

On College Presidents

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Colleges and universities are in the business of discovering, creating, and disseminating knowledge. Human wisdom reliably expands over time, but in the near term it ebbs and flows, making the job of institutions of higher education a difficult one.

There was a shift, early in the twentieth century, from universities as places that taught orthodoxy to its students, to universities in which openness and inquiry were the rule in both research and teaching.¹ University curricula moved from imagining that we already knew everything there was to know, and all that needed to happen was to push that knowledge into the minds of the young and upcoming, toward a more humble and, frankly, scientific perspective. Such a perspective acknowledges the shifting and incomplete nature of our knowledge, and rewards progress and changes in perspective as new information emerges. This is the university system in which we all came of age. It is also the university system that we need.

When institutions of higher education were places of orthodoxy and indoctrination, no less an influencer than Andrew Carnegie argued that for any aspiring “future titan of industry,” a college education was “fatal to success in that domain.”² Carnegie was no fan of the liberal arts tradition—he saw little value in studying history or dead languages, and he prioritized experience over arcane knowledge. But his larger point—that college curricula were out of step with the changing world into which their

¹Keith Whittington, *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), 19.

²Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 14.

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graduates emerged—was apt. Now, as colleges and universities are again becoming places of orthodoxy, twenty-first century analogs of Carnegie’s in the tech sector are arguing much the same thing: Colleges are too expensive, they teach conformity, and they don’t teach entrepreneurship.³

Carnegie was wrong to imagine that you can know in advance what knowledge will be valuable to you in your life as a thinker, innovator, creator, or entrepreneur. The very premise of the liberal arts is that pursuing knowledge or skills without a clear goal will land you in places that you could not predict going to. A liberal arts education allows for the possibility of educational emergence. This was true in the twentieth century, and it is even truer in the twenty-first.

The need for nimble thinking, creativity in both the posing of questions and the search for their solutions, an ability to return to first principles rather than rely on mnemonics and received wisdom—this is ever more important with the expansion of human knowledge in technology. A misunderstanding of how work will look in the future is driving people to specialize earlier and more narrowly. Higher education is the natural place to counteract that trend and push toward greater breadth, nuance, and integration. Students of traditional college age today cannot accurately predict what their career will look like by the time they are seventy years old . . . or even fifty. Or perhaps even thirty. College is where breadth should be inculcated—before the inevitable drive to specialize grabs a student’s attention.

And yet it is at this historical moment that a new orthodoxy is becoming mainstream. It emerges from a small but growing number of faculty who are concentrated in a few disciplines—just a few traditional disciplines, plus many new fields with names ending in “Studies,” which have been collectively dubbed “Grievance Studies.”⁴ The new orthodoxy is spreading to students, and from there to the broader world. Mob rule threatens to decide what questions get asked and which topics discussed at universities. Examples include incidents at Yale, Middlebury, Claremont McKenna, Lewis & Clark, and Brown, but there are many more.⁵ Merely questioning the move towards an “equity” agenda is sufficient, in

³Beth McMurtrie, “The Rich Man’s Dropout Club,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 8, 2015.

⁴Jillian Kay Melchior, “Fake News Comes to Academia: How Three Scholars Gulled Academic Journals to Publish Hoax Papers on ‘Grievance Studies,’” *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2018; James Lindsay, Peter Boghossian and Helen Pluckrose, “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship,” *Areo*, October 2, 2018.

⁵Erika Christakis, “My Halloween email led to a campus firestorm—and a troubling lesson about self-censorship,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2016; Allison Stanger, “Understanding the Angry Mob at Middlebury That Gave Me a Concussion,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2017; Howard Blume, “Protesters disrupt talk by pro-police author, sparking free-speech debate at Claremont McKenna College,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 2017; Robby Soave, “Students at Lewis and Clark College Shouted Down Christina Hoff Sommers: ‘We Choose to Protest Male Supremacy,’” *Reason—Hit and Run*, March 6, 2018; Colleen Flaherty, “Journal Looking Into Study on Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 31, 2018.

some cases, to have the full wrath of a college descend upon you, as happened to Bret Weinstein (my husband) and me at The Evergreen State College (Olympia, Washington), where we were tenured until 2017.⁶ At Evergreen, under the guise of a college-wide move towards greater “equity and inclusion,” the core principles of the liberal arts college were dismantled, and those who objected were taken to be enemies of the cause, and therefore of the college itself.

