

## Beating the Apple Tree: How the University Coerces Activism

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“The revolution is not an apple that falls when it is ripe! You have to make it fall,” the Argentinean Marxist Che Guevara once declared.<sup>1</sup> At the time he was referring to Fidel Castro’s role in the Cuban revolution. But his words seem apt for today’s college campuses, where American students are the revolutionary apples, and higher education is busy tree-whacking.

Universities in the United States are increasingly trading their academic mission for a social mission. They see themselves as responsible for contributing to solutions for the great problems of our time. These conscience-troubling problems include racism, the unequal distribution of wealth, and impending environmental catastrophe. To combat these issues, universities are changing curricula, policies, and the spirit on campus.

The primary direction of the movement seems to be top-down. College presidents set the tone by declaring their institutions’ commitment to various ideologies such as diversity, social justice, and sustainability. Administrators and faculty members develop courses and programs that reflect these commitments. Students, confronted with such course material, must consciously either join in or sit out. This is different from the legitimate study of the life and work of such historical figures as Martin Luther King, Jr., Susan B. Anthony, and Albert Schweitzer. Instead of teaching about these people, universities prompt students to become activists themselves. Students don’t have to look far for a cause to adopt; they are bombarded with causes they *must* adopt.

<sup>1</sup> *Libération* vol. 3 (January–April, 1965).

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The college campus is supposedly the perfect setting for incubating social activism. Students are young, impressionable, energetic, and ready to forge their identity. They have the time and willingness to help people who ask.

But activism in the classroom harms higher education. It muddles the university's academic mission and leaves students knowing less about math, history, and public policy than about ways to rally an angry mob. Yet it comes in attractive packages with such labels as "social justice" and "sustainability."

### The Mirage of Social Justice

"Social justice" is a major theme on campuses today. The actual meaning of social justice, however, is unclear. It was originally understood by the Catholic and Protestant churches as the biblical mandate to show compassionate care for orphans and widows. Marxists appropriated the term to describe a classless society. DiscoverTheNetworks writes that "'social justice' in its contemporary sense has come to mean a rejection of capitalism and of each man's economic freedom...to do as he wishes with his own intellectual, physical, and material resources."<sup>2</sup> In 1976, the economist Friedrich von Hayek wrote in *The Mirage of Social Justice* that this conception of social justice leads to "full-fledged socialism" and tyranny.<sup>3</sup> But in 1971 political philosopher John Rawls argued in *A Theory of Justice* that a just society should aim for an equal distribution of the "primary social goods": rights, liberties, opportunities, income, and wealth.<sup>4</sup>

With all these competing theories, it is right for various academic disciplines to study social justice in its complexity and to seek to understand how these theories have influenced our society. But rather than having students weigh the Christian, Marxist, free-market, and welfare-state versions of social justice, most universities with a social justice curriculum already have the answers. Students do not examine ideas *about* social justice—they become its agents.

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<sup>2</sup>DiscoverTheNetworks.org, A Guide to the Political Left (<http://www.discoverthenetworks.org>), "Social Justice," <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/guideDesc.asp?catid=160&type=issue>.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 64.

<sup>4</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90ff.

Even religious schools have bought into this idea. In 2009 Cabrini College, a small Catholic school outside Philadelphia, created a social justice program called “Justice Matters.”<sup>5</sup> The program is a set of required core courses for all Cabrini students. A three-course component of the core, “Engagements with the Common Good,” requires students, among other things, to

- understand the key terms of power, privilege, difference, dignity, solidarity, and equality
- demonstrate a sustained commitment to the practice of social justice through community-driven projects designed to create social change.
- demonstrate in practice (by developing their research and advocacy skills) and in reflection the difference between seeking justice through charity and through social change.
- critique their personal philosophy of social justice grounded in dignity, equality, and solidarity through:
  - community involvement
  - growing solidarity with diverse communities
  - understanding of philosophical, historical, and contemporary movements that sought to create social justice<sup>6</sup>

One course seeks to equip students with “life-long tools for civic engagement” and requires them to demonstrate “advocacy skills.” What is puzzling about the program is that although it is housed by a Catholic institution, it endorses the leftist version of social justice over the religious version, and indeed, even implies the inferiority of the latter with the imperative to “demonstrate...the difference between seeking justice through charity and through social change.” Instead of spurring students on to acts of compassion and kindness in the context of church tenets, Cabrini requires them to prove their worth as activists devoted to group identity politics.

