

The Decline and Revival of Liberal Learning at Duke: The Focus and Gerst Programs

Russell Nieli

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Abstract Small programs can make a big difference on college campuses. At Duke University, a few dedicated people, with the support of college administrators, exploited the all-too-evident liabilities of curriculum fragmentation, political correctness, and the lack of direction felt by undergraduate students to create intellectually valuable and stimulating new offerings. Russell Nieli tells how the Gerst and Focus programs have influenced that university and others across America.

Keywords Liberal arts education · Duke University · Focus · Gerst · Cohesive curriculum · First-year programs

When a student arrives at the university, he finds a bewildering variety of departments and a bewildering variety of courses. And there is no official guidance, no university-wide agreement, about what he *should* study.... The net effect of the student's encounter with the college catalogue is bewilderment and very often demoralization. It is just a matter of chance whether he finds one or two professors who can give him an insight into one of the great visions of education that have been the distinguishing part of every civilized nation.... The teacher, particularly the teacher dedicated to liberal education, must constantly try to look toward the goal of human completeness and back at the natures of his students here and now. Attention to the young, knowing what their hungers are and what they can digest, is the essence of the craft.

Allan Bloom (from *The Closing of the American Mind*)¹

¹Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987, pp. 21–2, 338–9.

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R. Nieli (✉)
Politics Department, Princeton University, Princeton, USA
e-mail: russniel@princeton.edu

The *À La Carte* University: A Brief History

Contemporary higher education in America is faulted on many grounds but no criticism has been more enduring over the past 50 or 60 years than the charge that the typical college or university curriculum in the United States offers students little more than a smorgasbord of courses and choices without coherence, interconnection, or relevance to the deeper purposes of life. “Over-specialization,” “fragmentation,” “supermarket sweeps,” “incoherence,” “alienating irrelevance,” are but a few of the terms that have been employed to describe this situation, and such terms are just as likely to be applied to the education offered at some of the better liberal arts colleges as to that offered at the larger universities. Even the most prestigious and venerable of America’s older institutions of higher learning—including Harvard, Princeton, Amherst, and Yale—come under the same indictment.

The alienation, disappointment, and confusion that this situation can produce among sensitive undergraduates came to light in a dramatic fashion in the spring of 1964 with the ugly student uprising at Berkeley, California, where the demand for “relevance” from the college curriculum became the watchword of student protest. The modern university’s inability to cultivate the character and intellect of its undergraduate students—a long-time complaint of humanist intellectuals going back to the earliest decades of the 20th century—reached its culmination in an outburst of nihilistic and destructive student rage that brought the issue of university education to the attention of the entire nation. If the student protests at Berkeley proved ultimately anarchic and without constructive achievement, blame for the situation lay as much with the university and its inability to educate or inspire the young as it did with the nihilistic protesters.²

A quarter of a century after the Berkeley uprising the issue of higher education in America again became the focus of national attention with the publication of political philosopher Allan Bloom’s explosive bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. American higher education, Bloom charged in his book, was aimless, soulless, and failed to cultivate the higher existential yearnings of the nation’s most gifted and intelligent youth. Bloom’s critique clearly struck a nerve among large segments of the college-educated public and touched off a protracted national debate on the state of liberal arts education in America. Originally issued in a first printing of 7,000—a substantial press run for a learned book of its kind—Bloom’s indictment of post-1960s higher education in America would eventually sell more than half a million copies in hardback before being issued in an even more popular paperback edition. Bloom would later remark that the unexpected success of his book in terms of sales and national attention had made him into something like the academic equivalent of a rock star. Many who had recently attended our nation’s better colleges and universities apparently found in Bloom’s disdainful critique of the state of American liberal arts education a trenchant and provocative explanation for their own educational frustrations and disappointments.

This report will seek to describe one small but hugely successful set of programs at one elite educational institution in the United States—Duke University in North

² On the Berkeley student protests see Seymour Martin Lipset and Sheldon Wolin, editors, *The Berkeley Student Revolt*, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1965.

Carolina—which has tried to respond to the kind of complaints that Bloom and so many other critics have leveled at undergraduate education in contemporary America. It is based on a series of extensive interviews and discussions carried out in late March of 2006 with several of the people most responsible for bringing these programs into existence. The present writer, a Duke graduate of an earlier generation (B.A. 1970), spent 3 days on Duke's beautiful Durham campus learning as much as he could about both the Gerst and Focus programs that had been commended to him by knowledgeable academics concerned with the sorry state of American liberal arts education. Gerst and Focus have clearly had a major impact in improving the educational experience of those students at Duke who have availed themselves of their offerings, and in telling the Gerst and Focus stories it is hoped that these programs can be duplicated elsewhere.

From Christian Liberal Arts College to Modern Research University

Duke is the youngest of the elite national universities, being established only in 1924 through a huge endowment from the family of Washington Duke and his two sons, James and Benjamin. The Duke family acquired its wealth in the tobacco business after the Civil War and in later years through the manufacture and sale of electric power. In one very important respect, however, Duke differs from the newer national universities like Stanford, Cornell, and the University of Chicago, which were also established by wealthy private benefactors. Unlike these other institutions, Duke was built around an existing institution, Trinity College, which already had its own beautiful campus in Durham, North Carolina, and a well-established regional reputation as a serious Christian liberal arts college. The Duke family, in fact, was an important financial supporter of Trinity College for many decades before there was any intention to transform the college into a national university.

Trinity College itself grew out of a smaller institution—the Union Institute Academy—which was established in 1838 under the leadership of Brantley York, a largely self-taught Methodist minister, who had been asked by local Methodist and Quaker farmers in rural Randolph County, North Carolina, to establish a local school of higher learning for their children. York's school was chartered twice by the State of North Carolina, first as the Union Institute Academy (1841), and later as Normal College (1851). In 1859 Normal College began its long financial and trusteeship relationship with the United Methodist Church, at which time it changed its name to Trinity College to reflect its new religious affiliation. Free tuition was also granted at this time to all students studying for the Methodist ministry.

From its official founding in 1859 to its transformation into Duke University in 1924, Trinity College reflected the vision of liberal Protestant educators who combined a serious Christian religious commitment with a strong desire to create an educational environment that was open to the best in both ancient and modern learning. The pattern can be seen even in Trinity's first president, Braxton Craven, an ordained Methodist minister, who held teaching professorships in the college in a host of areas both traditional and modern. Craven was professor of American constitutional law, Biblical literature, mental and moral science, rhetoric and logic, ancient languages, and metaphysics. No narrowly conceived denominational college,

Trinity from early on sought to establish itself as a Christian progressive institution that would encourage Christians of various denominations to teach, study, and worship together, and to combine the best of both “education and religion.” This latter phrase, in its Latin form, *Eruditio et Religio*, became Trinity’s official motto—the words having been lifted from a hymn by the early Methodist evangelist Charles Wesley.

Under the leadership of John Kilgo, who was president between 1894 and 1910, Trinity established itself as one of the South’s most distinguished liberal arts colleges, and one of the few small colleges in the South to become known outside the region. Kilgo was a preacher of great power, and during his tenure one can see at work the faint stirrings of the kind of progressive Christianity that would become such an important force in the South during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s. Though Kilgo was Trinity’s leader at the very time that the Jim Crow philosophy of segregation and white supremacy was reaching the peak of its influence and cultural dominance in the South, under his guidance Trinity College established itself as a distinctly moderate voice on the racial issues of the day. A pivotal event of the time was the visit of Booker T. Washington to the Durham County Colored Fair in October of 1896. While Washington was in Durham, Kilgo invited the famous black leader to speak in Trinity’s chapel, a gesture unprecedented in the South in the Jim Crow era. Trinity was the first white Southern college to extend such an invitation to Washington, who was grateful enough to remember the event in his autobiographical, *Up From Slavery*, where Trinity College found itself mentioned among the nation’s top colleges and universities: “It has been my privilege,” Washington wrote, “to deliver addresses at many of our leading colleges including Harvard, Yale, Williams, Amherst, Fisk, the University of Pennsylvania, Wellesley, the University of Michigan, Trinity College in North Carolina, and many more.”³

Washington would also be prominent in another development that occurred during Kilgo’s presidency—the so-called Bassett Affair involving the Trinity history professor John Spencer Bassett. In a 1903 article published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* Bassett praised Booker T. Washington as a man second in stature only to Robert E. Lee among the great Americans of the past hundred years—an assertion many whites at the time found outrageous. It was the kind of remark that in the minds of white supremacists amounted to a sort of racial treason. Powerful voices outside of Trinity, including influential Democratic politicians, called for Bassett’s dismissal, and not wanting to cause trouble, Bassett offered to resign. With Kilgo’s support, however, Trinity’s Board of Trustees voted 18–7 not to accept Bassett’s resignation—a vote that would later be heralded as a victory for both academic freedom and racial tolerance. Two years after the Bassett incident, President Theodore Roosevelt, during a visit to the Trinity campus, praised the college for the courageous stance it had taken in the Bassett affair in defense of free inquiry and free speech.⁴

Kilgo was succeeded as president in 1920 by William Preston Few, who was the driving force behind the transformation of Trinity College into a major national

³ Cited in “Booker T. Washington’s Visit to Trinity College,” www.lib.duke.edu/archieve/history/Washington_bt.htm. The material on Washington is taken from this article.

⁴ See “Duke University – Beginnings,” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duke_University.

university. Few was a man of extraordinary talent and vision, who believed that it was possible to combine the best of a Christian liberal arts college with the diverse educational opportunities offered by a modern research university. Southern reared and Harvard educated, Few was a champion of the ideal of the New South that would bring higher education in the South into line with the advanced learning obtainable elsewhere. A pious Methodist laymen, Few believed that Trinity College's long-time motto, *Eruditio et Religio*, could serve as the guiding principle for the new university he envisioned, and the Latin phrase itself would be adopted as Duke's official motto. *Eruditio et Religio* remains to this day Duke's motto and is prominently displayed at the base of the university's official seal.