The movement to focus on equity, inclusion, and diversity—buzzwords, all—on college campuses is not concerned with questions or ideas. It pretends to be concerned with correcting historical oppression, but because it is not engaged in a good faith investigation of ideas, one of the key tenets of this movement is flat out wrong. “Equality” sounds like “equity” to the untrained ear, but they are not the same thing. “Equity” is code.

The concept of equity was included in the first Principles of the American Society for Public Administration, and in 1981, the ASPA distinguished between the concepts thusly: “equality, which is to say citizen A being equal to citizen B, and equity, which is to say adjusting shares so that citizen A is made equal with citizen B.”⁷ Equity thus promotes equality of outcome. This is a dystopian idea that was brilliantly satirized in Vonnegut’s short story *Harrison Bergeron*, wherein those with greater ability are handicapped in order to bring society into full compliance.

In this context, the newest American College President Study, the eighth edition of a survey and analysis of college presidents that has been ongoing since 1986, is particularly jarring.⁸ Whereas earlier editions of the survey found hope in the trend towards greater diversity among college presidents,⁹ the 2017 document would have us believe that, notwithstanding even stronger positive trends in recent years, “equity” must be a primary concern of college presidents. The executive summary of the 2017 document lists three “key take-aways.” The first is about “diversifying the presidency,” the second about finances, and the third, data driven decision making strategies. No key take-away from the 2017 ACPS mentions research, knowledge, or ideas, whereas some aspect of “equity” shows up in all three of them.

⁶Heather Heying, Bret Weinstein, “Bonfire of the academies: Two professors on how leftist intolerance is killing higher education,” *Washington Examiner*, December 12, 2017.

⁷H. G. Frederickson, “Public administration and social equity,” *Public Administration Review* 50, no. 2 (1990): 37.

⁸J.S. Gagliardi, L.L. Espinosa, J.M. Turk, M. Taylor, *The American College President Study: 2017*, American Council on Education, Center for Policy Research and Strategy, TIAA Institute.

⁹Marlene F. Ross and Madeleine Green, *The American college president: 2000 Edition*, Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2000, 0-114, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED446708.pdf>

All else being equal, diversity of experience and opinion is valuable. The more diverse the people engaged in inquiry, the greater diversity in the kinds of questions that get asked. Why, though, in a time of ever greater diversity among college presidents, faculty, and student bodies, does the College President's Survey focus on "equity," a favorite clarion call of the social justice movement? "Social justice" ought to be everyone's goal—although what "social" adds to "justice" is difficult to pin down. But the social justice movement as it exists is one that privileges victimhood over recovery, accusation over restoration, reversal of fortune over actual equality. It is "politics by other means," as David Bromwich outlined in his book of the same name. In a chapter on institutional radicalism, he writes, "Thus a prescriptive compassion for those who carry the mark of victimhood—something class never did for anybody—pulls in an opposite direction from the actual sense of social justice."¹⁰ The social justice movement that is gaining power on campuses and spreading outwards is cloaking a mission antithetical to justice and civil rights.

Among grievance scholars, it has become *de rigueur* to make extraordinary claims without evidence. For instance, in three papers easily found, spanning from 2005 – 2018, these proclamations are made: "Education policy is an act of white supremacy"; "seeing each other as individuals [is] a perspective only available to the dominant group"; "universities are entrenched systems of privilege."¹¹ Asking for evidence for these claims is, apparently, an assault in and of itself, and there is jargon to prove it: epistemic exploitation.¹² Now that asking for evidence of racism is itself evidence of racism, we have a fully gameable, authoritarian, and anti-intellectual climate. That is what is becoming of our campuses.