We even find this kind of indoctrination at public research universities. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst, for example, offers a master’s and a doctoral degree in social justice education in its school of education.

<sup>5</sup>Scott Jaschik, “A ‘Mission-Driven’ Core,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 6, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/03/06/cabrini>.

<sup>6</sup>Cabrini College (<http://www.cabrini.edu/>), Engagements with the Common Good, <http://www.cabrini.edu/default.aspx?pageid=2013>.

The program boasts of being “theory oriented”—that is, oriented exclusively to the claims of oppression pronounced by the progressive Left such as “anti-Semitism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, racism, and sexism.”<sup>7</sup>

Accreditation bodies also contribute to the push for activism in the classroom. One example is the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the national accreditor of social work education programs, which considers preparation for political advocacy an essential component of professional training. The National Association of Scholars (NAS) wrote about CSWE’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards in the 2007 report *The Scandal of Social Work Education*.<sup>8</sup> The CSWE standards at the time avowed that one of the purposes of social work is “to pursue policies, services, and resources through advocacy and social or political actions that promote social and economic justice.”<sup>9</sup> (This wording was slightly altered in 2008 in the latest version of the CSWE standards.)<sup>10</sup> Under these standards, social work graduates must be able to “understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and apply strategies of advocacy and social change that advance social and economic justice.”<sup>11</sup>

NAS’s *Scandal of Social Work Education* report included the story of Bill Felkner, a student who attended the School of Social Work at Rhode Island College, which is accredited by CSWE. Felkner, a libertarian, was given an assignment in his first semester to advocate in favor of legislation that would increase cash assistance to low-income families in Rhode Island. As he began to research the bill, Felkner found that he could not in good conscience support it. When he asked if he could write his paper against it, the professor told him that Rhode Island College “is a perspective school and we teach that perspective,” adding that “if you’re going to lobby on that bill, you’re going to lobby in our perspective.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>University of Massachusetts at Amherst, School of Education, Social Justice Education, <http://www.umass.edu/sje/>.

<sup>8</sup>National Association of Scholars ([www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org)), *The Scandal of Social Work Education*, report, released September 11, 2007, [http://www.nas.org/polReports.cfm?Doc\\_Id=33](http://www.nas.org/polReports.cfm?Doc_Id=33).

<sup>9</sup>Council on Social Work Education, *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2001), as last corrected 11/02, 6; cited in National Association of Scholars, *Scandal of Social Work*, 5.

<sup>10</sup>Council on Social Work Education, *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2008), <http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=13780>.

<sup>11</sup>Council on Social Work Education, *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2001), as last corrected 11/02, 9; cited in National Association of Scholars, *Scandal of Social Work*, 5.

<sup>12</sup>*William Felkner v. Rhode Island College, John Nazarian, Scott Kane, Carol Bennett-Speight, James, Ryczek, and Roberta Perlmutter*, verified complaint (2007), 10.

Felkner wrote in opposition to the bill anyway and received an F on his paper, along with the explanation, “Regardless of the content, application of theory, and critical analysis, you did not write from the perspective you were required to use in this academic exercise. Therefore, the paper is must [*sic*] receive a failing grade.”<sup>13</sup> It didn’t matter how well-argued Felkner’s essay was—all that mattered was his willingness to embrace a particular viewpoint and advocate for it.

Public elementary education in Tucson, Arizona, also projects a particular ideological viewpoint. Children there learn to advocate on behalf of Chicanos who seek to reclaim the Southwest region of the United States (they call it *Aztlán*) as their rightful territory. Tucson United School District (TUSD) has adopted an ethnic studies program called La Raza studies, recently renamed Mexican American Studies.<sup>14</sup> The program draws on Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder, 1970) to teach Mexican American students to take hold of their heritage by revolting against white America.