To accommodate a much larger faculty and student body the Trinity College campus was expanded with the addition of several new buildings, which were fashioned in the striking, red-brick Georgian style of architecture endemic to the region. The main campus of the new university, however, was built on a new tract of land approximately a mile and a half from the existing Trinity campus and became known as the West Campus to distinguish it from the much smaller East Campus of the older Trinity site. Built in classic Gothic style, Duke's West Campus sports a magnificent Gothic cathedral with a soaring 210-ft tower that occupies the center of the campus. Important times and events of the academic and liturgical year are announced by its fifty-bell carillon. The choice of Gothic architecture with a chapel dominating the landscape seems to have been made for religious reasons and out of a desire to imitate the architectural style found at some of America's oldest institutions. Visitors to Duke today are struck by its architectural similarity to Princeton, whose nineteenth-century buildings may have partly served as an architectural model. (It is an urban legend, however—one widely circulated—that James B. Duke sought to purchase Princeton if the university would only change its name to Duke but decided to build a Southern university only after being rebuffed by Princeton's trustees. Actually, James and Benjamin Duke, perhaps reflecting their Methodist beliefs in Christian humility and anonymous giving, originally objected to the new university bearing the family name but were persuaded to change their mind by Few, who believed that the new university would flourish better with a more unique institutional name than the more common Trinity.⁵)

Few was college president for a very long time—he became Trinity's president in 1910 and served as president of the new university until his death in 1940—and his vision and character left an immeasurable stamp on the new university. The enduring impact of Few is noted on Duke's official website: "Just as Few often emphasized that Duke University owed its rapid development to the strengths of Trinity College, the stature of the University today is due in large measure to the ideals and talent of William Preston Few."⁶ Few knew exactly what kind of university he wanted Duke to become, and his vision seems to have been shared by the Duke family and most of the members of the Board of Trustees. That vision was succinctly summarized in a mission statement contained in the bylaws of the act of endowment for the new university, which Few had inscribed on a permanent metal plaque and placed at the

⁵ See www.lib.duke.edu/archives/history/narrativehistory.htm.

⁶ See www.lib.duke.edu/archives/history/presidents.htm.

center of the main campus in front of the university chapel. The plaque still stands today and reads,

The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teaching and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; to advance learning in all things of truth; to defend scholarship against all false notions and ideals; to develop a Christian love of freedom and truth; to promote a sincere spirit of tolerance; to discourage all partisan and sectarian strife, and to render the largest permanent service to the state, the nation, and the church. Unto these ends shall the efforts of this university always be administered.⁷

The statement is striking for its combination of devout Christian piety, love of learning, defense of scholarly inquiry, political and religious tolerance, and the ennobling ideal of action directed in the service of the common good. It was a reflection of the highest ideals of late nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal Protestantism, and would have been music to the ears of men like Noah Porter or James McCosh in an earlier era. The educational ideal enshrined in the mission statement would stamp the character of Duke University for at least a generation after its founding, and as late as the mid-1960s (when the present writer first entered Duke as a freshman), a faint echo of it could still be discerned. It could be seen, for instance, in the large religion department and divinity school prominently placed near the center of the campus; in the religiously based interest in the civil rights movement of the era;⁸ in the respect for Higher Biblical Criticism and the requirement that all arts and science majors (the vast majority of the undergraduate body) take a scholarly two semester religion course focused on the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament; in the requirement that all students take an introductory course in a modern natural science; and in the requirement of a four semester Great Books-type English literature sequence focusing on the greatest of English and American writers from Chaucer to Eliot. The ideals of a Christian liberal arts college and a modern research university may ultimately be at odds, but Duke in its early days probably did as good a job as possible in uniting these goals and in

⁷ George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p. 322.

⁸ As early as the late 1940s members of Duke's Divinity School addressed Duke's whites-only admission policy using appeals to Christian values that would prefigure the later protests of the Black Church led civil rights movement. A May, 1948, petition signed by Duke Divinity School students reads: "To the administration and faculty of the Divinity School of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina: We, the undersigned, students of The Divinity School of Duke University, would welcome the fellowship, stimulation, and fuller Christian cooperation that we feel would exist here if Negro students were to join us in our common Christian study as ministers of the Gospel. ... We, the undersigned students, hereby request that serious consideration be given ... to the admission of Negroes to the Divinity School as day-students without affecting the general university policy." Quoted on the Duke website, www.lib.duke.edu/archives/history/desegregatuib.htm. Long before other white universities in the South were willing to take the integrationist plunge, Duke's University Council in January, 1956, called for the admission of "duly qualified Negroes in such areas of advanced study in the University as might prove desirable and feasible," though its recommendation didn't become a reality until 1961. (This was still ahead of the pace of most other white colleges and universities in the South, which didn't integrate until threats of federal financial withholdings forced them to do so following passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.)

instilling a respect for Christian religious values, traditional Western high culture, and the best in modern learning.

Students completing a Duke undergraduate degree before the mid-1960s were likely to know not only that the book of Job is part of the Old Testament, but were likely to have read the book and reflected upon its contents as part of their freshman religion course. They would most likely have been exposed to some of the better known works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Donne, Wordsworth, Yeats, Shaw, O’Neil, Faulkner, Joyce, and Eliot—and their teachers would with equal likelihood have been men and women with both knowledge of, and deep appreciation for, the greatness of the works they read. They would have known the meaning of words and phrases like iambic pentameter, eschatology, romantic poet, Magna Charta, Synoptic Gospel, Elizabethan drama, Renaissance man, baroque art, Aeschylean tragedy, Platonism, the Reformation—and most of the hundreds of other terms E.D. Hirsch says all literate Americans should know.⁹ They would, in short, be in possession of a core knowledge of Western history, religion, literature, and ideas, in addition to whatever specialized body of knowledge they had acquired in their major field of concentration. In a word, they were educated Americans, and if their religious formation fell short of what might be found in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century denominational liberal arts colleges, where daily chapel service and periodic examination of conscience were the order of the day, at least they would have known something about the major religious, literary, and philosophic developments that had formed the heart of Western culture. And they would have one huge advantage over their eighteenth and early nineteenth century counterparts: many would have acquired knowledge in a useful technical field like economics or chemistry that would enable them to pursue a constructive occupation in a world of ever more advancing technology.

The Chaos of the Late 1960s, the Fish Era, and the post-Fish Thermidor

For anyone entering Duke as an undergraduate in the 1970s or later the vision of William Preston Few was history. The ideal of combining the best of a Christian liberal arts college with that of a large modern university was no longer a living reality on the Duke campus. The ideal had begun to fade even before the 1960s, but it is clear, not only in retrospect but at the time that it occurred, that it was during the tumultuous era of the late 1960s and early 1970s that the university Few and the Duke family had created was transformed into something very different.

A major impetus to change was, of course, the student uprisings of the period, and the demand for more individual freedom in the choice of elective subjects. In short order Duke, like many other universities at the time, changed its mixed system of course selection that had combined a modest core curriculum requirement with generous elective possibilities into the now familiar system of distribution-only requirements that mandate no specific required courses as long as each student’s course selection is sufficiently scattered among different departments and consistent

⁹ E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1987.

with the requirements of the student's selected major. Gone were the days when almost all Duke students would have read *The Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost*, and *King Lear*; when one could strike up a conversation with even a Duke chemistry or biology major on the differences between St. John's Gospel and the Synoptics; when students eagerly debated in their dorm lounges whether Yeats, Eliot, and Pound were fascists or high-minded traditionalists; and when Southern students and faculty took special pride in the outstanding literary achievements of the great Southern writers. The ideal of a liberally educated citizen gave way to student demands for greater individual choice and an *à la carte* curriculum.

The 1980s at many colleges and universities brought serious soul-searching over what had transpired over the previous period, and there was a modest return to the idea of a minimal core curriculum. Prominent conservative voices including Education Secretary William Bennett, NEH head Lynne Cheney, and scholar Allan Bloom all counseled a return to more traditional notions of a liberal arts education. At this time, however, Duke took a very different turn, and particularly in the form of its English and comparative literature departments sought to assemble the most influential group of anti-traditionalists—deconstructionists, postmodernists, Marxists, feminists, “queer theorists”—of any university in the nation. And in this endeavor it clearly succeeded.

Success was largely achieved because of the support of the Duke administration, especially dean of arts and sciences Richard A. White, and the new president of Duke, Keith Brodie, who took office in 1985 after the more traditional Terry Sanford, Duke's president since 1969, resigned to run for the U.S. Senate. Brodie and White wanted to raise Duke's humanities departments to national prominence, and they were persuaded that the best way to do this was by hiring a stellar cast of radical *avant-garde* literary theorists, who, if nothing else, would generate a great deal of publicity and excitement about modern literary criticism that would put Duke's literature departments on the map. Concern for the quality or value of what would be taught appeared to be quite secondary, if it mattered at all. Duke's vice-provost Malcolm Gillis explained the thinking to Dinesh D'Souza in a 1990 interview. Defending the hiring of Duke's controversial literary theorists, Gillis said to D'Souza, “What I do know is that these fellows generate a lot of sparks. ... Look, what we wanted was academic excitement, and these fellows sure knew how to generate that. They are cutting edge. Whatever they're doing, they get attention. That's our objective. ... Do you know that applications for our graduate program are up 340 percent in the last five years?”¹⁰

The point man in this ambitious project to make Duke humanities “cutting edge” was Stanley Fish, a leading postmodernist literary theorist, who was hired away from Johns Hopkins in 1985 to become the chairman of Duke's English department. Fish was instrumental in bringing to Duke many other scholars who shared his doubts about the value of traditional approaches to literary criticism and the evaluation of classic texts.¹¹

¹⁰ Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*, The Free Press, New York, 1991 pp. 167, 161.

¹¹ Besides the chapter in D'Souza's book, see the article by Scott Heller on Duke's English department in the Fish era, “A Constellation of Recently Hired Professors Illuminates the English Department at Duke,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 1987, pp. 12–15.

He had done early and generally respected scholarly work on John Milton, but what established Fish's reputation among the *avant-garde* was his 1980 book, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*,¹² in which he attacked the idea that in interpreting literature there is such a thing as objective interpretations, objective texts, or objective truth. The idea that has generally prevailed in literary theory, Fish explained, is that there is a real, true, or objective meaning of an author's writing, one usually identified with the author's intention, and that the job of the critic or interpreter of literature is to discover this real, true, or objective meaning. Such a view, Fish argued, is naïve because it fails to appreciate the constitutive nature of the reader's input into the interpretative process and of the community of interpreters for whom a literary critic writes.

Even what constitutes a "text," said Fish, is a product of the interaction of a reader–interpreter upon words and sentences, which have no independent or objective meaning outside the mind of those doing the reading and interpreting. The text, he held, has no objective existence apart from interpreters and their interpretive communities. "The text is always a function of interpretation," he wrote; it is "produced" by interpreters, and contrary to the conventional wisdom, has no interpretation-independent life by means of which multiple or conflicting interpretations could be judged as true or false, adequate or inadequate.¹³ Since the text has no independent life of its own, according to this view, it cannot, Fish argued, "be the location of the core of agreement by means of which we reject interpretations."¹⁴ According to the conventional, objectivist model of literary criticism, Fish explained, "critical activity is controlled by free standing objects in relation to which its accounts are either adequate or inadequate." But according to Fish's model "critical activity is constitutive of its object." "In one model the self must be purged of its prejudices and presuppositions so as to see clearly a text that is independent of them; in the other, prejudicial or perspectival perception is all there is, and the question is from which of a number of equally interested perspectives will the text be constituted."¹⁵

Interpretation and literary criticism on Fish's view would seem to involve a highly subjective process that accords a ridiculously expansive role to the reader–interpreter in determining the meaning of what is being read. And this is indeed the case, though Fish stressed that the reader–interpreter is always constrained by what he calls the "boundaries of the acceptable," which are determined by the interpretive community in which the literary critic lives and breathes and has his cultural being. Examples of such "interpretive communities" might include academic English or comparative literature departments, various scholarly journals and their editorial boards, popular newspapers and magazines, sectarian religious publications, etc. These institutions, says Fish, determine the "cannons of acceptability" at any given time, though Fish is quick to point out that these canons can change without notice and are never eternally fixed.

