

Rebuilding Public Trust in an Age of Anti-Intellectualism

SOCIOBIOLOGIST E. O. WILSON'S COGENT OBSERVATION that contemporary society is "drowning in information, while starving for wisdom" is accompanied by his prediction that "the world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely."¹ Wilson's comments highlight both the value of a liberal education and the ideal of an educated citizenry in an age when the democratization of information through the Internet has given rise to a new wave of anti-intellectualism—one grounded in the denial of reason and the distrust and disdain of experts. The result has been an increasing polarization of American society and an entrenched refusal to countenance opposing points of view, contributing to a marketplace of ideas at risk of falling

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prey to those who have the resources to control the shaping of public opinion and policies. In this arena, asserted claims be-

come orthodoxy despite the absence of evidence and in the face of enduring questions. Indeed, nearly a century and a half after her death, there is an ostensibly burgeoning allegiance to the advice given by the poet Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies."²

During the opening plenary of AAC&U's 2017 annual meeting, "Rebuilding Public Trust in the Promise of Liberal Education and Inclusive Excellence," I argued that leaders in the academy must reaffirm and demonstrate the critical role that liberal education plays in discerning the truth. At the same time, if we are to counter the widespread perception that colleges and universities are out of touch with mainstream America, we must interrogate the extent to which existing institutional structures, policies, and practices have perpetuated this misconception. It is a point echoed by Catherine Liu, author of *The American Idyll: Academic Anti-Elitism as Cultural Critique*. In an interview with Saffron Huang, Liu notes that the current anti-intellectualism is, in part, "a reaction against an increasingly organized educational institution that was once supposed to democratize knowledge, but is now becoming more like a cartel." As Huang observes, the fact that many of the most high-profile educational institutions "operate on the basis of exclusion, by test scores or family income," has led to a growing sense of resentment and suspicion by those denied access to the halls of academia.³

Beyond the destructive, disparate impact on underserved students of a national obsession with standardized tests and the persistent myth of meritocracy, structural impediments continue to marginalize the crucial work of faculty dedicated to providing the broadest access to excellence in higher education through humanistic practice. Such practice reaches beyond the gates, recognizing the value of connecting with those beyond the narrow confines of the ivory tower, and refuses to exalt knowledge disseminated in peer-reviewed journal articles above all else. It contravenes the assumptions underlying this moment in the history of the academy when the professional structures of academic scholarship, with its tendency to neglect teaching excellence, outreach, civic engagement, and public intellectualism, are alienated from a more widespread humanistic

comportment to life. These barriers fuel the prevailing rhetoric that reduces the value of higher education solely to job training and positions liberal education not only as a self-indulgent luxury, reserved for the privileged elite, but also as stigmatizing those who question its worth. If American colleges and universities are to make progress in redressing the growing economic segregation in higher education that threatens to destabilize our democracy, we need to expand our modes of engagement to connect the work being done on our campuses with people's everyday lives.

Restoring public trust in higher education and destabilizing the cultural attitudes at the basis of proposals that devalue liberal education will require demonstrating in a more compelling way the extent to which we actually are teaching students twenty-first-century skills, preparing them to solve our most pressing global, national, and local problems within the context of the workforce, not apart from it. But to do so, our institutions of higher education must come together to engage in an honest assessment of our effectiveness and undertake a collaborative exchange of best practices. Indeed, this was one of the primary purposes of our annual meeting. For those of us who believe that higher education is inextricably linked to our nation's historic mission of educating for democracy, it served as a collective call to action to contest accusations of irrelevancy and illegitimacy leveled against higher education.

The articles in this issue, drawn from presentations at the annual meeting, allow us to take stock of the many ways in which our colleagues across the country have taken up this charge. Just days after the inauguration of President Trump and the Women's March of 2017, and amidst reaction by leaders of higher education to the first executive travel ban, escalating controversy around the limits of free expression on college campuses, and unprecedented levels of bias-related incidents being reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center, AAC&U members confronted head-on the most pressing issues of the day. In every case, the authors illuminate why our organization's mission of making liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation of institutional purpose and educational practice is more crucial than ever. And while Wilson posits that "the real problem of humanity is the following: we have paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology," he also reminds us that we can solve the crisis of the next hundred years if we are "honest and smart."⁴

—LYNN PASQUERELLA

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NOTES

1. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 294.
2. Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown, 1961), 506.
3. Saffron Huang, "A Departure from Truth," *Harvard Political Review*, October 9, 2016, <http://harvardpolitics.com/world/anti-intellectualism>.
4. "An Intellectual Entente," *Harvard Magazine*, September 10, 2009, <http://harvardmagazine.com/breaking-news/james-watson-edward-o-wilson-intellectual-entente>.

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