The Raza studies program derives its curricular model from the Social Justice Education Project, an initiative co-sponsored by the University of Arizona and TUSD.<sup>15</sup> The Social Justice Education Project teaches students to conduct action research focusing on “how Latina/o high school students experience social inequalities in and beyond education.” The Project goal is for students to use their findings “to transform education and address the[se] inequalities.” To do so, University of Arizona researchers and graduate and undergraduate students teach students the “skills that will empower them to produce their own solutions to educational and community injustices.”<sup>16</sup>

Let us consider these goals a moment. Is education supposed to be transformative? Should it address inequality? Should it empower students to solve injustice? Perhaps. In general, education changes people. Those who learn well understand the world differently than they did before. Yet while education has the capacity to transform and equip people to recognize and address social problems, these are not education’s first purposes. That purpose is to teach objectively what is worth knowing in areas such as

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>14</sup>Tucson Unified School District (<http://www.tusd.k12.az.us/index.htm>, Mexican American Studies Model, <http://instech.tusd.k12.az.us/raza/model.asp>).

<sup>15</sup>University of Arizona Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (<http://bara.arizona.edu/index.htm>), Research, The Social Justice Education Project, <http://bara.arizona.edu/research/pro-socialjusticeeduc.htm>.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

mathematics, history, science, literature, and rhetoric. The power for change is intended to be an outgrowth of education—not an academic subject.

But many education institutions have things backwards: Cabrini College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Social Justice Education Program, the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, the Rhode Island College School of Social Work, and the TUSD Raza Studies Program all give priority to social advocacy over education.

### Sustainability's Social Mandate

A relatively new ideological trend in higher education is the “sustainability” movement. Sustainability, like social justice, is a tricky term with positive connotations but hidden meanings. It is usually used to refer to conscientious stewardship of natural resources in the interest of saving such resources for future generations. But eco-responsibility is only one level of sustainability, a concept often illustrated with a Venn diagram of three overlapping circles labeled “social,” “economic,” and “environmental.” Sustainability’s social and economic elements, and often its environmental elements as well, generally align with the doctrines of the political Left, such as multiculturalism, population control, government regulation, and economic redistribution.<sup>17</sup>

Sustainability *can* be studied empirically through serious inquiry in biology, economics, engineering, law, and biotechnology—Arizona State University seems to have the makings of such a program<sup>18</sup>—but more often than not sustainability on campus takes the form of a utopian vision sold to students. Several groups outside the university are casting that vision.

The American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) is a key driver of the movement. As of now, the commitment has been signed by 677 college and university presidents who have pledged their institutions’ allegiance to the fight against global warming and the infusion

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<sup>17</sup>See American College Personnel Association (<http://www2.myacpa.org/>), Members of the ACPA Sustainability Taskforce: Kathleen Gardner, Susan Mendoza-Jones, and Dr. Jeanne S. Steffes, “Advanced Sustainability Techniques Institute-I: Moving from Rhetoric to Substance,” Power Point presentation, slide 10, “Social Justice Aspects of Sustainable Development,” Program 4 of 5—Sustainability Institute, March 31, 2009, [http://www.myacpa.org/task-force/sustainability/docs/041009\\_516\\_ACPAConventionSusInstitute4.3.pptx](http://www.myacpa.org/task-force/sustainability/docs/041009_516_ACPAConventionSusInstitute4.3.pptx).

<sup>18</sup>Arizona State University School of Sustainability (<http://schoolofsustainability.asu.edu/>), Faculty Listing, <http://schoolofsustainability.asu.edu/faculty/index.php>.

of sustainability education into the curriculum.<sup>19</sup> One line in the text of the commitment states:

Campuses that address the climate challenge by reducing global warming emissions and by integrating sustainability into their curriculum will better serve their students and meet their social mandate to help create a thriving, ethical and civil society.<sup>20</sup>

The most telling phrase here is “meet their social mandate.” The ACUPCC contributes to the pressure on students to become activists, lobbyists, change agents, protestors, agitators, fist-raisers, justice warriors, world problem solvers, utopia builders. And advocacy is not simply an option. “Meet your social mandate” is a way of saying, “Fulfill your destiny—the one we’ve created for you.”