¹² Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1980.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 365–366.

Fish carried out the implication of his analysis to its logical limit: “No reading [of a text], however outlandish it might appear,” he wrote, “is inherently an impossible one.”¹⁶ As long as there is an interpretive community to support it, and as long as objective, interpretation-independent readings of texts are impossible, what may seem outlandish to some can only be so from the perspective of a rival interpretive community, which objectively has no more claim to uncontested truth than any other. Some may see such a view, Fish acknowledged, as a council of despair—if objective truth can never be known about a literary work, some would argue, what is the point of studying it. But Fish vigorously rejected such an implication and claimed that his own, more realistic view of the role of the reader and literary critic is ultimately more liberating and exhilarating than the older view which believed in the possibility of objective truth. “No longer is the critic the humble servant of texts whose glories exist independently of anything he might do; it is what he does within the constraints embedded in the [interpretive literary community] that brings texts into being and makes them available for analysis and appreciation.”¹⁷

Many dismiss Fish’s ideas as loopy and see them as the silly musings of a wacky professor. But his ideas, and ideas like them—loopy though they may be—have been enormously influential in certain academic circles and for anyone knowledgeable of the political demographics of the post-1960s professoriate in America it is easy to see why. For in stressing the central and irreducible element of subjectivity in all interpretive judgments, the Fishian variety of postmodernism not only accorded an elevated position to the role of text interpreter in determining what a text means, but simultaneously provided the interpreter with the absolute freedom to determine what constitutes literary, aesthetic, or moral merit in literature and art. All those individuals and groups who were hostile to the traditions of Western high culture—and in the post-1960s academy their numbers were legion—could find in this type of analytic framework a basis for dismissing and dethroning the great classic works of Western culture that past interpreters, within their own interpretive communities, had previously heralded as great and worthy of passing on to posterity. When to the Fishian type of analysis was added Marxian and Foucaultian type claims that literature always reflects the economic and power interests of its author and intended audience, a powerful framework was created for undermining the authority and appeal of the traditional canon of Western philosophy and literature. The supposedly Great Books of the Western tradition could then be dismissed as the partisan propaganda of dead, white, heterosexual, property-owning, European males, and be replaced by a reading list more congenial to the sensibilities of academic feminists, Marxists, deconstructionists, “queer theorists,” and Third-Worldists.

For those holding more conventional classic or Christian beliefs about the content of a well-structured liberal arts education, however, the effect of these developments on the curriculum of the Duke English department was a disaster. By the late 1980s it was possible to graduate as an English major at Duke without having read a single word of Shakespeare or of any of the other great English or American authors from Chaucer to the present. While other universities in the 1980s were slowly bringing

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

back some of their older course requirements—rashly jettisoned they came to believe in the frenetic years of the late 1960s—Duke’s English department at this time embarked on a different course and decided to abandon even its minimal historical distribution requirement for departmental majors. In the Fish years Duke English majors could spend almost all their reading and class time studying American westerns, twentieth century feminist literature, Marxist literature, science fiction novels, contemporary popular novels, and the works of African American and Third World writers. And they would have a rich opportunity to explore these works with flamboyant professors who approached the material from a variety of popular left-of-center viewpoints. Since merit, according to Fish, always reflects a political perspective that wrongly claims for itself “the mantle of objectivity,” and since “all educational decisions are political by their very nature,”¹⁸ it didn’t seem much of a problem for a department dominated by thinkers like Fish to replace the traditional canon of English and American literature with one dearer to the hearts of the literary *avant-garde*.

Ironically, opposition to some of the ideas and changes that were introduced during the Fish years came from two of the English department’s black professors, Kenny Williams and Henry Louis Gates. Williams, whose position on the Duke English faculty predated the Fish era, was a traditionalist in her literary tastes and was appalled by the take-over of the English department by postmodernist radicals who had little respect for the literary culture of the Christian West. From her perspective, the English department had succumbed to the onslaught of Young Turks whose orchestrated assault against an older and more genteel academic establishment was largely successful because of the latter’s inability to fight vigorously enough for the older ideals. Williams would later join the National Association of Scholars, a Princeton-based advocacy group dedicated to combating left-wing political correctness and threats to academic freedom and free speech on college campuses.

Henry Louis Gates was hired away from Cornell to join the Duke faculty in 1989, and although moderately left-of-center in his political and cultural leanings, he was not an enthusiast for much of what was going on in the late 1980s in the area of literary theory. Unlike many of his colleagues in Duke’s English and African American studies departments, Gates believed that there really were objective standards of merit in literature, and that what is best should be singled out for special attention and study. He was particularly concerned to identify the best in underappreciated African American writers and have it read by students alongside the best writing produced by white Europeans and Americans. Although somewhat disinclined to admit it, Gates, like Kenny Williams, was in many ways a literary traditionalist.

“I’m much more conservative than my colleagues,” Gates acknowledged in a 1990 interview. “When I was in grad school in the 1960s everything black that could be found was reproduced. But some of it was terrible. We’ve got to make discriminations within the corpus of black literature, and keep that which is worth keeping. I do believe that some works are better than others. Some texts, black or

¹⁸ D’Souza, op. cit., p. 176.

white, use language that is more complex, more compelling, richer. I'm not in favor of Chinese lantern literature, you know, paper thin and full of hot air. I believe we can find works by blacks that are complex and reflect layers of experience otherwise scarce, otherwise ignored. My friends on the left think I'm hopeless."¹⁹ Gates went on in the interview to explain that as a black man he enjoyed a certain immunity from the fierce criticisms of his more radical white colleagues, which made it easier for him to survive in Duke's new postmodernist milieu. "You can't criticize black people too much or you'll be called a racist," he noted.²⁰

The Duke postmodernists of the 1980s and 1990s led a movement that certainly had an impact on the Duke curriculum and the tenor of intellectual life on the Duke campus. The movement they led, however, lacked endurance and staying power. In part this was due to the fact that unlike the upheavals of the late 1960s, which involved large numbers of radicalized students successfully intimidating often craven administrators and faculties, literary postmodernism was a movement led largely by a small coterie of quirky professors, many of them "tenured radicals" from the 1960s, who enjoyed only limited support from the generation of college students coming of age during this period. Whereas the radical leftist professors of the 1960s, such as Herbert Marcuse and C. Wright Mills, enjoyed enormous popularity among substantial segments of the Baby Boom generation of college students, the leading postmodernist literary theorists of the 1980s and 1990s enjoyed no comparable popularity with Generation Xers, whose enthusiasm for radical politics and radical philosophical theories was much more subdued than their parents'.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the general discrediting of Marxist and Marxist-influenced ideas had much to do with this development. An equally important effect was produced by the revelation that Yale literature professor Paul de Man, who was one of the leading lights in the development of postmodernist and deconstructionist literary theory, had as a young man in occupied Belgium written articles for a collaborationist newspaper in which he parroted the Nazi line about the Jews. Even for postmodernists, collaborating with Nazis was beyond the pale and universally judged to be evil.

An additional factor in the postmodernist decline was the enormous publicity generated by Alan Sokol's pseudo-arcane parody of postmodernist theoretical writing. Sokol, a mathematical physicist at New York University, wrote a tongue-in-cheek article parodying the style and thought of literary postmodernists which made absurd claims about the allegedly subjective nature of the physics discipline and about a supposed convergence between modern physics and postmodern hermeneutical theory. Its concluding paragraph was so over-the-top that it is worth quoting at length:

Finally, the content of any science is profoundly constrained by the language within which its discourses are formulated; and mainstream Western physical science has, since Galileo, been formulated in the language of mathematics. But *whose* mathematics? The question is a fundamental one, for, as [the Marxist theoretician] Aronowitz has observed, "neither logic nor mathematics escapes

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

²⁰ Ibid.

the ‘contamination’ of the social.” And as feminist thinkers have repeatedly pointed out, in the present culture this contamination is overwhelmingly capitalist, patriarchal and militaristic: “mathematics is portrayed as a woman whose nature desires to be the conquered Other.” Thus, a liberatory science cannot be complete without a profound revision of the canon of mathematics. As yet no such emancipatory mathematics exists, and we can only speculate upon its eventual content. ...²¹

Incredibly, Sokol’s article was taken seriously when submitted to the editors of the leading postmodernist literary journal, *Social Text*, which, failing to realize the absurdity of its claims and its mocking parody of postmodernist jargon, duly published the article in its Spring/Summer 1996 issue.

Sokol’s uproarious hoax received widespread media coverage with extensive accounts in leading national newspapers and magazines in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Australia. From *The New Republic* magazine to the *Dartmouth Review*, from the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal*, everyone had a good chuckle at the expense of the editors of *Social Text*. The stars of literary postmodernism had already been in eclipse by the middle of the 1990s, but the ridicule unleashed by the Sokol parody helped to deprive the movement of whatever vigor it still had outside the narrow confines of a few eccentric academic English and comparative literature departments. The Sokol hoax was particularly painful for Stanley Fish, who had been instrumental in founding *Social Text* and gaining sponsorship for the journal from Duke University Press, of which he was a director. Fish would subsequently write a long and somber op-ed piece for the *New York Times* in which he accused Sokol of dishonesty and breach of trust in the hoaxing of the *Social Text* editors.²² Unlike almost everyone else, Fish failed to see the humor in it all.

In the late 1990s, the Duke English department essentially imploded, with many of its leading postmodernist stars squabbling amongst themselves and unable to arrive at agreement on what they or their department should stand for. Stanley Fish, who had embodied the dominant ethos of the department since becoming its chairman in 1985, decided to leave Duke in 1999 to take up an administrative position at the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, where he became the dean of arts and sciences. A number of the other postmodernist stars of the 1980s also left Duke around this time. The Duke English department experienced its own post-postmodernist Thermidor.

In a way, postmodernists like Fish had blown a great opportunity to enhance our understanding of the relationship between truth and the existence of multiple interpretive traditions. The epistemological and hermeneutical issues with which they dealt had been explored to great benefit long before by thinkers like John Stuart Mill, Karl Mannheim, and Hans Georg Gadamer. A whole school of German sociology that went by the name *Wissenssoziologie* or “sociology of knowledge,” had addressed with great penetration the entire panoply of issues presented by the

²¹ Alan Sokol, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” *Social Text*, Spring/Summer 1996. The article is reprinted in full on Sokol’s website, www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokol. The final quotation is found on page 11 of the website version of the article.

