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Losing Our Liberties, One Degree at a Time

By **Thomas K. Lindsay**

Does democratic liberty depend on civic education? America's founders thought so. While we expect students to acquire job-relevant skills in college, we also hope for something more, something higher, than employment training alone, as expressed by Thomas Jefferson's cautionary remark, "Any nation that expects to be *both* ignorant and free ... expects what never was and never will be." Our freedoms are not guaranteed. They must be re-earned, through being relearned, by every generation.

Forget all that now. Harris Pastides, president of the University of South Carolina, has sparked a conflagration by refusing to obey a **state requirement** that public universities instruct students in the "essentials of the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the *Federalist Papers*." His justification for flouting the law? It's **"archaic."** This is but the latest example of American higher education's abdication of its responsibility to do more than provide job training (which, by the way, it's also doing poorly, **say employers**).

It would be unfair to focus our indignation on Pastides alone.

Today, most colleges fail to require even one introductory course in American government. The result? Department of Education statistics show that only one-third of graduates ever complete such a course. More disturbing is the reason for this academic turnabout. Carol Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, reported that "after five years of active discussions on dozens of campuses," **she found** "not just a neglect of but a resistance to college-level study of United States democratic principles."

Required courses constituting a "core curriculum" of studies in American government and American history, as well as economics, philosophy, and "Western Civ," were attacked in the late '60s and early '70s as irrelevant, producing a **decades-long dismantling** of such requirements and with them, the study of the Great Books. The effect has been all too predictable: The landmark national study of collegiate learning *Academically Adrift* employed the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to measure how much undergraduates increase their mastery of fundamental intellectual skills during college. The **study found** that 36 percent of students showed "small or empirically non-existent" gains in "general collegiate skills" -- critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills -- after four years invested in college.

A new program at the University of Texas-Austin is standing athwart this national decline, crying "Stop!" UT's Thomas Jefferson Center for the Study of Core Texts and Ideas, under the direction of professors Thomas and Lorraine Pangle, has launched the **Jefferson Scholars Program**, a rigorous, six-course, unified sequence in the "Great Books and ideas of the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds," open to incoming freshmen in all schools and divisions of UT.

The initial rush of applications for the program from high-school seniors is pleasantly surprising. Two-thirds of applications to date are from students who will be enrolling in schools other than the liberal arts -- nursing, architecture, engineering, business, geophysics, and the natural sciences.

It's easy to see the reason for this enthusiasm. A survey of the Jefferson Scholars Program's six courses will cause famished seekers of genuine liberal education to salivate. The first semester's classes, "The Bible and Its

Interpreters" and "Classics of Political and Social Thought," focus on the theme "Justice, Human and Divine." Together, these courses examine "some of history's most profound reflections on good and evil, on human nature and the character of human excellence, on whether there is a God and what can be known about him, and on the principles that should guide our collective lives as political communities."

The second semester's courses, Discovery of Freedom and Era of the American Revolution, examine the theme "Freedom, Ancient and Modern." The two classes compare the discovery of political freedom in Greek antiquity with its modern understanding and implementation by America's Founders.

The final semester's offerings, America's Constitutional Principles and Masterworks of World Drama, center on the theme "Leaders and Leadership." America's Constitutional Principles provides an "intensive study of the U.S. Constitution, the vision of justice and liberty that it embodies, and some of the leaders and movements that have subsequently worked to realize that vision." Masterworks of World Drama examines "classic plays from antiquity to the present, with a focus on the theme of just and effective leadership." As in the prior four courses, students read a number of the Great Books, here including those of Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Luther, Hobbes, Locke, the American Founders, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche.

Lovers of intellectual and political freedom can only hope that the Pangles, not Pastides, represent the future of the American higher education. "Whenever the people are well-informed," wrote Jefferson, "they can be entrusted with their own government; that, whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them right."

However, if we fail to restore to American universities their proper task of enhancing critical thinking and civic education, in short order we shall lose the capacity for self-government on which individual liberty and limited government ultimately depend.

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