

# THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Democracy's Disappearance

Our students don't understand what it is, so how will they defend it?

By *Roosevelt Montás* | OCTOBER 01, 2017



André da Loba for The Chronicle Review

In this first year of the Trump administration, colleges have emerged as sites of resistance. Many academic leaders have denounced Trump's presidency as a threat to American values and the future of the university. The combative posture in response to a hostile administration is appropriate — but it will prove hollow unless academe also turns inward and examines the degree to which it has been complicit in the rise of Trumpism.

Consider the response from our community in the immediate wake of the election. Many students and scholars declared that the president-elect was "not our president" and circulated petitions urging Electoral College electors to cast their ballots against Trump, no matter who won their states. It was not uncommon to hear commentators lament that Trump's victory was a failure of democracy. The painful fact, however, is that our democratic process worked. On November 9, 2016, we woke up to a democratically elected president chosen according to the quirky procedures established by America's 18th-century founders.

But if the 2016 election was not a failure of democracy, it *was* a democratic groundswell that threatens *liberal* democracy. The pervasive conflation of those two ideas — democracy and liberal democracy — points to how higher education has helped create this political moment.

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Our students, even at elite institutions, seem to know little about the kind of democracy established by the founders. Most of them probably don't know that political philosophers before the 18th century condemned democracy as a dangerous idea. They might be shocked to learn that Plato thought it was a one-way road to tyranny; that Thomas Aquinas described it as a degenerate form of government in which the poor oppress the rich; that Thomas Hobbes believed it would stoke the worst passions of human nature. They have probably never read the *Federalist Papers* and their warning about democracy's tendency "to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens," or considered Alexis de Tocqueville's chilling warnings about the "tyranny of the majority."

Well aware of the vulnerabilities of democracy, the American founders engineered a system designed to check the democratic power they were unleashing. They designed not simply a democracy, but a *liberal* democracy — a democracy with emergency brakes against the force of democratic consensus and hedged against itself by constitutional guarantees of freedom, even when the exercise of this freedom goes against popular opinion.

Liberal democracy is now under siege. But unless our students understand what it is, they will be ill-equipped to defend it. Liberal democratic societies depend on the open flow of ideas, goods, and people; transparent government adhering to the rule of law; respect for diversity; tolerance of difference; concern for vulnerable members of society;

an independent judiciary; a free press — values that are all under threat in our political climate. And there is a case to be made that universities have been not only negligent but complicit in the deterioration of these values and in the parlous state of our public discourse.

**A**cademe has an opportunity, and a responsibility, to influence the political culture in a way that no other institution can. The crucial contribution we can make is to introduce students to the texts, ideas, and norms of deliberative argumentation that gave rise to liberal-democratic politics in the first place. For a long time now, universities have largely failed to make this contribution. Instead, too many institutions offer incoherent curricula that leave students ill-informed about the underlying premises of our political order and ill-equipped to participate in the task of self-governance.

The necessity of educating such citizens has long been recognized as a prerequisite for a viable democracy. "The most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in," Abraham Lincoln wrote, is to ensure that "every man may receive, at least, a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions."

Why have we failed to deliver on Lincoln's modest requirement? What prevents faculties from ensuring that students become better informed about the founding principles of the American republic?

There are many reasons, but foremost among them is the dominance of disciplinary specialization in the university. With the introduction of the elective system in college curricula in the post-Civil War period, students — and faculty — began to consolidate their intellectual activity into narrower and narrower areas of interest. In the sciences, this meant more efficient accumulation and dissemination of knowledge; in the humanities, it meant disconnection from the fundamental questions of human experience that breathe life and relevance into liberal education.

Over time, universities have come to be organized (epistemologically as well as budgetarily) into disciplinary pigeonholes, with faculty positions, promotions, and prestige awarded as a function of specialized research aimed at narrow audiences of academic experts. Moreover, specialization deters the faculty from engaging students on subjects on which they themselves cannot claim professional expertise and leads them to focus instead on reproducing their own professional competence.