²² Stanley Fish, “Professor Sokal’s Bad Joke,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1996, p. A23.

existence of differing perspectives and interpretive viewpoints, including the key factor of self-interest and personal bias that was always involved in the interpretive enterprise. The older theorists had reached important conclusions that needed to be elaborated and restated anew. Rather than doing this, however, the postmodernist movement went off the rails and would degenerate into a trendy relativism that ultimately ended in nihilism and self-parody.

The older political theorists and practitioners of *Wissenssoziologie* recognized that at least in the areas of philosophy, religion, and literary interpretation, viewpoints are multiple and often conflicting, but they concluded from this not that no objective truth exists, or that truth is only relative to a given interpretive community. Rather, they concluded that truth is usually a complex affair that often requires the synthesizing of a multiplicity of partial truths, which, in their original statement, are often exaggerated or distorted and hence in need of wise evaluation, critical pruning, and substantial reformulation and revision.

What John Stuart Mill said long ago about popular political opinion is equally true of opinions relating to the interpretation of literature, philosophy, and social theory. “Popular opinions,” said Mill, “are often true but seldom or never the whole truth. They are a part of the truth, sometimes a greater, sometimes a smaller part, but exaggerated, distorted, and disjointed from the truth by which they ought to be accompanied and limited.” “In the human mind,” he further explained, “one-sidedness has always been the rule, and many-sidedness the exception.” (*On Liberty*, Chapter II)

The great potential of a university—one that postmodernists completely missed—is that under favorable circumstances the university community can become a great forum in which competing and contrasting viewpoints confront each other in a mutually enhancing and enriching exchange in which participants learn to expand their knowledge, qualify their claims, transcend their narrowness and parochialism, and overcome the single-vision that Mill correctly saw as endemic to the human mind. The cultivation of good judgment and a comprehensive and balanced view of the subject matter must always be the goal of such an endeavor. A well-balanced, informed, and synoptic perspective is clearly preferable to a more narrow, one-sided, and ill-informed one. All perspectives are not created equal.

The difference can be well-illustrated through a look at modern Plato scholarship. The main ideas contained in Plato’s great literary works have been variously interpreted over the centuries beginning with the Neo-Platonists of Hellenistic and Roman times and continuing into the present. In the nineteenth century, German historicists, following Hegel, saw Plato’s writings as manifesting a particular movement of the classical Greek *Geist* (spirit), one that had its antecedents and successors, both of which needed to be taken into account in understanding Plato’s meaning and significance. During the Italian Renaissance many interpreters saw Plato primarily as a mystic-spiritualist writer as did the earlier Hellenistic, Roman and Christian Neo-Platonists and the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century. In the 1930s, with the increasing power of the totalitarian political movements, many leftist scholars came to see Plato as a proto-fascist, a distant ancestor of Hitler and Mussolini, who defended a class-based system of power and privilege and who tried to establish a totalitarian state with men like himself as its rulers. Plato’s defenders during this period contested this view and claimed that Plato

was the founder of the ideal of a transcendent moral law which all humans were obligated to conform their life to. Such an ideal belief, they said, far from being fascist, was really the strongest antidote to the modern poison of totalitarianism and the soul-destroying nihilism and moral relativism upon which modern totalitarianism feeds. In the 1960s then, feminist academics got into the conversation pointing out the many progressive ideas they found in Plato's writings, especially those concerning the greater occupational potentialities of women in contrast to the narrower views propagated by Plato's more patriarchal contemporaries. Plato on this view was a proto-feminist. British analytic philosophers also took part in this discussion, usually taking up smaller issues of argumentation and logic and trying to recast Plato's ideas into clearly stated discursive statements.

One can, of course, throw up one's hands in the face of conflicting interpretations such as these and declare, like Stanley Fish, that "prejudicial or perspectival perception is all there is." One would renounce thereby the difficult task of sifting through differing perceptions to discover what element of truth, if any, each may contain. But the greatest of the modern Plato interpreters have rejected such a defeatist view, and it is for this reason that their work is of such enduring value. In the writings of many of the great modern classical scholars, including Werner Jaeger, A.E. Taylor, F. M. Cornford, Paul Friedlaender, and W.C.K Guthrie, we find the measured judgments of intellectually and morally mature thinkers, each possessing a vast knowledge of the original texts and secondary literature on Plato, who have developed an outstanding ability to extract what is useful and illuminating from a variety of interpretive positions, while rejecting what is clearly unsound or false. While they do not all agree with one another on every point in their assessments, there is a large enough core of consensus among them to guide the beginning reader of Plato to an understanding of what Plato really meant. Alongside the grand achievements of Plato scholars of this caliber, the criticisms of postmodernists appear petty and carping.

Similar examples could be multiplied with almost any classical writer who has been intensely studied. To give just one more illustration (chosen because of the partisan passion it usually evokes) we might consider Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*. *The Prince* is the most famous of Machiavelli's writings and has elicited throughout the centuries probably as many contrasting interpretations as the writings of Plato. It has been viewed as a work of "political pornography," written by a shameless immoralist and "teacher of evil" (Leo Strauss, Irving Kristol, William Shakespeare, the Elizabethans); as the work of a great Italian patriot who sought to rid Italy of enslavement to overbearing foreign powers (Italian nationalists, Maurizio Viroli); as the work of the first truly value-free social scientist (American political scientists of the behavioral school); as a pamphlet prepared by an obsequious flatterer of princes whose main aim was to secure for himself a high-level political appointment (some modern historians); as a piece of satire intended to ridicule and discredit the world of power politics (various modern literary critics); and as the founding treatise in the school of international diplomacy known as "realism" or *Realpolitik* (many contemporary international relations theorists).

Such a multiplicity of interpretations can be confusing and disheartening to the student seeking to discover what Machiavelli really intended by his work, but a comprehensive assessment of *The Prince* would have to address all of these views,

taking into account what is known about Machiavelli's life, about his other writings, about the historical context in which he wrote, about other authors he read, and much more. While a full and comprehensive interpretation of a work like *The Prince* is a daunting task, and one that no single study can do full justice to, it is not a task beyond human comprehension or one that necessarily crashes on the shoals of indeterminate subjectivism. The meaning of *The Prince* may be multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, and in places highly nuanced, but it can still exist objectively, "out there," waiting to be discovered and creatively explored. Postmodernist critics have contributed absolutely nothing constructive to our understanding of how such a successful hermeneutic enterprise is carried out. Worse still, they have developed a quirky, self-defeating ideology that would render the end-goal of such an enterprise in the discovery of an author's original meaning entirely futile.

Real Interdisciplinary Experience: The Focus Program at Duke

Duke's flirtation with *avant-garde* trendiness in the late 1980s did nothing to enhance its reputation among serious-minded people. Its decision in 1988 to require every academic department to hire at least one additional black professor regardless of the availability of black Ph.D.s also did little to raise its academic standing. Duke seemed to be succumbing to the worst national trends towards left-wing political correctness and "tenured radicalism." For Duke supporters who could remember when Duke was still concerned with uniting the best of an older Christian liberal arts tradition with the best of modern university learning—*Eruditio et Religio*—the 1980s and early 1990s were a time of great sadness. While growing in size and in the national prestige of its professional schools and research departments, Duke seemed to be losing whatever remained of its claim to be a place where students could come and receive a valued liberal arts education. The absence of a core curriculum, the bewildering proliferation of ever more narrowly specialized academic courses and subdivisions, the faculty focus on research, the nationwide attack in the name of multiculturalism on the once ennobling ideal of a Western canon of Great Books, the cowardly action of the Duke administration in acceding to the demands of militant students for the racially conscious hiring of educators and departmental personnel, and the university's intoxicating embrace of postmodernist literary theory all contributed to the feeling among many of its long-time supporters that Duke had lost its way. For students seeking a genuine liberal arts experience, one not narrowly focused in a careerist direction nor dominated by faddish professors with little of value to teach, Duke University in the late 1980s and early 1990s seemed like a particularly inhospitable place to be.

Gradually, however, things began to change in the early and mid-1990s as postmodernism and its close ally, Marxism, were thoroughly discredited, and it became clear to many of the more discerning elements among the Duke faculty and administration that entering undergraduates deserved more from their educational experience than a supersized menu of courses from which to hack out a zigzagged program of study. Here is where the Focus program, begun earlier but expanded greatly in the 1990s, began to have an effect. As its name suggests, the Focus program was aimed at overcoming what was seen as the unfocused, smorgasbord-

style of student course selection which had come to dominate large, research-oriented universities like Duke. While initially not intended as an acronym, Focus came to stand for First-year Opportunity for Comprehensive Unified Study. Its main target was the fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum and the splintering of academic inquiry into ever narrower and more insular specializations where specialists in each discipline talk only among themselves while contributing nothing to a wider conversation.

The basic idea behind Focus was to bring together experienced faculty and entering undergraduates in an intense interdisciplinary exchange that centered on a single subject or thematic cluster of subjects which could fruitfully be approached from a variety of academic disciplines. The specific subject or thematic cluster provides the “focus” of study with the faculty gearing all courses within the Focus program both to the subject matter at hand and to the needs and understanding of the freshmen participants. For each general topic or thematic cluster, Focus offers four semester-long seminar courses, each taught by a different professor, usually from different academic disciplines, each coming from widely varying backgrounds with differing expertise. Thirty freshmen students are admitted to each of the various Focus clusters and must choose from the four seminar offerings two in which to enroll for credit. Each of the four seminars typically enrolls about 15 students—the result of 30 students each choosing two courses among four alternatives.

To encourage continued student discussion outside the classroom setting, all of the 30 students participating in each Focus cluster are housed together in a common student dormitory on Duke’s East Campus. In addition, members of each cluster meet once each week for a dinner discussion with faculty members that will often feature a guest speaker or video presentation. Students in each Focus cluster must also take a special writing seminar that is similar to freshman writing seminars at other universities except for the fact that it is centered on topics directly related to their specific Focus theme. Focus students thus get a multilayered immersion in their theme cluster that includes (a) two seminar courses directly related to their chosen topic; (b) a weekly dinner discussion with faculty; (c) a semester-long writing course on their cluster theme; and (d) the daily (and often nightly) interchange with other freshmen students sharing similar interests and taking the same courses who are housed in the same freshman dormitory.

Although the Focus program was originally restricted to the first semester of the freshman year its popularity with students and faculty eventually led to its expansion to include both freshmen semesters so that first-year students who had not availed themselves of the Focus option during their first semester at Duke could be given the opportunity to access the program in their second semester. In recent years plans have been made to offer the Focus program to second-year students as well.

