrators meeting shortly after beginning work that I certainly did not have administrator type shoes by another Dean while riding in an elevator. My reservations grew significantly when the Secretary to the Board called to inform me of my required attendance at a Board dinner and added “Wear Country Club Casual”. And I was sure I had made a fatal mistake when I questioned the use of “superadjuncts”, individuals with salaries one third that of full time faculty who taught full time and had benefits and was told we needed to pay such wages because otherwise we could not operate fiscally.

In the mid 1990’s we saw the development of still another tool which has changed the focus of attention on higher education. North Central, the accrediting body in our region of the country, accredited the University of Phoenix and that institution began to establish branches in every part of the country. While there are those who support the nature and goals of this University, it represented a new and different model for higher education in this country. Classes are held both on campuses at regional sites and on-line around the country but the faculty are all part time, with only one full time faculty in each academic area, for example in Nursing. The argument is that faculty providers (not faculty) teach at night what they teach during the day and therefore do not need preparation time for that teaching. These providers work for adjunct wages and have no benefits. And they teach in professional areas of direct utility to adult learners (those who are over a certain minimum age at the time of admission). It is of more than passing interest that the students meeting in groups for 25% of the instructional time, with no faculty instructor present (a consequence of the belief that knowledge is produced in such settings and the philosophy being voiced recently that the Professor should be the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage). Most distressing is the fact that there is only one librarian for the whole country and that each “branch establishes real libraries on site through contracts with local institutions which often developed their libraries using taxpayer money. In a visit to the University of Phoenix in Phoenix in 1998 I had a chance to have a close-up look at the instruction offered and discovered that the syllabus for each course is, developed by a committee and specifies topic and content by the minute and this, it is maintained, insures consistency of course content in every region of the country where the course is taught. Sort of a Wal-Mart of Higher Education. So much for academic freedom and for the right of an instructor to alter course content in light of changing external circumstances or the chemistry of the class.

In short order, North Central then accredited an institution called Jones International University whose central administration is in Colorado. Jones, another for profit institution, accredited by the same team of accreditors that accredited Phoenix, went a step further toward a faculty-less institution. It only offers courses on-line and its courses are developed by faculty “experts” at other institutions under contract to Jones for the development of a course. The content is provided by course deliverers, often people of lesser academic credentials than the course developer. The performance of the students is evaluated by still yet another group of individuals – course assessors. The concept is called “unbundling” and means that a course can start on one day and another session can start on the very next day with the same “provider. But the self-study paper submitted in the request for consideration for accreditation specifically says that faculty development funds for the course developers has to be provided by the home institution of the faculty member, not by Jones University. So much for academic freedom and collegial governance. How can there be collegial governance in an institution that has no faculty.

I have no problem with institutions that are different and innovative. But the real problem is that their accreditation affects what happens in all institutions of higher education. Their credits are transferable and the practices at these institutions affects the practices at all institutions. If profit is to be the motive, then what are we to do with departments and courses that return no profit to the institution? Do we really need a Physics program or a Religion Department if there are not sufficient number of majors to justify a return on investment? As a recently retired administrator at an institution that cut thirteen academic positions this past year, I can tell you that integrity of curriculum or cohesiveness of program was not a consideration in the determination of which positions were cut.

But my concern with pressures from the accreditors goes even further. Since North Central took the steps they did in accrediting these institutions and declared them to be legitimate deliverers of quality education, standards for accreditation in every other region of the country has had to accommodate to the standards which allow the Phoenix’s and Jones’s of the world to exist. Mention of qualified faculty has disappeared from these standards – to be substituted by the words “appropriately qualified personnel”. Governance standards have disappeared and the roles of Presidents are now being defined in terms of responsibilities of CEO’s. No mention of librarians is to be found in the accreditation standards of the Southern Region Accrediting Body. And there has been a profound shift in accrediting standards from inputs and process to outcomes assessment. As long as an institution is assessing its outcomes and meeting its mission, however vaguely defined, it doesn’t matter that the school or University is on the AAUP censured list – in fact the President of an AAUP censured institution (University of Central Arkansas) was head of a visiting team that examined the credentials of another school to be accredited shortly after the imposition of censure. The Provost from my own institution was a member of the accrediting team at the University of Dubuque this past year and had not been made aware of the censure action about to take place.

The value of a liberal Arts Education. It all becomes highly personal. And it is true that we have not been as active as we should have been about explaining to the public what that value is. Is it important for a legislator to understand the history of a topic on which voting is scheduled. Is an understanding of Ecology and important factor in evaluating

the opening of the North Slope for oil exploration? Is an understanding of Islam vital to the development of a successful policy to be used after a war fought for proclaimed moral reasons? Is an appreciation of opera critical to the biologist who seeks pleasure in areas other than work?

I like to tell the story of our youngest son. He went to a fine Liberal Arts college in the East and like many of my students over the years, was as interested in social activities as he was in academics as an undergraduate. As parents our role was to smile and be there when the inevitable bumps were experienced. After graduation with a degree in Political Science, he decided to stay in the New England area because a friend would not move to Washington D.C. with him where he hoped to eventually use his skills. Since few jobs were available he took one in a community college in the Registrar's office entering data into spreadsheets.

When it became clear a year later that his friend was not going to go with him to Washington, he decided to go alone and stayed with some friends while he looked for work. Again and again he was told there were no jobs available. Undeterred, he networked and asked questions about what he might be doing if he found work in Congressional offices. He was read a list of duties assigned to aides in the Senate offices and one of them was work as a computer coordinator. He quickly responded that he had work with computers the year before and the person he was speaking with immediately told him that the computer coordinator for one of the Senators had been run over on the New Jersey Turnpike and killed. He was told that the office was desperate for help and perhaps he would like to go to the offices for an interview. That night he called home and told us of his hiring. He told of interviews with several staff members and how he had fixed their computer problems by plugging their cords in more tightly. His moth, in astonishment said "How are you going to do the job needed as you have never had a course in computer science?". He responded with some surprise with the statement "Mom, I can read". Within five years he was nominated for President of the Computer Coordinators group in the Senate.

Did he learn computer science in College? No – what he learned was the ability to read, to listen, to reason, to reach out and get help when needed and he learned to apply what he knew to problems that needed solution. That is the product of a Liberal Arts Education. It is what makes the continuation of the Liberal Arts core of our colleges and universities so valuable. As James Freedman says in his book on the Liberal Arts "Liberal Education opens our eyes to what life is principally about. It's about understanding yourself and having some resources to deal with everything life throws at you. It's about developing a moral compass and some understanding of how society works, how democracy works".

As an Association we have taken stands in defense of the Liberal Arts. But we need to be even more vocal in that defense. We need to be at the forefront when accreditation standards are being set. We need to be there speaking for the importance of a balanced set of offerings when decisions are made to downsize institutions. We need, in short, to be able to emerge from our disciplines and speak for our profession – a profession that has served us with extraordinary distinction and which now calls for our collective defense.

Jim Perley