The predictable result of this structure of incentives is the neglect of the education of undergraduates as whole persons. We teach them science, or economics, or art, or literature, or marketing, or communications — or whatever our specialty may be — while failing to consider the broader aims of education as training for citizenship in a self-governing society. College curricula have fallen victim to what the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset called "the barbarism of specialization."

To "educate" is to nurture an individual into a particular community. We must recognize plainly that all education is education for citizenship. What we teach, how we teach it, and whom we teach it to necessarily describe a vision of society and of the types of individuals we want to prepare for that society. Values don't merely infiltrate education from the outside, as ideological add-ons, but are constitutive of the very practice of teaching. It is more urgent than ever for colleges to break the stranglehold of specialization on undergraduate curricula and to educate students with an awareness of what is required to produce an informed citizenry.

The place to start is with nondisciplinary curricula that take seriously the history — both admirable and shameful — that gave shape to our political order. A few colleges have undertaken this task, designing common curricula that place disciplinary specialties aside and focus on introducing all students to the fundamental problems of communal living, the existential quandaries of being human, and the political lineage that has shaped Western democracies.

My own university's Core Curriculum has done this for nearly 100 years, but there are more recent and notable programs that have stepped up to the challenge, like Ursinus College's Common Intellectual Experience, Carthage College's Western Heritage program, and the new requirement on Great Books in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

at Sacred Heart University. In each case, these programs have been spearheaded by faculty members committed to broad liberal-arts education and supported by presidents and deans who recognize that a rigorous and common curriculum in liberal learning will distinguish their undergraduate programs in an increasingly competitive environment. Other programs, like the recent Voluntary Core Curriculum at Emory University and Yale's longstanding Directed Studies program, serve as a kind of honors track within larger and less-structured undergraduate curricula.

But these efforts remain exceptions. For the most part, institutions and faculties have shirked the responsibility of forging a cohesive and deliberate curriculum that embodies a vision — if always a provisional one — of the intellectual and moral capacities that will enable students to live full lives as members of a democratic society.

**A** student should not have to go to law school to study the Constitution, nor to graduate school in political theory in order to understand the principles of liberal democracy that undergird our national compact. The disintegration of the undergraduate curriculum across American higher education reflects the inability, or unwillingness, of university leaders and the faculty to have the sometimes contentious conversations that any serious design of a curriculum requires. The prevailing posture has been a kind of epistemological ecumenicalism that refuses to make commitments to any hierarchy of knowledge — remember that the "post-truth" era began in the university as a "postmodern" rejection of objectivity — or to approach the fundamental question that must guide college curricula: What should all students learn? The outcome of the 2016 election vividly illustrates that the answer to that question is vitally important.

Objections to required core curricula are typically couched in ideological terms: that they inevitably reflect a history of violence and exclude the already marginalized; that they always serve the interests of power; that they are forms of political indoctrination. But more often than not, these objections disguise the real impediments, which have to do with the resistance of the faculty to the hard and often ill-recompensed work of teaching outside of their disciplines, and the fear of college leaders that rigorous requirements will

drive away students who approach their college education as the quickest way to a decent job. Both impediments speak to how the values of the marketplace have deformed the institutional structures upon which the health of a free society depends.

Education for citizenship is not — and should never be — education for partisanship. The "great books" of the Western canon do not, as some conservatives would have it, contain a set of timeless truths beyond dispute. Nor are they, as some liberals would claim, an ideologically debased product of "dead white men." They constitute a tradition of open and unsettled debate without which we condemn ourselves to the provincialism of the present, to confinement within the pieties of the day, and to a sense of moral superiority that has been the enemy of free thought through all of history. The point of studying our political tradition is not to venerate it, but to allow ourselves the freedom of intelligent critique and of creative progress.

Many immigrants like myself understand the opportunity to become "American" as a precious chance to embrace and participate in a tradition of debate about freedom and citizenship. Beyond protesting and issuing declarations of principle, let us make our classrooms laboratories for liberal democratic citizenship. It is the most effective response that higher education can offer in a time of democratic crisis.

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*This article is part of:*

Teaching the Idea of America

*A version of this article appeared in the October 6, 2017 issue.*

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Washington, D.C. 20037