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September 16, 2013

A Conservative Road Map to a Better Academy

By **Thomas K. Lindsay**

A Marxist historian told me sharply some 30 years ago: "The left's decisive advantage is this: We will 'waste' money on projects for years, decades, in order to raise public consciousness, whereas quintessential Americanism lives and dies tethered to its god of the quarterly profit. Viewing education as a business is your fatal flaw."

He might think his forecast vindicated by the *New York Times'* recent sale of the *Boston Globe*. A *Boston Herald* story sparked speculation that the *Times* rejected a higher bid from a conservative in order to ensure the *Globe* stayed in reliably leftist hands. If true, the account is instructive: A conservative might say, "Fools, you squandered millions in service to your ideology!" The left's rejoinder: "Fools, we invested millions in changing hearts and minds. In time, these converts will help us take back those millions, and more -- from you!"

If America's liberal critics believe themselves more philanthropic than conservatives, studies disprove this. But conservatives' generosity doesn't seem to carry over to higher education.

The Left has for a century given toil and treasure to changing hearts and minds through commandeering the wellsprings of culture, Hollywood and the media among them. But the true fount is higher education. Political philosophy professor Harry V. Jaffa detailed this in 1959. "The university professoriate," he wrote, "is the decisive source of the ruling opinions in our country." He added that the "utopianism and intolerance" taught in the universities "would surely spell the end of constitutional democracy." Given the ensuing half-century of Canon Wars, political correctness, and campus speech codes, few on the right now doubt him.

But where were the Constitution-defenders while all this was transpiring? Why the absence of those professing inspiration from Jefferson's caveat that any nation expecting to live "both ignorant and free" expects what "never was and never will be"? Were they, as the left maintains, preoccupied with the price of everything and the value of nothing?

More likely are two explanations. First, many conservatives asked then, as now, "Why flush funds down a system that cannot be trusted to fulfill its donors' intentions?" Recall Lee Bass's failed effort to ensure that his \$20 million contribution established a **Western Civilization program** at his alma mater, Yale. Second, many have felt that reforming a system dominated by largely antagonistic, life-tenured professors, if possible at all, would consume at least a generation's time, whereas here-and-now crises -- rising taxes, strangling regulations, and the growth of government generally -- were and are ubiquitous enough to exercise their efforts and drain their funds. The urgent trumped the high.

Understandable reasons, both, for "letting the universities rot." But America rots with them. The Constitution's defenders recognize this when they lament that they have "lost the culture."

What, then, to do? Bass's experience, as well as my own as a past university professor and administrator, convinces me that universities are unreformable from within. True, a number of donors have succeeded in establishing "Western Civ" programs, as well as centers and institutes focusing on the Constitution and Core Texts, at a few dozen schools nationwide. But these are drops in an ocean of illiberal learning, tolerated because infinitesimal.

If not from within, might public colleges and universities be reformed from without, through

establishing greater accountability and transparency in the operation of taxpayer-funded institutions? Fat chance, say some analysts. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa struck a major blow when their 2011 work, *Academically Adrift*, demonstrated that 36 percent of students nationwide fail to show "any significant improvement" in "critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills" after four years in college. Yet they doubt public awareness of this scandal will spur reform, finding "no reason to expect" students and parents to "prioritize undergraduate learning" over features like "the quality of student residential and social life."

Arum and Roksa may be too skeptical. Texas reformers, for example, have made strides in accountability and transparency by mandating the release of comparative data on schools and making it easier for all to inspect course content. But perhaps the surest method of reform will come from neither the inside nor the outside, but from a lack of money. A 2012 [study](#) finds one-third of colleges and universities now in financially unsustainable positions.

In this crisis may lie an opportunity. Those with the means to rescue bankrupt universities will have leverage -- leverage they could use to erect a new regime. This regime could feature a required core curriculum, including Western Civilization and American government and history courses (largely dismantled since the '60s) and multi-year contracts in place of life tenure. The faculty, with reduced publication requirements, could teach more. Remaining lecture courses could be offered online. These measures could simultaneously increase learning outcomes and reduce tuitions, which have jumped 440 percent in the last quarter-century. These schools could require the Collegiate Learning Assessment (the test employed by *Academically Adrift* to demonstrate widespread poor learning today). This measurement of output might encourage prospective students to look past the inputs-dominated *U.S. News* rankings. Finally, these institutions could offer three-year degrees, which have existed in Great Britain for centuries. This too would lower costs and spur demand at a time when student-loan debt stands at \$1.1 trillion.

This thumbnail sketch of a road not yet taken seeks not to replace left-wing with right-wing ideological indoctrination. Both are anathema to genuine education, that is, to an education animated by Socrates' famous declaration that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Instead, this sketch's modus operandi echoes the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration's appeal to the "opinions of mankind" asks only that the world reason about -- investigate and argue with -- its contention that human equality and individual liberty are the true grounds of justice. It extends this invitation to free debate confident that the world will come to see the rightness of its claims.

The left, by contrast, has embarked on a decades-long project to stifle political debate through the imposition of speech codes, etc. Worse, the Obama-administration-endorsed national curriculum for civic education, "[A Crucible Moment](#)," intends to transmogrify "civic education" into the promotion of radical egalitarianism, progressive activism, and cosmopolitanism -- principles inimical to the limited government championed by the Declaration and Constitution.

I am mindful that my plan would face a number of regulatory roadblocks. Moreover, even if successful, it would take at least a generation to have any tangible effect. So be it. American universities did not turn against American democracy overnight. Why expect an overnight restoration? Nevertheless, if the Constitution's defenders hope to resurrect self-government, it is time they reallocate some of their donor dollars. Such an effort, though fraught with difficulties, may be, like America itself, their last, best hope.

*Thomas K. Lindsay directs the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and is editor of [SeeThruEdu.com](#). He was deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under George W. Bush. He recently published *Investigating American Democracy* with Gary D. Glenn (Oxford Press).*

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