In the particular case of Evergreen, if the goal was to preserve the financial and intellectual integrity of a college, President George Bridges appears to have done everything wrong. The story is a long one, and has yet to be fully told, but one précis is this: a pedagogically innovative, public liberal arts college, in which students of myriad backgrounds were able to do rigorous, creative, analytical work, was undone by the collaboration of a new president with a cabal of faculty and staff who insisted on their vision of "social justice." Videos of protests that

¹⁰David Bromwich, *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 118.

¹¹D. Gillborn, "Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory and education reform," *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 4 (2005): 485-505; R.J. DiAngelo, "Why can't we all just be individuals? Countering the discourse of individualism in anti-racist education," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 6, no.1 (2010); D.O.N. Green, "Integrating Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion into the DNA of Public Universities: Reflections of a Chief Diversity Officer," in *Campus Diversity Triumphs: Valleys of Hope*, edited by Sherwood Thompson (Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 185-199.

¹²N. Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo* 3, no. 22 (2016): 569 – 590.

engulfed the campus in May of 2017, taken by the protesters themselves, were but one tiny piece of the madness that took over a once remarkable institution.¹³

In the months leading up to the protests, President Bridges pandered to the protestors; privately blamed lack of action on his provost (while his provost was equally certain that it was the president who needed to act); and tried to silence dissent within the college by offering goodies to those who were speaking out in exchange for their silence. Furthermore, he empowered “social justice” faculty by allowing them to push through policy changes, strong-arm their critics, and make slanderous claims against other faculty, with no correction or follow-up. For months social justice faculty wrote nasty and often epithet filled emails directed at Bret Weinstein because he questioned the way the college was being run, after which several dozen faculty demanded an investigation of him for the mortal sin of accepting an invitation to appear on FOX News. They had become faculty trolls hiding under Bridges.

Once the protests broke out, the president hired a public relations firm to spread false narratives, and ordered the police to stand down while protestors hunted car-to-car for “particular individuals” on campus, barricaded buildings, and held people hostage. In a private meeting with upper administration and protestors (which was filmed and uploaded to the web by protestors), Bridges said of those not supporting the college’s equity agenda that “They’re going to say some things that we don’t like, and our job is to bring them on, or get ‘em out . . . bring ‘em in, train ‘em, and if they don’t get it, sanction them.”

The president shut down channels by which faculty and staff communicated; his administration discouraged anyone from talking to the press; and when, in February of 2018, the new provost alerted faculty to the financial troubles at the college, the president chastised her for sharing information that “might end up appearing elsewhere in ways that will be used against us.”

Perhaps the worst set of fiscal decisions made at Evergreen involves administrative bloat. In 2015, there were four college divisions: Academics, Student Affairs, Finance & Administration, and Advancement. By early 2018 Bridges had increased that to seven, adding Diversity & Inclusion, Indigenous Arts and Education, and College Relations. The first two of these can best be understood as social justice divisions, or pandering to same; the third is public relations. Academics was further weakened when the newly hired Diversity & Inclusion vice president was appointed vice provost, a position newly created and ill defined. (The near ubiquity of diversity

¹³“EvergreenStateCollege01-033,” YouTube Video Playlist, June 2017, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLm4lyJgqbgFhdX8_0h_FnuhkDQGhtn0xW; Heying and Weinstein, “Bonfire of the academics.”

officers now on campuses should itself be questioned, as new research finds that their presence has no effect on the hiring of other people of color on campuses where they serve.)¹⁴

Having done all this, on May 14, 2018, Bridges announced that, in service of a “leaner budget” and in order to “consolidate . . . activity across divisions,” Student Affairs would be disappeared, mostly subsumed within Diversity & Inclusion; Academics would be further weakened by the addition of yet another vice provost; and Finance & Administration would receive new leadership—none other than Bridges’s former chief of staff, who was hired without a search, thus further eroding faculty and staff input to administrative decisions. In short, the administrative legacy of this president is to extinguish or substantively disempower three of four previous college divisions, and create three new ones of dubious value, staffed with people likely to be loyal to him personally, all while making the unverified claim that the restructuring of the administration is a response to the fiscal crisis.