A few illustrations from recent Focus offerings will help illustrate how the program works. A popular recent topic dealt with “Global Islam.” The catalogue description reads as follows:

This [Focus] cluster will offer a broad introduction to the peoples and institutions, beliefs and practices that characterize the Muslim world. A cultural and religious element in major societies throughout Africa and Asia, Islam has also become important in Northern Europe and the Americas during the modern

period. Crucial to the study of Islam and the Muslim world is the comparative dimension. To grapple with the complexity of Islam requires an approach that is at once culturally embedded and multiregional in scope.

Listings of four seminar offerings then follow this description. One deals with “Women and Islam” and is taught by a professor of Arabic literature; a second, taught by a professor in Duke’s religion department, focuses on the Koran and its various interpretations over time; a third is titled “Islam and Comparative World Cinemas,” and takes up the topic of how Islam is portrayed in world literature and film—it is taught by a professor in the comparative literature department; and the fourth, taught by a specialist in Turkish studies, looks at the development of Muslim identities outside the Arab Mideast in the countries of Europe and Asia.

Another recent Focus cluster looks at the “Medieval and Renaissance Worlds” and is described in the official catalogue offering as follows:

All facets of our modern world have parallels in Medieval and Renaissance cultures. This cluster will explore the negotiations and clashes that took place between the Arab and Christian worlds, and the worlds of Church and State. Ranging across the formative periods of Western culture from late ancient to early modern eras, and examining historical, religious, literary, and art historical materials, [students] will examine women’s and men’s lived experience, focusing on beliefs about how people should live and behave. This cluster will explore two concepts vital for the understanding of Medieval and Renaissance cultures: memory and invention. The men and women of the Middle Ages and Renaissance shaped their present—whether real or ideal—by endlessly reinterpreting, revising, recombining, and innovating upon the traditions, ideologies, values, and social structures that they had inherited from their forebears, or that they acquired through contact with other cultures.

Of the four listed seminars following this description, one is taught by a professor of Romance languages and deals with the history and culture of the city of Venice; another, conducted by a professor of art history, deals with the “Architecture of Monasteries, Cathedrals, and Friaries” in medieval Europe; a third, given by an historian, deals with “Work and Worship” from early medieval times to the dawn of the modern era; while a fourth deals with the positive and negative role models represented by medieval saints and sinners and is taught by a professor in the classics department.

Students enrolling in Focus clusters such as these attend two of the four seminar courses offered, in addition to attending the weekly faculty-student dinner discussions, and they must also write regular freshman papers for the cluster-specific freshman writing course in which they must enroll. In addition to these Focus requirements, all students must enroll in one additional Duke University course of their choosing outside the Focus program.

All in all, Focus is an intellectually intense and challenging program, which, like the typical engineering and premed programs at most colleges, has acquired the reputation on the Duke campus of being among the most demanding of Duke University offerings. Despite its challenges, however, students find their Focus participation enormously rewarding, and like Marines who have finished their basic training on Parris Island, after completing the program, many feel that they have

gone through a rigorous and transformative experience that a less intense program could never have provided. It is for this reason that the program has been so popular among Duke undergraduates despite the fact that there are much easier courses and programs available to meet the university's requirements for promotion and graduation. If nothing else, Focus shows that when challenged at least some students will rise to the occasion. Students who have completed the Focus program usually feel that they have really learned something important, that they have had an incomparable interchange with knowledgeable faculty and engaged students, and that they have stretched their minds and their imagination in ways they had never done previously—and perhaps never thought possible. For many Focus students the Focus experience is the high point of their intellectual career at Duke.

Ironically, the Focus program was at least in part a product of the initiative and ongoing support of Duke's dean of arts and sciences Richard White, the same dean who had been instrumental in overseeing the transformation of Duke's English department to postmodernism. White in the late 1980s was disturbed by the fact that many of the more intellectually focused of the high school students who were admitted to Duke were choosing to pass Duke up for places like Williams, Swarthmore, Oberlin, and the University of Chicago—institutions with long traditions of dedication to undergraduate instruction and liberal learning.²³ To deal with this issue, White appointed a Committee on the Freshman Year to look into the possibility of making the first year of study at Duke particularly attractive to the more academically serious of the admitted students as a way of convincing these students to enroll at Duke. The committee, headed by the sociologist Angela O'Rand, eventually recommended that Duke expand its small living-learning program—known as the Twentieth Century America program—which had existed since the early 1970s, into a much more ambitious project that would offer a variety of integrated cluster themes to incoming students to be taught by professors from a variety of academic backgrounds. The current Focus program grew out of the recommendations of this committee.

At the inception of the Focus program in the early 1990s the cluster offerings were modest in number, but they expanded greatly in the latter years of the decade owing largely to widespread student and faculty support, as well as to the aggressive nurturing of history professor Sy Mauskopf, the Focus director from 1995–2003. Angela O'Rand, who is the current Focus director, says that at the outset there was considerable resistance to starting the Focus program on the part of some of Duke's faculty and administrators, who believed that it would be difficult to get faculty from widely varying disciplines at a research university like Duke to come together and cooperate in a program aimed at instructing freshmen. "When we first proposed this program," O'Rand writes, "the primary resistance from faculty was that it would probably be impossible to get faculty from across the major divisions to teach together—particularly to get science and math faculty to work with social science and humanities for very long, if at all." But Richard White, whose academic background was in biology, ignored these misgivings, she says, and moved forward with a strong commitment to the program. "We now have fully one-third of our

²³ Most of the information in this paragraph and the three paragraphs which follow is taken from material supplied to me by the current director of Focus, Dr. Angela O'Rand, email communication 11/30/06.

clusters,” she says, “that include biologists, computer scientists, chemists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, philosophers, linguists, literary scholars, etc. etc. who teach together in these programs.”²⁴

Contrary to the predictions of skeptics, the Focus program soon proved a hit with both students and faculty and has undergone considerable expansion, which continues to the present. Many of the faculty who teach in Focus, O’Rand says, “return year after year because they enjoy the experience so much ... and new faculty approach us annually either to participate in an existing cluster or to start a new one.” Since Focus courses are part of the university’s distribution requirements for students and count as part of the regular teaching load of participating faculty, the Focus program has been fully integrated into Duke University’s official curriculum.

A second misgiving that some had at the inception of the Focus program concerned funding. It was not clear where the money for the program would come from, but with the vigorous support of both Richard White and Dean Lee Willard, outside funding sources were obtained, and Focus today even has its own supplementary endowment with some of the money coming from former Focus students, who are now loyal Duke alumni. All in all, Focus has been a model of a successful living-learning academic program, at once rigorous, challenging and rewarding, which is probably responsible for attracting a number of very eager and capable undergraduates to Duke.

Viewpoint Diversity and Freedom: The Gerst Program

As the phrase suggests “comprehensive unified study” is the great strength of the Focus program and it has done about as much as can be expected from a single program to overcome the intellectual fragmentation endemic to modern university education. In recent years almost a third of all Duke students have participated in the Focus program, and while complaints are sometimes made of the great demands the program makes in terms of the effort and energy participants are expected to invest in it, student and faculty feedback is almost uniformly supportive. During three days of interviewing faculty, students, and administrators on the Duke campus in March of 2006, I was unable to find a single person who judged the program negatively. It is because of such response that the program has been expanded to include second semester freshmen and in the future may be expanded to include sophomores as well.

If the Focus program can be seen as a successful response to the fragmentation and *à la carte* incoherence of contemporary undergraduate instruction, a second innovative program at Duke sets its sights on another cardinal failing of contemporary elite universities, namely, the stifling effect of political correctness and the near absence on university campuses of viewpoints other than those of the political and cultural left.²⁵ This second innovation is the Gerst program—or as it is

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ To get a sense of the extreme political one-sidedness that reigns on most college campuses see Daniel B. Klein and Andrew Western, “Voter Registration of Berkeley and Stanford Faculty,” *Academic Questions*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (2004–5); and David Horowitz and Eli Lehrer, “Political Bias in the Administration and Faculties of 32 Elite Colleges and Universities,” available online at www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/reports/lackdiversity.html.

more formally known—the Gerst Program in Political, Economic and Humanistic Studies. Named after the Duke engineering alumnus Gary Gerst (class of 1961), who provided the initial idea and funding for the program, the Gerst program was largely scripted by Duke political science professor Michael Gillespie, who, beginning in the late 1990s, energetically developed the program into an intellectual and educational force of considerable prominence on the Duke campus.

The Gerst program grew out of the perceived need to counteract the pop-trendiness and political correctness that was so pervasive on many university campuses in the 1980s and 1990s—trends that found such resonance at Duke in the heyday of the Fish era. In an interview Gerst told me that like many concerned alumni of Duke and other elite universities he was deeply disturbed by what seemed to be the general ideological intolerance on college campuses and the virtual exclusion in many places of conservative and free-market voices that did not comport with the agenda of the far left.²⁶ He mentioned in this context the troubling development of politically driven campus speech codes, the several incidences of leftist students destroying campus conservative publications without rebuke or reprimand from college administrators, and the ideological exclusion that refused to consider any idea challenging the hegemony of the political left (he mentioned in this context Larry Summers' recent troubles at Harvard over remarks that offended Harvard's feminists). "I was unhappy with the extreme left attitude reigning at almost every academic institution of any quality in America," he told me. "There is little political diversity [at such quality institutions]," he complained, and he cited in this context a poll by a campus conservative group at Duke indicating that well over 90% of Duke's liberal arts professors are registered Democrats compared to a national average of only about 40%. Diversity is something the elite institutions pay a great deal of homage to, but when it comes to political and ideological diversity they seem to care little. "I don't think Duke is any worse in this regard than any of the other better colleges," he said, "but I see no reason why people who don't agree with what is going on continue to shell out money to their universities." In giving generously to Duke, Gerst was determined not to let his own money further developments of which he strongly disapproved.

Gerst was also concerned with what he saw as the watering down of academic standards through such developments as grade inflation—as a past engineering student at Duke he knew what rigorous standards were all about. And while he was not tied to the idea of a Great Books approach to liberal learning, he nevertheless believed strongly that many traditionally acclaimed works of both fiction and non-fiction were often superior to the trendy writing that had become popular on many college campuses. "There was a period at Duke when Fish was head of the English department," he told me, "where there was this attitude that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' and that there was no such thing as good writing or bad writing." "Students in English departments were beginning to read some pretty trashy stuff as opposed to what people for a very long time considered good writing." Gerst was

²⁶ Quotations from Gerst are from the telephone interview with the author, June 13, 2006.

determined that any program he would fund would be marked by rigorous academic standards and reading material that was selected on the basis of weight and substance rather than popular fashion.

