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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Citizen Formation Is Not Our Job



Lakeshore Technical College

Students from Lakeshore Technical college, in Wisconsin, participate in a service-learning project.

By *Stanley Fish* | JANUARY 17, 2017 PREMIUM

The National Association of Scholars is an education-advocacy group that advertises itself as "working to sustain the tradition of reasoned scholarship." It leans conservative, but in saying that I intend no criticism, just an identification. In the past the NAS and I have done battle, but I find myself agreeing with at least half of the arguments being made in its

latest report, "Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics."

The main argument is that they don't. Rather than introducing students to the history and structures of American government, universities today, the report asserts, teach "civic engagement" in courses that focus less on a specific subject matter (the Supreme Court, the organization of Congress, the powers of the president) than "on turning students into activists" who engage in "coordinated social action" designed to further a left, progressive agenda. Under the aegis of this "new civics" students (and faculty) participate in "service learning," that is, learning that gets them into the community where they can gain practical knowledge and participate in the solving of society's pressing problems. A 1970 report by the Southern Regional Education Board names the goal succinctly: "to give young people ... front-line experience with today's problems so that they will be better equipped to solve them as adult citizens."

In short, learning things and becoming a learned person give way to doing things and becoming a better person.

What could be wrong with that? What's wrong, according to the NAS, is, first, that at bottom the project is driven by a progressive-left assumption that America "must be transformed ... from an unjust, oppressive society to one that embodies social justice," and second, that in the process the traditional academic project of

searching for the truth is displaced by the political project of making the society better, where "better" is defined as a movement away from currently-in-place values and norms. In short, learning things and becoming a learned person give way to doing things and

becoming a better person; the societal transformation civically engaged students work to accomplish also transforms them: "The New Civics replaces traditional liberal arts education with vocational training for community activists."

Now I'm sure that a lot of traditional liberal-arts education is still going on, if only because I see it all around me and because I do it. So despite the apocalyptic tone of the report I am not persuaded that unless we act now the enterprise of higher education will disappear from the face of the earth.

Nevertheless, I have felt for some time that the integrity of academic work has been under pressure from forces that would politicize it, either from the outside in the form of external constituencies eager to have colleges and universities reflect their agendas, or from the inside in the form of student protests aimed at getting colleges and universities to toe their preferred ideological line. The NAS report stands squarely against the second form of politicization (as do I), but participates fully in the first. Consider the following key and representative sentence: "We view the liberal arts, properly understood, as fostering intellectual freedom, the search for truth, and the promotion of virtuous citizenship." Fostering intellectual freedom? Yes! Search for truth? Yes! Promotion of virtuous citizenship? No! Promoting virtuous citizenship is no doubt a worthy goal, but it is not an academic goal, because, like the programs the report derides, it is a political goal.

A simple question makes my point. What is the content of "virtuous"? The answer will vary with the varying views of what obligations citizenship brings with it. For the authors of the NAS report, virtuous citizenship means love of country and "a commitment to our form of self-government." For the faculty and students who practice civic engagement, virtuous citizenship means a radical questioning of our forms of government and a resolve to restructure them so that they reflect (insofar as possible) the ideal of social justice. This difference is obviously political and amounts to a quarrel between opposing views of what form of citizenship universities should foster. But because my position is that the university should not foster any form of citizenship — at least not as part of a design; the fostering might well occur as an unintended side-effect — I find both parties off base because they are in their different ways deforming the educational enterprise by bending it to a partisan purpose.

A director of a service-learning institute quoted in the report declares that "The crux of the debate is whether education should provide students with the skills and knowledge base necessary to fit into the existing social structure or prepare them to engage in social transformation." The right answer is "neither of the above." Neither social transformation nor unabashed patriotism is an appropriate goal of the classroom experience. The report declares that the proponents of civic engagement "cannot distinguish education from progressive activism." The NAS cannot distinguish education from conservative activism.

That activism takes an ominous turn when the report lists its recommendations, which include urging "citizens groups around the country" to sue universities promoting the New Civics and asking legislatures to "freeze or curtail all federal and state funding for service-learning and civic engagement." In short, send in the police because the inmates are

obviously not to be trusted to run the asylum. The content of civics education, the report concludes, should be stipulated by elected officials (who, it is asserted, know better than anyone what citizenship is), and a "publicly funded university should teach precisely the civics education the legislature requires." So much for an autonomous university and a search for truth unimpeded by external constituencies. The state will tell you what to say and you will say it.

This unpalatable conclusion diminishes the value of the report as a whole despite the cogency of many of its points. I agree that colleges and universities should teach civic literacy rather than civic advocacy. I agree that while volunteerism is in general a good thing, it is not an academic good thing and those who take it up should not receive academic credit for doing so. I agree that students "should possess a basic understanding of their government" and that colleges and universities should play a part in providing that understanding. I don't agree that the content of that understanding should be dictated by government officials, and I find it odd that an essay claiming to defend traditional liberal education against the incursion of politics ends by inviting the politicians in. One might say that the cure is worse than the disease, but that would not be quite right: The cure is the disease.

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