Orthodoxy spreads through the proliferation of in-house bureaucrats, but also through the removal of discretion from the faculty, staff, and administrators who know systems the best, and outsourcing the dirty work to anonymous others, who—at best—have generic interests in mind, and may also have perverse incentives. Consultants, for example, are unlikely to be persuaded by candidates who are skeptical of the value of consultants. It is, therefore, also notable that another trend in the college presidency is how many presidential searches are now being run by consulting firms, rather than by in-house committees. In 1978, only 44 percent of presidential searches were run by consulting firms; by 2016, that number had climbed to 71 percent.¹⁵

In biology, there is a concept known as historical constraint. It provides one answer to the question of why organisms are riddled with so many imperfections. In brief, historical constraint refers to the fact that once a structure, such as an eye, is established, selection cannot act on it to make it better, if the first necessary steps in the process would make it worse. The vertebrate eye could be improved, for example, by reversing the orientation of the photoreceptors, as is the case in octopus and squid, but the improvement is left unmade by natural selection because of the blindness that would accompany the intermediate steps.

An analogy can be made between historical constraint in biology and bureaucratic constraint in institutions. Once systems are in place, especially

¹⁴S.W. Bradley, J.R. Garven, W. W. Law, J.E. West, *The Impact of Chief Diversity Officers on Diverse Faculty Hiring*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 24969, issued August 2018, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24969#fromrss>.

¹⁵Gagliardi et al., 24.

if there are personnel involved, it is difficult to get rid of them even as they become outdated or redundant. We see calcification of once nimble and forward thinking systems, into ever more rigid and archaic ones. This is, in part, what underpinned Thomas Jefferson's observation that, even in a democracy, rebellion need happen with some regularity.¹⁶ Even the best systems will become rigid over time and need an overhaul, and sometimes that overhaul will not be doable in increments.

Bureaucratic constraint is real, and difficult to manage. But what is happening on many college campuses in the last few decades is, like an infection, quicker to do damage. The move to increase administration effectively guarantees a difficult-to-manuever ship, even at institutions, such as Evergreen, where there was once pride in being lean and nimble: in 1997, the anonymous authors of "The *Real Faculty Handbook*" wrote that academic administration consists of "a vice president/provost with three staff and five academic deans. That's it." The growth of administration, especially diversity officers and offices, who in the current climate will be particularly difficult to downsize or fire, creates bureaucratic constraint out of which some colleges will not be able to maneuver. The infection, if left untreated, is likely to be fatal.

Selection cannot see ahead and make decisions that will improve lives in the long term, if such decisions make things worse in the short term. But selection has built organisms that can do just that: we are one such species, the one best equipped to do so. Our ability to see into the future, to project scenarios, to predict what might happen if we do X rather than Y, is so much of what makes us human. We can predict that building up administration, and acquiescing to authoritarian faculty and protestors, will not be fiscally or academically sound for an institution of higher education. It is also quite human, however, to ignore such predictions when they don't suit one's narrative or, as is often the case, when one's personal ascent requires a failure to comprehend the hazard.

Furthermore, and perhaps most alarming—both for the impact on children, and on institutions of higher education—schools of education seem to be falling particularly quickly to the religion of social justice. Schools of education are prey to "ideological orthodoxy and low academic standards," a trend that has been noted in the published literature for years.¹⁷ Combine this with the fact that a significant portion of college presidents emerge from schools of education, and you have a recipe for top-down tolerance of mob rule. Teacher training research, which occurs at Schools of Education, is

¹⁶J.P. Boyd et al., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950), 33 vols.

¹⁷Lyle Asher, "How Ed Schools Became a Menace," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 8, 2018.

understood to be “subjective, obscure, faddish, impractical, out of touch, inbred, and politically correct.”¹⁸ And curricula in schools of education have been found to lack nuance and to be one sided, with “narrow ideological viewpoints treated as settled fact.”¹⁹ While at Ph.D. granting institutions, only 19 percent of presidents emerge from the field of education, at two year institutions, that number rises to 68 percent.²⁰ Given the prevalence of education degrees among college presidents, the politically correct ideology gripping many institutions now—which not only tolerates but embraces abject submission in the face of authoritarian protest—was perhaps predictable.

