

Introduction

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It's a political season. The presidential campaign is in full swing. The need for well-informed, discerning political engagement is acute. But all too often instead of information we get sound bites, instead of analysis of issues we get coverage of the campaign horse race, instead of deliberation we get debates, instead of critique we get attack. The fairness of our sources of information is doubted in every direction. Analyses of issues are everywhere assumed to be tainted by political prejudice.

There is nothing new or surprising about this political climate. But it does present a serious challenge to a central goal of a liberal arts education — to help students become engaged and thoughtful participants in our political life. Some students turn off, regarding the political realm as a swamp of self-interest masquerading as public good. Others engage passionately, but at times simplistically, carving the political landscape into realms of good and evil and failing to bring their critical skills to the claims of friend and foe alike.

How then do we accomplish the civic goals of a liberal arts education? Not surprisingly, there is also nothing new about this question. Educators have long understood the political power of education (consider the nation-building purposes of public elementary education), and higher education is no exception. Indeed the relationship between liberal arts education, in particular, and civic life has been so close in America that many have claimed that the health of American political life depends on a liberally educated citizenry.

But it should also not surprise us that the answer to this question has been hotly contested. And the history of the very different answers to it is deeply interwoven with the history of several other key ideas and movements in academic life — academic freedom, institutional neutrality, general education, critical thinking, the emergence of the student affairs profession and student governments, the Free Speech Movement, and of course liberal arts education itself.

These connections are beautifully revealed in the essays that follow. Julie Reuben, historian of American higher education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has spent her career exploring major intersections between academic life and political life in American history. These essays reach right back to the origins of American higher education, noting the political function of American colleges even in the colonial era. Reuben stresses developments in the 20th century, giving particular attention to curricular and policy swings along two largely unseen dimensions — consensus-versus-pluralistic understandings of institutional non-partisanship and direct-versus-indirect pedagogies of political education.

One of the great virtues of these essays is that they reveal very different paths into questions about the relationship of higher education and politics. Whether you're a

faculty member wondering about the place of your own political views in the classroom, a dean facing questions about the political activities of your faculty, a president navigating the sometimes treacherous waters of institutional neutrality, a student affairs professional working to foster students' civic engagement, or a student leader planning political action, you will discover in these essays historical moments that illuminate the challenges you face.

This political season will pass very soon. But the need for engaged and thoughtful citizens will not. And what contribution higher education can make to meeting that need remains a pressing issue. I hope you find the insights that follow helpful in whatever role you play in that effort.