The Gerst program was set up with one overarching theme: to further an appreciation for the role that freedom and ordered liberty have played in the political, economic, and cultural development of America and the West and in the lives of morally responsible individuals. To this end the program seeks to further discussion of differing meanings of freedom and liberty and the role that these differing ideals have played in the abolition of slavery, the overthrow of monarchies and other forms of dictatorial rule, the growth of democracy and national self-determination, the success of movements to guarantee political and economic rights to women and ethnic minorities, the expansion of free enterprise and free markets around the world, and the rise and later collapse of communism and its claim to represent a truer form of freedom and liberty. In terms of concrete activities, Gerst is a multi-layered program that overlaps in one area the Focus program, but includes several different campus initiatives all intended to further an appreciation for the ideals of liberty, democratic governance, and morally responsible personal action.

Where the Gerst overlaps the Focus program is in the popular Focus cluster which it sponsors, the Visions of Freedom. This theme cluster brings together professors from the political science, public policy, history, English, and economics departments to explore with 30 freshmen each year “the various competing conceptions of freedom and their historical origin.” “Do we know what it means to speak of a free people, a free government, a free economy, or of personal or moral freedom?” it is asked in the cluster description, and four seminars are offered that address various aspects of these questions. Recent Visions of Freedom offerings have included a seminar on the classical defenders of liberty in English and American writing (e.g. Milton, Locke, Mill, Jefferson, etc.); on the contrasting views of order provided by a hierarchic model of governance versus the spontaneous order expressed through competitive markets and a freely floating price system; on the criticism of classical conceptions of liberty offered by Marxist-Leninists, fascists, poststructuralists, and certain varieties of feminism; and on the conflicting visions of the relation between public freedom and social responsibility in the works of major Western political philosophers from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

Besides its Focus component, the Gerst program supports several other initiatives at Duke all of which are supervised by the Gerst director, Michael Gillespie, of Duke’s political science department. Gillespie’s scholarly background is in political theory and nineteenth-century German philosophy so it is perhaps not too surprising that in the tradition of the great past thinkers he has studied he has tried to keep the Gerst program focused on the Big Questions that emerge from the Western philosophical tradition, especially those related to freedom and moral responsibility. For those familiar with the extreme narrowness of scope and arcane writing that often appears in academic philosophical circles, the approach Gillespie has taken in his management of the Gerst program provides a refreshing contrast.

The Gerst program sponsors an ongoing colloquium and speaker series that meets on a regular basis in which students, faculty, and other interested parties within the university community can hear knowledgeable academics and eminent public figures discuss topics related to program themes. The Gerst program also sponsors an annual

spring conference that brings together nationally known scholars and others with relevant knowledge and experience to discuss some pre-selected Gerst theme.

In addition to these activities the Gerst program funds a postdoctoral fellowship that permits a recently minted Ph.D. to teach two courses per year at Duke to upper level undergraduates on subjects related to the major themes of the program. Money is also provided for teaching fellowships to graduate students who are in the final stages of their doctoral dissertation so that they can develop and teach courses to undergraduates on a variety of selected topics. Rounding out its teaching component then, the Gerst program also provides money to experienced university professors to develop one interdisciplinary team-taught course per year that is intended for graduate students and advanced undergraduates. Although the content of all the Gerst-sponsored courses is left up to the individual academics who develop them, it is an expectation—if not a formal requirement—that all courses must embody the highest standards of scholarship and make considerable demands upon student participants in terms of reading and writing requirements. Gary Gerst was insistent from the start that any courses his program would sponsor not be hip, cool, wishy-washy, or “gut,” but intellectually challenging and weighty in their course matter. All indications are that these expectations have been met.

The Gerst Program and Duke’s Political Science Department

The Gerst program was quite consciously set up with the understanding that the various courses, seminars, and colloquia that it sponsored would not only deal with big issues—especially those related to freedom and personal responsibility—but also that it would be open to a variety of methodologies, disciplines, and ideological perspectives. Among the latter, there was from the beginning a special concern that free-market, conservative, and classical liberal viewpoints be among those brought to the table.

It is difficult for those who have not spent much time on elite university campuses to imagine just how one-sided and conformist much of contemporary academia tends to be in its political and cultural leanings. In most social science and humanities departments at the better colleges and universities something like a ten-to-one rule reigns supreme in regard to the relative number of professors who consider their political and cultural views liberal or left-of-center—and who mainly vote for Democratic political candidates—compared to those who consider their views conservative or right-of-center and vote mainly for Republicans.²⁷ Duke is no exception to this general rule. A 2004 survey by the Duke Conservative Union, a conservative student group on campus, looked into the party registrations of Duke professors in eight liberal-arts-oriented departments as well as those of Duke’s top academic deans. Most of those surveyed were registered as members of one of the

²⁷ On the near monopoly of left-of-center viewpoints on contemporary university campuses see Daniel B. Klein and Andrew Western, “Voter Registration of Berkeley and Stanford Faculty,” *Academic Questions*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (2004 5); and David Horowitz and Eli Lehrer, “Political Bias in the Administration and Faculties of 32 Elite Colleges and Universities,” available online at www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/reports/lackdiversity.html.

two major political parties with the overall count being 142 registered Democrats versus only eight registered Republicans. Duke's history department took the prize for the most politically one-sided with 32 professors listing their party affiliation as Democrat versus none as Republican.

The one surprise in the student survey was Duke's political science department. Six of the eight registered Republicans that the students were able to locate were from this one department, which also contained 26 registered Democrats. This may not seem like much improvement in terms of ideological pluralism and balance, but such a view would be misleading for two reasons. First of all, a number of the more conservative or free-market oriented professors in Duke's political science department, including its current chairman Michael Munger, are outspoken in their right-of-center viewpoints and make no attempt to hide their criticisms of reigning leftist beliefs. This adds immeasurably to the vibrancy and genuine intellectual interchange that takes place among department members and between department members and the larger Duke community. A second factor, which may be equally important, is that a number of those in the Democratic camp, as Michael Gillespie explained to me in an interview,²⁸ are centrist or "Scoop" Jackson Democrats rather than leftists. Leftists are certainly represented in the department, Gillespie told me—there is even a deconstructionist or two—but the department as a whole displays a genuine plurality of viewpoints unlike most other departments at Duke or at other elite universities.

I asked Gillespie why it is that so many humanities and social science departments at places like Duke are so monochromatically left-of-center in their political orientation. He told me that the ideological polarization of the academy must be viewed within the context of a more general polarization taking place within American society. The military and evangelical churches were becoming just as one-sidedly conservative and Republican as colleges and universities are liberal and Democratic, he pointed out. Self-selection, he believes, has much to do with these trends. Academic professions, he explained, tend to attract those more interested in social causes who are less financially ambitious and less focused on upward economic mobility. "People are not attracted to the academy because they want to get wealthy and Americans for the most part are attracted to becoming wealthy." While more conservatively oriented people might be attracted to medicine, business, engineering, or other high-paying professions, academics tends to attract more humanistically oriented people who harbor grand ideas for social change and often spurn the business world. The net result of this self-selection process, Gillespie says, is the extreme political one-sidedness we often see at many elite universities like Duke.

But the situation has improved at Duke, Gillespie believes. "There's been a moderation in a number of departments," he told me, offering Duke's English department as a concrete example. In recent years, he says, the English department has actually attracted a number of serious practicing Christians, something that would have been unlikely in an earlier period when the department was dominated by radical postmodernists. Even the Marxists have changed, he says. The Marx that gets taught at Duke in various departments, he explained, "is not the Marx that you

²⁸ Interview with Michael Gillespie, Duke University campus, March 22, 2006.

and I knew as undergraduates”—it is a less dogmatic, less deterministic, more cultural-aesthetic brand of Marxism that looks at hip hop movies and their meaning rather than predicting the imminent collapse of capitalism.

Gillespie had considerable praise for many of Duke’s administrators who have supported him and the Gerst program despite their own left-of-center orientations. Many people, he told me, “are bigger than their political ideology,” and one of the great things about Duke, he said, is that there are administrators, who, whatever their political or ideological leanings, are genuinely dedicated to open inquiry and expanded debate. Many also want to see Duke become a place where students can pursue a genuine liberal arts education.

Gillespie’s comments about Duke and Duke’s political science department were generally seconded by Michael Munger, the department chair. An economist by training, Munger is an unabashed, unapologetic classical liberal in the tradition of Adam Smith, James Madison, and Friedrich Hayek. He is a great believer in free markets, competition, and the basic Madisonian principle of checks and balances and separation of powers in politics. The basic economic and political problem, he told me,²⁹ echoing an address he had given as president of the Public Choice Society, “is the design or maintenance of institutions that make self-interested individual actions not inconsistent with the welfare of the community.” In so far as the left has failed to grasp the pervasiveness of self-interest in human affairs, he believes, it has lost contact with reality—and done so in a dangerous manner that leads to both poverty and enslavement. He is particularly dismissive of those who believe that innovation, increased productivity, focused persistence, and hard work can be brought about through an economic system that does not seek to reward these activities through material incentives. “People can imagine economic systems where everyone works well together [without material incentives], where everyone just naturally produces—as Marx said—all that we can. But this imagined economic world has no more empirical content than unicorns.”

Munger harbors no illusions about how far out of the mainstream his free-market ideas are from mainstream academia including mainstream academia at Duke. “My libertarian-conservative views are as strange to most academics,” he wrote in a campus student publication, “as if I were a cannibal or a Zoroastrian dastur. Worse, actually, since those guys would at least be considered multicultural and romantically primitive.”³⁰ Despite his out-of-the-mainstream views, Munger insists that in the political science department at least, his views gain a respectful hearing, and he has high praise for Duke for being a place “where a free-market Republican like me” can become chairman of an academic department. He was not hired for his political views, he says, but they did not count against him either. Echoing Gillespie he told me that politically “our department is all over the map.” “Almost everyone in our department believes in the transcendent virtue of intellectual tolerance and they are respectful of other faculty opinions.” The same is true, he believes, for at least some of Duke’s administrators, though he acknowledged that there are some departments—he specifically mentioned Cultural Anthropology—where scholarship is highly politicized and intolerant of views like his own. Many at Duke on both the

²⁹ Interview with Michael Munger, Duke University campus, March 21, 2006.

³⁰ <http://www.newsense.org/article.php?aid=1>.

left and right, he told me, are genuinely committed to “the transcendent virtue of tolerance and civility,” and for this reason Duke stands on a higher plane than many other universities which are unwelcoming to viewpoints like his own.

