

Making College Right: Heretical Thoughts & Practical Proposals, by William Casement. New York: National Association of Scholars, 2012, 236 pp., \$18.00 paperback.

Behind Academic Barricades

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“American higher education is in a state of disarray.” So says William Casement, retired SUNY–New Paltz professor of philosophy, founder of a Great Books program at St. Thomas University in Florida, and long-time National Association of Scholars member. Casement recognizes that this news may come as a shock to some. “To hear that one of our nation’s most respected industries in in trouble may surprise many people,” he writes.

Many people? Maybe not. Polls in the last few years have shown widespread public skepticism about

both the cost and quality of higher education.¹ But if Casement’s statement surprises some people, few of them are likely to be members of the NAS, which has been speaking out about the disarray for twenty-five years.

In *Making College Right*, Casement puts the disarray in focus for those who have not scanned the troubled groves of academe. He offers a reprise of the signal controversies of the past half-century.² His guiding theme is that colleges “have been co-opted” by people who have faint concern with undergraduate teaching. He seeks to unmask these pseudo-educators.

Casement approaches his Augean task by concentrating on seven topics: (1) a college education costs too much; (2) its preferred ranking measures such as *U.S. News & World Report* are “confused and misleading”; (3) “affirmative action has become an entrenched entitlement with no end in sight”; (4) legacy admissions are unjust; (5) “big-time” sports distorts the meaning of the word “amateur”; (6) Advanced Placement is an insufficient replacement for elementary college-level

¹See “Crisis of Confidence Threatens Colleges,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 15, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Crisis-of-Confidence/127530/>.

²See William Casement, *The Great Canon Controversy: The Battle of the Books in Higher Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

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study; and (7) the term “general education” has come to mean the ability of students to take whatever exotic courses they wish. For Casement these deadly sins are symptoms of a larger decadence—that the “basic function collegiate institutions are meant to perform has become overshadowed by other functions.”

These faults have, of course, been named by others. Casement’s claim on our attention is his analysis of the public deceptions that make it possible for colleges to continue bamboozling the American public. Apologetics by the likes of Martha Nussbaum, the unceasing catechesis by college and university presidents, even the seeming *pricelessness* of higher education, merge to tell a story: that higher education has never been so enlightened and as enlightening as now.

The public has received false wisdom and Casement’s intellectual task is to clear it away: “I build a case on persistent cross-examination that reveals the faulty nature of the received wisdom from the higher education establishment.” Casement’s duty, then, is in large part Socratic.

Each of the seven sins has a dedicated chapter in the book. Each chapter, broadly speaking, is broken into two parts. In the first part, Casement wades into the received wisdom and tries to draw out its

contradictions, its “mistaken claims and rationalizations.” In the second, he transitions from critique to construction, offering “practical proposals” for their remedy. This is why he titles his book *Making College Right*. There is work to be done once the fog has cleared.

Some of Casement’s “practical proposals” are more *practical* than others. For instance, a shorthand version of his proposal for the rectification of general education requirements is “let common sense prevail.” If only. After all, those who would profit from this sound advice deny the very possibility of common sense—all truths are contingent values to them.

Casement’s footing is much firmer everywhere else. His chapter on “Affirmative Action and Elusive Equality,” for instance, offers a sharp critique of the exploitation of black students who must fulfill the administration’s script for “diversity.” Casement’s argument is imbued with empathy for black students, for historical wrongs and their current predicaments. He sees racial preferences as deepening racial antagonisms. Even so, he calls the inspiration behind affirmative action “noble” and views it as addressing a “fundamental moral issue that has plagued our nation throughout its existence.”

He is, however, unwilling to sacrifice the individual lives and futures of young black students who are often victimized by the system that seeks to assist them. According to Casement, “Preference creates a mismatch that sets minorities up for poor performance.” It has failed “to result in closing the gap among high school students in their readiness for competitive colleges,” and has “failed to result in minorities closing the gap as undergraduates, and, beyond that, at the graduate school level.”

What Casement sees are too many instances of disillusioned minority students saddled with debt and forced to fulfill an inflexible doctrine not of their own making or choosing—namely the doctrine of “diversity.” And, as he writes, these young lives are not “acceptable collateral damage in the quest for diversity.” For Casement, the moral agenda behind affirmative action results in a moral failure. He summarizes simply, “Minority preference should be eliminated.”

Making College Right excels in its “cross-examination” of the rationalizations behind the deterioration of general education. He blames the “smorgasbord” approach to general education on what he calls the “quadruple whammy,” four deeply theoretical—and misguided—forces

that converge to undermine the coherence of common requirements. These forces are relativism, politics, the knowledge explosion, and the process/content distinction. “They have an initial attractiveness about them, an aura of sensibility,” Casement writes, “but they’ve been overplayed and misapplied.”

In Casement’s description, relativism denies even the possibility of faculty ordering courses hierarchically and designating certain curricula as “fundamental” knowledge for all students. The politics he refers to—“multiculturalism” or “diversity”—introduces an endless series of cultural “studies” that are justified as being just one form of curricula among many other equally plausible alternatives. The knowledge explosion is said to have expanded the boundaries of learning beyond the capacity of general education. Any attempt to synthesize these proliferated facts into a syllabus would necessarily have to be selective, and thus would be arbitrarily and dishonestly privileging one group of facts over others. And the process/content distinction made by education theorists—rationalistic successors of the Romantics—claims that telling students “what” to learn is imperialistic and stifling to their individuality. Instead, they teach students “how” to learn; meaning that they learn content-hollow critical

thinking skills that are not bound to specific bodies of knowledge and can thus move between any number of them.

Readers may initially be puzzled at Casement's exposition of the assumptions lingering beneath general education requirements, but the content they produce will be all too familiar to college students:

Several categories of knowledge are identified that are essential to intellectual nourishment, and to go with them students are offered long lists of courses full of eye-catching titles. They're trusted to let their taste guide them in selecting a course or two from each category. One person's choices may be far different from another's, but the idea is that it's best for them to sample things as they like, and as long as they sample each category, their acquisition of basic knowledge is taken care of. The smorgasbord, officially called the "distribution" approach, is often dressed up by adding a required course in writing and one in math, and other

features like first-year seminars, service learning, and capstone learning.

Many who have attended a university or liberal arts college in recent years will recognize this as a description of their own experience. But, as I said, they likely won't recognize the forces that animate it. And they might begin to if they read *Making College Right*.

Casement paints an image of higher education in a state of chaos and deception. And he finds the American public in a state of stupor. It is a grim picture. But there is hope here. In his first chapter Casement asks, "Does college cost too much?" Everyone in the America—with the notable exception of college and university administrators—quickly and emphatically answers yes. The higher education establishment, however, seems to think that only the details are open to criticism, not the system itself. Casement may not pry that door open with those who have a pecuniary interest in keeping the status quo, but he opens a window for the public to see what is going on behind academic barricades.