

To: Chris Hoeckley  
Gaede Institute for the Liberal Arts, Westmont College  
From: Mark McIntire  
SBCC, Philosophy

Reflections on our conversation:

*Learning in a Time of Politics: Liberal Arts Education and Political Engagement*

**Plenary Session 1:**

*The Political Education of College Students -- Learning from History: Dr. Julie Reuben, Harvard University*

1. Setting the historical context for our conversation, Professor Reuben refreshed and enlightened our understanding of how we arrived at the present condition of political education in the modern university. It became apparent to all that a considerable divide exists between the divergent ways political education is embedded in the curriculum of public versus private liberal arts education. That divide seems to be widening according to some participants in the conversation that Professor Reuben expertly lead. On the one hand the expectation in public higher education seems to envision a sort of institutional moral and political 'neutrality' while respecting the individual right to engage in political 'activism' based on contemporary moral predicates so long as the institution itself is not tagged with a particular political point of view. Conversely, the expectation in private higher education seems to envision a blend of both institutional and private advocacy of contemporary political opinion so long as both the individual and the institution take responsibility for such advocacy. While those private higher education institutions that accept some sort of state funding for 'entitlement' programs seem more restricted in the kind of political advocacy they can engage in, contemporary moral assumptions seem to guide the topics, causes and campaigns of political education in both public and private education in the liberal arts curriculum. Overall, there seems a persistent variance exists on exactly what constitutes the *Ars Liberalis* themselves within this division of public and private higher education. A consensus emerged during conversation that this is a critical concern that needs constant attention to both define and implement in the curriculum. Reports from meal conversations seemed to confirm this concern.
2. Professor Reuben also introduced an entirely new dimension at the end of the first Plenary Session that reverberated throughout the entire conference. *"To what degree, if any, are we academics 'custodians' of both traditional ideas and values that*

*have stood the test of time, analysis and evidence for their truth?* Her book, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, gives a scholarly and fascinating history of this 'custodian' role of modern academics as they struggle to address contemporary moral and political assumptions.

3. An ancillary question might be posed. "To what degree, if any, do academics have a moral and political responsibility to nurture a 'life of ideas' as a necessary and sufficient precondition to any discussion of political education?" This goes to the question of how can we expect students in the liberal arts to effectively formulate political thought if there is not a unified body of 'truths' and critical thinking methods of arriving at those truths. Simply stating that the liberal arts education is based on 'democracy' and 'freedom' does not seem sufficient. This lingering question fueled lively discussion at table and on into the next session.

## **Plenary Session 2:**

### *Is Freedom Enough?*

1. Again by consensus, freedom without responsibility does not seem to be enough. But this seems to clash with the views of those faculty and students that want unbridled control over the academy without any interference from those outside in the public square. Administrators are instructed by these advocates of unrestricted 'freedom' that they must lead, follow or get out of the way in the face of ever shifting demands about 'world peace', 'diversity', 'global warming' 'animal rights', and the latest, 'sustainability' being the top priority of all academic planning and curriculum.
2. The difficulty with this contemporary 'freedom without restrictions' based curriculum results when each advocacy group is left to believe and insist that their cause has top priority in academic planning. Professor Jesse Covington's (Westmont, Political Science) effective metaphor of playground children suddenly without a protective 'fence' around them tending to raise their level of 'anxiety' seemed right on point here. Without some restrictions and the responsibility to live within them, political thought and argument brakes down into babble.
3. At our table conversation, Professor Scott Andrew (CSU, Northridge, English) engaged us with an illuminating discussion on the impediments to teaching and learning imposed by continually increasing 'assessment' demands without clear goals, arguments and evidence that these programs are justified. This highlighted the cross-purposes of teaching faculty success in the classroom and administrative passion for numbers, outcomes and reports.

### Plenary Session 3: *The Problems of Advocacy and Indoctrination*

1. This session seemed to spark the most intense conversation with many divergent views punctuated by personal reflections, examples and recommendations. Perhaps this was due to the skillful Socratic format of the cumulative table discussions led by Chris Hoeckley (Gaede Institute Director) and Warren Rogers (Westmont, Academic Dean) that spilled over to this discussion. In any case, the question of whether some liberal arts faculty might be engaging in 'indoctrination' with their exuberant and steadfast political/moral advocacy in the classroom was thoroughly thrashed out. One articulated view argued for faculty to keep their personal political/moral views entirely to themselves in the conduct of their courses lest they exert too great authority on these subjects. Others responded that this would be an unfair request at conflict with 'academic freedom' protections that have grown up in the university in the last one hundred years. Still others, like Professor Ray Rosentrater (Westmont Mathematics) cited examples of notable professors that could both argue their political/moral views and not impose them on their students as the only rational, preferred views to be held.
2. Interestingly enough, student participants offered valuable insights from their contemporary perspective. For instance, Matthew Bixby (Santa Barbara City College, Philosophy) reminded us that professor tends to over value their 'persuasive' powers when it comes to political/moral views expressed in the classroom. Other student participants such as Andrew Elia (Westmont, Liberal Arts) urged vigorous exchange of political views between faculty and students.

Final Musings: Looking back to see ahead...

1. Ok. So perhaps a perfect conceptual model of the liberal arts curriculum underpinning political education did not emerge during this conversation. Maybe no such model exists. It could be, as some participants suggested, that a liberal arts education, politically, is nothing more than a mirror of our contemporary culture. This 'mirror' metaphor seems pervasive in the modern university. It seems to allow a constant shift in political topics as the faces in the crowd before the 'mirror' change each generation. But is that all there is to it? Is it enough to merely see ourselves in the 'mirror' or should we look behind the mirror and find out what it's made of, who made it and how it is constructed?
2. Sometimes conversations are enlightening and poignant by *what* is not said and *how* it is not said. Although our conversation made bright lines along the history

of political education as seen through the liberal arts a synthesis did not emerge. No argument was made for universal conceptual principles that do not change under political pressures as the faces in the 'mirror' so often do. Do such universal and timeless concepts even exist? No one asked that question. Has this issue been settled once and for all? If anyone was thinking 'Yes' or 'No' they didn't mention it. Why?

3. From late antiquity through the Middle Ages and up to the late twentieth century the *Trivium* (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic) and the *Quadrivium* (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy) constituted the core curriculum of the liberal arts education, the arts that make for a free citizen. Why was this core shredded in public higher education? Why do so many public schools now educate 'what' to think while not requiring training in 'how' to think? As Dorothy Sayers remarked in her *Lost Tools of Learning*, "*Is not the great defect of our education today--a defect traceable through all the disquieting symptoms of trouble that I have mentioned--that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects," we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning*". (for her entire essay click: <http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html>) Are the very recent state education codes requiring 'critical thinking' courses an admission that some terrible pedagogic omission took place during the '70's, '80's and '90's? Are we about to remember that education is teaching one how to learn?
4. Perhaps we will get the chance to examine this and other fundamental questions in future conversations on the liberal arts in our universities. At least Westmont College and all its partners in our conversation are providing the venue for this robust discussion to happen as an ongoing intellectual resource. For this, we are most grateful.

Respectfully submitted by

Mark McIntire

Santa Barbara City College, Philosophy