

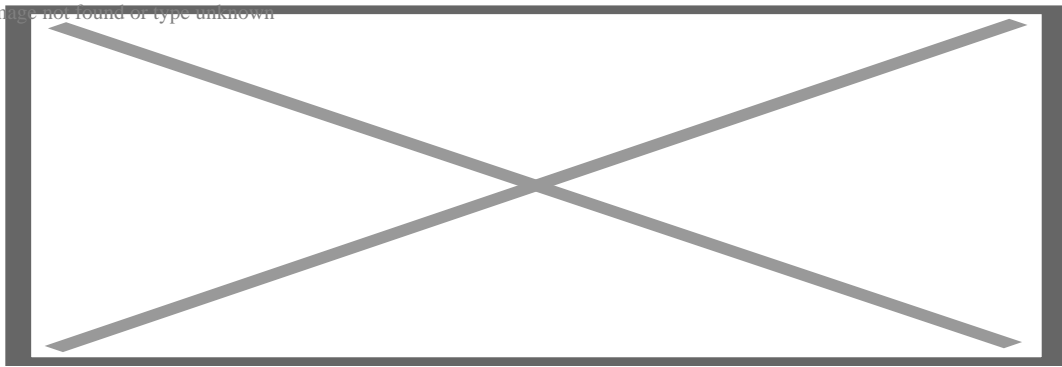
The New Criterion

Notes & Comments May 2013

The case of Bowdoin College

A new report paints a devastating portrait of the current state of college education.

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Bowdoin College quad in the Fall; via Wikimedia Commons user llove2run.

The fate of higher education has been a central concern of *The New Criterion* since our first issue rolled off the press in September 1982. As we noted at the time, what had happened to our colleges and universities did not take place in a vacuum. The revolution in academia was part of a much larger cultural deformation. That deformation was a multifaceted, conceptually slippery phenomenon, or set of phenomena, difficult of definition. But it has long since answered to a familiar epithet: “The Sixties.”

The point is that “The Sixties,” a marker that is as much existential as it is chronological, didn’t happen just in the Sixties. It is still with us. The process of institutionalization, through which the jagged novelties of that malevolently giddy decade were domesticated, drained the element of shock but not the toxicity from its astonishing innovations. Habituation is not the same as inoculation. The passage of time has deposited its reassuring glaze of nostalgia. But the spiritual detonations of that period have fatefully altered many basic assumptions about who we are and how we ought to conduct ourselves in our shared lives together. Which is to say that, whatever complacencies the passage of time have nurtured, “The Sixties” pertains to our present situation, *circa* 2013, just as much as it did to the bell-bottomed, acid-dropping, free-love-touting agitators of the Woodstock generation. Those formative years may have supplied the crucible in which the habits and values of “The Sixties” took shape. It is a shape that has deeply impressed itself on the character of our culture, not least our academic culture.

The New Criterion has regularly reported on the cultural charnel-house-cum-sanctimonious-grievance-factory that is contemporary academia. Allan Bloom, in his 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, famously analyzed a key feature of the new dispensation: the attitude, at once moral and mental (“intellectual” is not quite the right word), of spurious “openness.” “Openness,” Bloom wrote, “used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason’s power.” Hence the great irony that attends the ethic of openness: “What is advertised as a great opening is a great closing.” Liberated from the tutelage of truth, emancipated from the stern strictures of reason, openness degenerates, first, to indifference before mutating into a species of fanaticism. Witness the academic cult of “diversity.” The scare quotes are necessary because there are few environments less diverse than contemporary academia. “Diversity” is the universal shibboleth on college campuses. A stultifying conformity is the order of the day. Large is the number of things you cannot say at most colleges and universities today, narrow the range of permissible opinion about all manner of political, intellectual, and moral matters.

The mildly deprecatory image of academia as an “ivory tower,” as a place apart from the hurly-burly of society at large, no longer applies. Or, rather, it applies, but with a twist. Academia is still a protected oasis—you can gauge just how protected by checking the astonishing price tag—but its signature purpose is no longer to pursue the scholarly life, to preserve and transmit to the next generation the riches of our cultural inheritance. On the contrary, colleges and universities have increasingly been subjugated to a leftist ideological agenda bent on dismantling that tradition. Anyone who speaks of “the riches of our cultural inheritance” would be shouted down as a reactionary whose views were not worth listening to. In the academy these days, the Marxist conspires with “green” warriors to destroy capitalism and the market economy, the feminist wages war on patriarchy, and the post-colonialist seeks to undermine the vestiges of Western imperialism wherever they are found, which turns out to be pretty much everywhere. Meanwhile partisans of various exotic sexual subcultures want to major in their sex lives. They find willing accomplices in college administrators whose chief ambition is not to uphold standards of accomplishment and conduct but to appear ostentatiously enlightened. “It will never be known,” wrote Charles Péguy at the start of the last century, “what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive.” Péguy would have found abundant corroboration for his observation on contemporary American college campuses.