“I’ve watched the American academy transformed,” he wrote in the student publication. “Where the left was once *outré*, it is now tiredly and firmly entrenched inside. Because of this hegemony, many faculty on the left have softened into baccate self-caricatures, unable to tolerate dissent, and unwilling to think hard enough to justify their own positions. ... Still, Duke is the least ‘politically correct’ place I’ve ever been. Regardless of the private political views of administrators, the main thing they want is to improve the intellectual and academic atmosphere at Duke. Those of you who have been nowhere else have no idea how precious, and how rare, the intellectual freedom of Duke is.” Before coming to Duke, Munger taught at a number of prominent universities, including Dartmouth, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, though he found the intellectual atmosphere at each of these stifling and oppressive.

The praise that Gillespie and Munger had for the intellectual diversity in Duke’s political science department resonated with comments that were made to me in an interview with Duke’s former president Nannerl Keohane, who during her years as Duke’s president (1993–2004) was also a political science department member. When I asked her about the Duke Conservative Union survey that documented the extreme political one-sidedness of Duke professors, she responded, like Munger, with a comparison to other universities with which she was familiar: “From my own experience at Duke I would argue that Duke is one of the most ideologically balanced institutions that I know. I know for a fact that the political science department, which was my department, has a number of Republicans and libertarians—who agree and disagree about everything—in addition to Democrats and Independents. And I don’t know much about other departments but I know that among major universities Duke seems to me to have more balance and range of opinions than most and certainly part of our purpose was to encourage that.”³¹

In a sense one can see the Gerst program as an extension of the ethos of Duke’s political science department. It addresses serious issues in political philosophy and public policy and does so from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives. At the same time, the Gerst program, by multiplying the number of courses at Duke that reflect this ethos, not only increases the salience on campus of the political science department—Gerst’s institutional home—but helps to further an atmosphere on campus that provides a powerful counterweight to those more highly politicized departments at Duke where open-minded discussion and a genuine exchange of ideas are not practiced. The Gerst program and Duke’s political science department go a long way to furthering genuine liberal education at Duke.

Students, Faculty, and Administrators Speak Out

In the 3 days I spent interviewing people on the Duke campus, I was able to get a fairly good idea of the state of liberal learning at Duke and of both the strengths and

³¹ Interview with Nannerl Keohane, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, April 14, 2006.

limitations of programs like Focus and Gerst in fostering such learning. One of the most knowledgeable and perceptive of the many people I interviewed was Bill English, now a graduate student, who was a Duke undergraduate between 1999 and 2003 and one of the better known personalities on campus as a regular columnist for the *Duke Chronicle*, Duke's widely read student newspaper.

English has thought long and hard about the problems confronting those seeking a broadly-based liberal arts education at universities like Duke, and has written extensively about the problem in his *Chronicle* columns. In one column, titled "What is a University?," he juxtaposed the original mission statement of Duke University so prominently displayed on the metal plaque in front of the university chapel ("The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion ..."), with the current state of liberal education at Duke.³² The comparison was not favorable. Most programs of study currently taken by undergraduates at Duke, English complained, suffered from a "fractured incoherence" born of an undergraduate curriculum and advising system that leaves most students with an education "that appears to be assembled by a random number generator."³³ In another column, taking up the same theme, he said that Duke undergraduates were divided between (a) the "pre-professionals," such as pre-med students, who take a narrowly focused but at least thematically coherent course of studies; the (b) more fun-loving and freer "student consumers," who choose classes "so as to satisfy minimum distribution requirements and maximize amusement and free time"; and (c) the much smaller group of "scholarly students," who really seek a liberal arts education at Duke, one that may not lead to "immediate benefits or job offers," but could "broaden one's understanding of the world," and even possibly "free the individual from the ignorance of youth and tyranny of popular thought."³⁴

It is the students in this last category, English told me, who are often most disappointed by their education at Duke.³⁵ The pre-professionals, he said, have the easiest time getting what they want. They don't expect great intellectual challenges or a general education that will confront them with great ideas or personally transformative visions—and as a result they are not disappointed when they don't get any of these. Those seeking a real liberal arts education—one that will confront students with "the best that has been thought and said"—are most likely to be disappointed, he said, since few students have the foresight or the guidance to put together a proper program from the enormous number of courses at their disposal that will satisfy their needs. Duke students, he wrote in one of his *Chronicle* columns, are subject to "a constant flux ... of values, priorities, reasoning and aspirations ... in which [they] continually adopt and divorce rival versions of student life and are formed, over time, into individuals incapable of viewing their lives as a

³² *The Duke Chronicle*, August 26, 2002. Electronically accessed at www.dukechronicle.com/home/index.cfm?event=displayArticlePrinterFriendly&uSt.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *The Duke Chronicle*, November 4, 2002. Electronically accessed at www.dukechronicle.com/home/index.cfm?event=displayArticlePrinterFriendly&uSt.

³⁵ Quotations from Bill English are taken from an interview with the author on the Duke campus, March 23, 2006.

unified whole.”³⁶ Many students at Duke, he told me, wake up after their junior year with a sense that they have missed something fundamental in their university education and ask themselves, What have I learned? “It’s hard for undergraduates who are not pre-professional to understand what their undergraduate education is for,” he said. English expressed particular scorn for the system of student advising whose inadequacy, he believes, has a particularly harmful effect upon those who are not part of a well-structured pre-professional curriculum. Such students are set adrift into a bewildering universe of course offerings without proper mentoring or guidance.

English was also critical of the general intellectual climate on campus. Aside from certain programs like Gerst and Focus, the general intellectual atmosphere on the Duke campus, he told me, is “insipid and vacuous.” He attributed this to subtle pressures of conformity and a general fear of raising eyebrows that inhibits students from speaking their minds on controversial topics. Even students on the left, he said, sometimes complain about this state of affairs despite the fact that the overwhelming bias among Duke administrators and professors is clearly left of center.

The situation, however, has probably improved, he says, from the way it was during the height of the Fish era in the 1990s. With the collapse of Marxism as a viable economic system and the degeneration of literary postmodernism into what he calls “a parody of itself,” the radical left on campus has been in retreat, English explained to me, and has very little resonance with mainstream Duke students. At a meeting of recent Duke alumni who had worked for one of the conservative publications on campus he got a chance to compare notes and discover how deradicalized the Duke campus had become compared to earlier times. “Duke has improved from the time I first came here [in the late 1990s],” he says; “the far left radicals have less and less of a foothold.” While there are still some departments in which there is “a heavy ideological slant” expressing far-left or far-out views of one kind or another—he mentioned specifically in this context Duke’s women’s studies department, comparative literature department, African American studies department, and English department—student interest in these perspectives has waned and faculty who represent them are much less influential than they once were. The problem today, he says, is “less of a case of the university pushing an ideological agenda than simply failing on a very basic level of being a place of genuine intellectual inquiry.” “Duke University has not learned to sustain a real intellectual community on campus.”

The great exception to this general failing, he believes, is the Gerst and Focus programs on campus. In these programs, he says, there is “real learning going on”—one that all participants recognize as such and usually deeply cherish. He participated in a Gerst-sponsored freshman Focus program and praised such programs for “building off natural freshman curiosity.” Programs like these “are taking some of the more motivated students and matching them up with professors and other students sharing their intellectual goals.” There is an emphasis in these programs, he explains, on classic texts and on trying to capture the “Big Picture,” and most of the students who have been through such programs, he says, look back as they approach graduation with the feeling that their freshman year program was

³⁶ *The Duke Chronicle*, November 4, 2002. Electronically accessed at www.dukechronicle.com/home/index.cfm?event=displayArticlePrinterFriendly&uSt.

the most intellectually intense and rewarding of all the experiences they had at Duke. The Focus and Gerst programs, he says, were intellectually vibrant and alive, in a way that many social science courses are not (the majority of Duke social science and humanities professors, he says, “are not being biased [when they teach], they are just being boring”). For many Duke students, he explains, Gerst and Focus opened up an intellectual space “much broader than that in the typical classroom.” “It was a shock for a lot of us who came out of the first semester Focus program,” he says, “as soon as we moved beyond that environment to the larger university.” Compared to the environment created by Gerst and Focus-type programs, the larger university intellectual environment, he believes, is less open, less integrated, less challenging, and less rewarding in every way.

There really are resources at Duke where a student who is so inclined can get a good liberal arts or general education, English told me, but much of the success of such an endeavor, he says, is contingent upon finding the right sorts of courses, faculty and students with which to connect. “Undergraduate advising at Duke is terrible,” he says, and one of the great advantages of Gerst and Focus type programs, he believes, is that they enable undergraduate students to get to know intimately faculty and other students who, in the absence of good formal advisers, can help in the selection of a course of study well-tailored to their individual needs. “The real value of the Gerst and Focus programs for me was in initiating this kind of serious academic engagement. We were introduced to a body of texts, a body of ideas, and a body of students that enabled us to take advantage of these resources that are at Duke but not so easy to access.”

Of the faculty members whom I interviewed one of the most informative was the English professor Michael Moses.³⁷ Moses teaches a course within the Gerst-sponsored Visions of Freedom Focus cluster that explores the classical idea of freedom in British and American writers from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. He has also been active in other Gerst-sponsored activities including its conferences and colloquia. Echoing a theme taken up by many others, he said that it is increasingly difficult at most modern research universities to get a truly integrated liberal arts education. Some of the smaller liberal arts colleges might be better places to go, he says, if one is seeking the traditional kind of grounding in Great Books or English literary classics “from Beowulf to Virginia Wolfe.” He attributed the difficulties of modern universities in this regard to the fact that “the research goals of the faculty have tended to erode the notion of a common curriculum.” “Departments,” he says, “don’t like to be told by administrators to teach things that fit into an overall plan outside departmental interests or imperatives.” Students seeking a good liberal arts education at places like Duke, he says, need to connect very early on with faculty members or other knowledgeable people whom they trust and who can provide them with good advice

Since Moses is clearly in sympathy with much of the classical ideas on freedom of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British writers, I asked him why various kinds of leftist and socialist thinking, which is out of tune with this older style of classical liberalism, is so dominant on university campuses like Duke. He acknowledged that “there is a pretty hardcore left that remains active at Duke,” particularly in the

³⁷ Interview with Michael Moses, Duke University campus, March 22, 2006.

Literature Department (Duke's designation for what at other universities is called comparative literature), and that the Duke faculty is overwhelming left-of-center in its political leanings (he cited the recent student poll showing a total of only eight registered Republicans among Duke's higher level administrators and the faculty of several liberal arts departments). But he said the extreme ideological skewing of the faculty and administration was due less to discrimination against people with classical liberal or conservative views than it was to subtle conformist pressures that may not even be fully conscious. The kind of extreme ideological one-sidedness that one sees at places like Duke, he told me, "doesn't require any kind of deliberate planning on the part of the faculty." Most faculty members, he says, "are already in agreement with each other so they don't have to say 'we want to exclude such and such people because they have the wrong political views'. Faculties tend to replicate themselves over time and an inertial process develops that reinforces political conformity."