College presidents are keepers of both tradition *and* progress, protectors of paradigms *and* anomalies, overseers of orthodoxy *and* heresy. There is an inherent tension here: how to distinguish between those things that show up on the horizon and represent the next shift in understanding, and those that are a flash in the pan, true only for a moment, or in fact completely wrong in all contexts?

Established disciplines once did not exist, and some that seem strong now will not exist in the future. Those who imagine that the future will look like the past will render themselves irrelevant, and surely make poor teachers as well. However: that which has come before is what has made us who we are. Let us not go back to the arrogance of the early twentieth century university, which imagined that all relevant knowledge was already gathered, and merely needed to be uploaded to the brains of the next generation. Why did real world experience loom large for the giants of industry in both the Gilded Age and the Tech Age? Because in the real world, you run into problems that you did not imagine, could not possibly have been perfectly prepared for. When that happens, you must think on your feet, in real time, to solve them. In so doing, you acquire insight and wisdom that cannot be taught directly. Tests of rote memorization assess knowledge, but they cannot assess wisdom. Institutions of higher education generate wisdom—in their labs and studios, in the minds of those who refuse to color within the lines. Wisdom provides access to new knowledge. Orthodoxy absent heresy precludes the generation of new wisdom. College presidents, as keepers of the flame of higher education, therefore have as their (admittedly difficult) job, to keep multiple voices alive.

¹⁸Arthur Levine, “Educating school teachers,” Education Schools Project, Washington, D.C., 2006, http://edschools.org/pdf/Educating_Teachers_Exec_Summ.pdf.

¹⁹David Steiner and Susan D. Rozen, “Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers,” 2004, as cited in Lyle Asher, “How Ed Schools Became a Menace.”

²⁰Gagliardi et al.

College presidents must be focused on the bottom line: their responsibility is to the financial viability of their institution. They are not primarily academic officers. However, in the case of free expression on college campuses, I argue that doing the right thing financially, and doing the right thing legally and morally, are aligned. Any campus that comes out strongly and explicitly in favor of free expression and against censorship, mob rule, and an equity agenda will, I predict, see an uptick in applications and enrollment.

As increasingly dangerous and violent protests embroiled the Evergreen campus in late May of 2017, I wrote to my colleagues, including the president, to describe what I saw. I finished my letter this way:

Using oppression and fear mongering to maintain the status quo, as has happened nationally for a long time, ought be wholly unacceptable in a democracy. Using oppression and fear mongering to fight for a reversal of that status quo ought be similarly repugnant. A reversal of fortune, in which those who were in power are powerless, and those who were powerless have all the power, ought not be the goal. But it is the stated goal of at least some of the protestors and their allies.

That is not equity.

And this no longer looks like a liberal arts college.

I was wrong on one front. That is, apparently, the definition that has been decided on for “equity.” Equity has little relationship with equality. Given that, no institution of higher education should be signing on to an “equity agenda.” It is divisive, dangerous, and anti-intellectual. It does, in short, spell the end of the liberal arts college.

Abraham Flexner, the founder of Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study, wrote extensively on “the usefulness of useless knowledge,” and in 1939, with regard to Germany and Italy, wrote:

Universities have been so reorganized that they have become tools of those who believe in a special political, economic, or racial creed. Now and then a thoughtless individual in one of the few democracies left in this world will even question the fundamental importance of absolutely untrammelled academic freedom. The real enemy of the human race is not the fearless and irresponsible thinker, be he right or wrong. The real enemy is the man who tries to mold the human spirit so that it will not dare to spread its wings.²¹

²¹Abraham Flexner, “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge,” *Harper’s* (June 1939).

We need to look forward, rather than back, but we arrived here on the shoulders of giants, and we ought to learn from them. In 1871, at his inauguration as the president of the University of Michigan, James B. Angell, who has been credited with overseeing Michigan's transformation into an elite public university, gave a speech that is still worthy of our consideration. Angell argued that an institution should "never insist on [the faculty] pronouncing the shibboleths of sect or party."²² All modern institutions should heed his words well.

²²John B. Angell, *Selected addresses* (Longmans, Green and Company, 1912).