None of what we have just summarized is news. We at *The New Criterion*, along with many others, have been looking in on the catastrophe that is American higher education for decades. We, like other commentators, have tended to tackle the phenomenon piecemeal. A prominent anti-American professor here, a bogus, ideologically toxic program or infringement on academic freedom there. Like others, we’ve toured the menagerie of tenured radicals, poked about the rotten economic foundations of this unsustainable institution, and anatomized some of the preposterous effects of political correctness. What we’ve published amounts to a sort of collage:

numerous discrete snapshots of institutional subversion. No one has stitched together these various depictions of dereliction into a comprehensive institutional portrait.

Until now. Last month, the National Association of Scholars published *What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students*, an extraordinary three-hundred-and-sixty-page exposé of Bowdoin College, an elite, liberal arts college in Brunswick, Maine. Written by NAS President Peter Wood and his colleague Michael Toscano, the report is at once the most thorough, detailed, and comprehensive summary of what's wrong with American higher education ever published; it is available online as a free PDF. It is not for the faint of heart. Drawing on hundreds of college documents—course syllabi, official college proclamations, student publications and interviews, and other sources—Messrs. Wood and Toscano have produced a devastating portrait of intellectual betrayal, moral corruption, and political intimidation. As David Feith, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, observed, *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* reveals beyond cavil that Bowdoin is “an intellectual monoculture dedicated above all to identity politics.” The results have been destructive morally as well as intellectually. “Although Bowdoin still shapes character,” the former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett writes in his forward to the report, “it does not actively or intentionally seek to shape *good* character. The college effectively promotes sexual promiscuity among students, fosters a sense of permanent grievance among students (including a disregard for America), and produces a supercilious knowingness among students that too often flatters rather than educates.”

Again, no one who has been paying attention to what has happened to higher education over the last few decades will be surprised by any individual revelation in *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* It is simply business as usual in American higher education today that one can major in history without taking a course in American history. It is only to be expected that a college will, like Bowdoin, jettison almost all traditional requirements but insist students take a first-year seminar whose subjects include “Affirmative Action and U.S. Society,” “Fictions of Freedom,” “Racism,” “Modern Western Prostitutes,” “Women in the European Union,” “Globalizing India,” etc. It's the same with *Speak About It*, a student play about sex on campus. Bowdoin dispensed with its general education requirement as long ago as 1969, but it requires all students to watch the play. The take-away: “Whatever you decide you want your relationship with sex to be about there are opportunities out there. Whether you want to have sex or you don't, you're looking for love or a one-night stand, you're gay or straight or somewhere in between, it's all possible. And whatever happens remember to be safe, get consent, and watch out for your friends.” No wonder it costs nearly \$60,000 to attend Bowdoin—that level of educational irresponsibility costs a lot to maintain.

What Does Bowdoin Teach? is full of similarly depressing revelations. If you happen to be conservative and decide to go to Bowdoin, watch out. You can expect to be shouted at, intimidated, and ostracized. Around Bowdoin, “American exceptionalism” is a term of derision. *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* quotes a student who was ridiculed by his professor on the first day of class “for proclaiming that I was taking his class because ‘I love America.’ ” Out of a faculty of nearly two

hundred, Bowdoin counts only four or five conservative professors. One-hundred percent of faculty donations in the 2012 election went to support President Obama. One-hundred percent. If you happen to be Catholic, you can expect to be treated as a curious and repellent heretic, unenlightened about the latest word in sexual politics. Sex, as it happens, is a subject that Barry Mills, the preposterous character who is President of Bowdoin, seems obsessed with. On October 25, 2012, on the eve of a state referendum in Maine, President Mills published a letter in the student newspaper urging his charges to vote in favor of gay marriage. Was that appropriate behavior for a college president?

As we say, no particular revelation in *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* is new or surprising. It's the comprehensiveness and granularity of the report that make it unique. And its real importance is not what it says about Bowdoin College but what it says about American higher education in general. The simple truth is that most elite colleges in this country have, like Bowdoin, become staggeringly expensive factories whose primary purpose is not to educate young citizens but to indoctrinate them in a species of intolerant leftist ideology. That's what parents are forking over some \$250,000 to accomplish.

The authors of *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* express the hope that the report will stir alumni, parents, and other donors to seek reform. We are not sanguine about that. Bowdoin, like a few score of other elite colleges, is rich enough to be unaccountable to parents and donors. They process ("educate" is hardly the correct word) some 1,700 students. The college endowment is \$1 billion. You do the math.

Yet reform, or rather something closer to a revolution, is just around the corner for American higher education. It will happen partly on account of the intellectual and moral depredations that are anatomized in *What Does Bowdoin Teach?* But its material cause will be the grubbier economic and technological realities that are poised to wash over the educational establishment like a tsunami. The preening, self-infatuated faculty at places like Bowdoin are in for a rude awakening. It won't, in all likelihood, happen this year or next. But change—big change—is coming soon. You can bet your bottom post-colonial, feminist, Third World, anti-American, LGBT dollar on that.

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