One of the great benefits to Duke of the Gerst program, Moses believes, is that it has opened a wider intellectual space on campus where non-leftist views can receive a fair hearing. The Gerst program, he says, was from the start "very consciously tolerant of a wide spectrum of political opinion. It quite consciously did not seek to exclude conservative, or libertarian, or liberal-democratic viewpoints—which has not always been the case with other programs." Both the Visions of Freedom Focus-cluster and the Power of Ideas cluster, he explains, have attempted to put classical liberal type thinking on the map and expose students to an ideal of freedom which leftist professors often ignore or disparage. The Gerst program, he says, has also encouraged interdisciplinary thinking and the cooperation of faculty from different departments. Largely as a result of the Gerst and Focus programs, he says, he finds himself interacting more with faculty in other departments than those in his own department.

For students, Moses says, the great benefit of programs like Visions of Freedom and the Power of Ideas is the high level of course integration and the exciting intellectual atmosphere provided by a program that looks at a key set of issues so intensely. Many Duke students, he says, are extremely bright, highly motivated, and intellectually curious and benefit greatly from the intellectual challenge provided by Focus-type programs. Programs like the Visions of Freedom and the Power of Ideas, he says, offer students a common set of texts and a much more highly integrated set of courses than they are likely to choose on their own from the smorgasbord of courses available to them in the course catalogue; they have more contact with faculty members than in standard university courses; and they are in continual conversation both in the classroom and in their residential dorms with fellow students who share common intellectual interests. "Students will say 'I never had an intellectual experience as intense or as satisfying as the first semester of my freshman year'."

Similar praise for the Focus program was offered by Duke's former president, Nannerl Keohane, and its present provost, Peter Lange.³⁸ "The Focus program is one of our jewels," Lange told me, "and it is one of the places where we've been a

³⁸ Interview with Peter Lange, Duke University campus, March 23, 2006.

leader. It allows students to start off their careers very early with a well-grounded interdisciplinary focus on a topic that really interests them.” Keohane had similar words of praise. The intellectual experience provided by the Focus program, she told me, is one “few people on any college campus have at any time.” “Students often tell us,” she says, “that it doesn’t really matter if you get your first choice of Focus programs. [Students value] the intellectual experience of having the close relationship with about six faculty members and a limited number of students who all live in the same dormitory and eat meals together, and once a week at least eat meals with the faculty members and take half their course load in this cluster and find therefore that the rest of their time at Duke they are more likely to feel that they can reach out to faculty members.” Students who have gone through the Focus program, Keohane explained, have the great advantage of knowing “more about the kinds of things they want to pursue because five or six different ways of looking at the problem on an interesting issue has been suggested to them in class.”

Both Keohane and Lange acknowledged, however, that despite the advantages of programs like Focus and Gerst, there was a problem for many in getting a good liberal arts education at a large research university like Duke. Students, Keohane says, are often fascinated by the huge range of courses available to them and the wonderful opportunities offered by a large university like Duke. She sees the great range of courses offered to students at places like Duke “as an asset not a disadvantage.” But it is a common complaint of students at all institutions that do not have a well-structured curriculum such as a Great Books program, she told me, that the curriculum offered to them lacks coherence. This complaint, she says, is not unique to Duke nor to the present time—she heard similar complaints, she explains, when she was on the faculty of Stanford University in the 1970s. The problem can be avoided at small liberal arts colleges where faculty and deans can get to know every student very well, but such places suffer, she says, from a lack of the great range of intellectual opportunities offered by larger institutions. “You have to be more of a self-starter on a large university campus,” she explains. “The key is good advising,” she adds, “but good advising is difficult to do well.” And she admits: “I don’t think any of us do it particularly well.”

Peter Lange had similar comments. “We have at Duke,” he told me, “a very vibrant intellectual atmosphere.” “We’re pushing the undergraduate experience hard, and we pride ourselves in having sustained a commitment to undergraduates and to undergraduate education even as we’ve become much better as a research institution.” Nevertheless, he admits, Duke isn’t for everyone. When I asked him whether he would recommend Duke to someone seeking a good liberal arts or general undergraduate education, he said that it all depended on the student involved. For some a small, more traditional liberal arts college, he said, may be more suited to their needs and learning style than a large university—he himself is a graduate of Oberlin and recognizes the advantages of an education at a smaller institution. “If a kid is interested in attending a research university then I would definitely recommend Duke,” he says. “But that doesn’t apply to all kids because it’s not the right setting for all kinds of students, all kinds of learners, and the kinds of experience they want.” Although he didn’t speak in the same language of “self-starters” as Nannerl Keohane, he too seems to believe that undergraduate students entering a large research university would do well to have a good idea of what they

want out of their undergraduate experience or at least the ability to seek out and find knowledgeable faculty and administrators who can provide them with good advice. In the absence of these prerequisites, he believes, students might do better attending a small liberal arts college.

One of the most vibrant—and unusual—persons I interviewed about the Focus and Gerst programs was Elizabeth Kiss, the director of an ethics-related public policy institute on Duke's East Campus known as the Kiernan Institute. Kiss (pronounced keese), whom I had known years earlier when she was an assistant professor in Princeton's Politics Department, has been an active faculty participant in Duke's Focus program for a number of years. She is unusual in that she has strong left-liberal political leanings, but has been highly critical of universities like Duke for their failure to embrace a wider range of perspectives than those on the political left. In an article appearing in a local campus publication shortly before our interview, she said that universities like Duke needed to "confront our liberal bias" and recognize that there are alternative viewpoints out there that need to be discussed and taken seriously.

In our interview Kiss explained that there is often an unconscious liberal bias at places like Duke where professors and others routinely make assumptions of the kind that "'any intelligent person would think x' when the fact is that there are a lot of intelligent people who would think 'not-x' and we are not doing a good job if we are just letting that go."³⁹ There is, she said, a kind of "intellectual sloppiness" involved here that is not healthy for a university. It is important, she is quick to add, that people have moral, philosophical, and political convictions, even controversial ones. A university composed mainly of apolitical or non-committal people who have no convictions or who keep their convictions to themselves would not be an intellectually stimulating place to be. But it is important, she says, to have a variety of people with a variety of views who are outspoken in their convictions yet open and fair to alternative viewpoints. In this context she praised the value of Michael Gillespie's Gerst-sponsored Visions of Freedom program, which she said tended to attract many classical liberal thinkers, and Michael Munger's Power of Ideas program, which attracted free-market libertarians. Such programs, she told me, provide a much needed counterweight to all the "lefties" at Duke (she includes herself in this designation). Other Focus programs, such as Humanitarian Challenges at Home and Abroad, attract people from the left, she explained.

One of the great advantages of the Focus program, Kiss says, is that it provides entering freshmen with the opportunity to get to know professors better than they would from mere classroom exposure because of the weekly dinners and the field trips that are often included as part of the Focus seminars. Students as a result develop a more trusting attitude towards the faculty and are less inclined, she told me, to see professors as "the other." This provides them with a wonderful introduction to intellectual life at Duke and can have a positive effect on their future academic development. "Students in the Focus program are incredibly engaged," she told me, and despite Focus's reputation for being intellectually very demanding, student interest in the program has continued to grow to the point where

³⁹ Interview with Elizabeth Kiss, Duke University East Campus, March 21, 2006.

there is serious talk of extending the program to sophomores who missed out in taking the program during their first year at Duke.

Some Final Thoughts

Duke University has certainly not lived up to its founder's dream of combining the noblest features of a Christian liberal arts college with the scope and breadth of a large national university. In its ascent up the academic rankings to become one of the half-dozen most prestigious research universities in America—one with not only a national, but a world-wide reputation—Duke has certainly accomplished much though it has done so while succumbing to all the infirmities that seem inextricably bound up with the modern American “multiversity” that tries to be all things to all people. Loss of institutional cohesiveness, curriculum fragmentation, the proliferation of ever more narrowly focused disciplines and sub-disciplines, left-wing political correctness, undergraduate confusion and anomie—these and all the other problems found at our nation's large research universities are all to be found at Duke and they are not likely to disappear soon.

Nevertheless, the combined effect of the Focus program, the Gerst program, the University's generally open-minded administrators, and Duke's ideologically diverse and intellectually vibrant political science department have really made a difference on the Duke campus which is evident to anyone who has had a wide sampling of the campus scene at many other large research universities. Many on the Duke campus would echo Michael Munger's statement that those “who have been nowhere else have no idea how precious, and how rare, the intellectual freedom of Duke is.” There are pockets of real learning going on at Duke, and while they are not pervasive enough to stamp the character of the entire university, they are real “jewels” (provost Lange's description of Focus) that provide immeasurable opportunities to the students who avail themselves of their benefits.

Many will want to know whether it is possible to duplicate the effects of programs like Focus and Gerst at other university campuses. The answer is a qualified “yes” with at least three conditions being necessary as a prerequisite. First, there must be prominent faculty members like Michael Gillespie and Michael Munger who are willing to sponsor such programs and take the initiative in starting them. Such programs do not spring up spontaneously out of the ground like mushrooms, but require a sustained vision and the persistence and fortitude of educational entrepreneurs who can make the vision become a reality. The second requirement is for at least one or more high-level, strategically placed administrator who is congenial to the idea of such programs. Such people would be willing to acknowledge that the fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum and the extreme ideological one-sidedness that characterizes so many of our larger research universities is not a healthy situation and needs to be corrected. Many political conservatives assume that finding such people is a near insurmountable hurdle given the fact that college administrators usually share the same left-of-center views of college faculty. But conservatives often underestimate the capacity of administrators whose own political views may be left-of-center to acknowledge that intellectual fragmentation and political correctness are real problems on many campuses and

need to be addressed. As Michael Gillespie says, people are often bigger than their political ideologies, and this has certainly proven true on the Duke campus. It could no doubt be proven true on many other college campuses as well.

The final requirement is funding. Whether the money comes from concerned alumni and generous outside donors like Gary Gerst, or some in-house institutional source of funding, programs like Focus and Gerst require a good deal of money both to get started and to be sustained. If the money comes from an outside donor, it is probably a good idea for the donor to speak first with those who have had experience in these matters as donor money has a tendency to be shifted around by university bureaucrats if it is not made sufficiently clear from the outset exactly how and where it is to be spent. Gary Gerst was savvy enough from the beginning to recognize the potential perils of donor money and obtained guarantees from the start that his money would go to exactly the purposes for which he intended it.

What the Gerst and Focus programs show is that small programs can make a big difference on college campuses and that a few dedicated people, with the support of college administrators, can get such programs up and running. So long as curriculum fragmentation, left-wing political correctness, and the sense among many undergraduates that they are adrift and not being intellectually challenged remain central features of so many university campuses, there will be an urgent need for programs such as these.