Last April, the ACUPCC published a guide for signatory institutions on how to fulfill their eco-promises.<sup>21</sup> The guide’s first suggestion for making “climate neutrality and sustainability a part of the curricular and extra-curricular experience for all students” is to get “student involvement in greening the campus.”<sup>22</sup> In the same month, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), which co-sponsors the commitment, also launched a wiki with guidance for ACUPCC signatories.<sup>23</sup> Its recommendations for “greening academics” include “Establish a sustainability graduation requirement” and “Encourage and empower student environmental activism and clubs.”<sup>24</sup> And to make retention of sustainability leadership certain, the wiki also recommends a “climate action litmus test” for executive hires.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup>American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment, <http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/>.

<sup>20</sup>American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment, “Text of the American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment,” <http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/about/commitment>.

<sup>21</sup>American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment, *Education for Climate Neutrality and Sustainability: Guidance for ACUPCC Institutions*, April 2009, [http://www.secondnature.org/documents/EducationforClimateNeutralitySustainability\\_2009.05.07\\_finalWEB.pdf](http://www.secondnature.org/documents/EducationforClimateNeutralitySustainability_2009.05.07_finalWEB.pdf).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 10, 11.

<sup>23</sup>Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education ([www.aashe.org](http://www.aashe.org)), Climate Action Planning Wiki, *Cool Campus! A How-To Guide for College and University Climate Action Planning*, <http://www.aashe.org/wiki/climate-planning-guide>.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., “3. Prioritizing Education, Research, and Public Engagement,” <http://www.aashe.org/wiki/climate-planning-guide/education-research-and-public-engagement.php>.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., “10. Implementing Your Campus Climate Action Plan,” <http://www.aashe.org/wiki/10-implementing-your-campus-climate-action-plan>.

The ACUPCC's primary sponsor is an organization called Second Nature, founded in the 1990s by John Kerry and Teresa Heinz. The group's mission is to make sustainable living "the foundation of all learning and practice in higher education."<sup>26</sup> Presidents who commit to Second Nature's pledge thus sign away their entire student body's education in exchange for sustainability propaganda.

Individual sustainability enthusiasts have also had an influence on the university. In 2007, the NAS and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) exposed a residence life program at the University of Delaware that aimed to teach "citizenship" through sustainability education. The goal of the program was for students to develop "a particular values system" and "learn the skills necessary to be a change agent."<sup>27</sup> The program's director, Kathleen Kerr, was considered a pioneer of a new kind of "educational" residence life in which students are urged to develop a "liberatory consciousness" and "learn change agent skills." Although the University of Delaware shut this egregiously intrusive program down after NAS and FIRE drew attention to it, Kerr's agenda lives on in the presentations of other activists such as Debra Rowe, who regularly rouses administrators (most recently at an Educating for Sustainability conference at Pennsylvania State University) to supply "education to action."<sup>28</sup>

### **Tapping and Tunneling: Student-Driven Activism**

The effort to cast students as vessels of revolutionary fervor is largely administrator-driven, but students find plenty of ways to be activists on their own. Take Back the Tap, for instance, is a student-based "college campaign that encourages students and entire campuses to cut existing contracts with bottled water corporations and promote the use of tap water."<sup>29</sup> It and another group that markets to college students, Think Outside the Bottle, urge people

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<sup>26</sup>Second Nature: Education for Sustainability ([www.secondnature.org](http://www.secondnature.org)), Mission Statement, <http://www.secondnature.org/about/>.

<sup>27</sup>University of Delaware, Office of Residence Life, "Rodney Complex Curriculum, A Sustainable Community, 2007–2008," developed by Sendy E. Guerrier, <http://www.thefire.org/public/pdfs/81f9cbba277e955afa9823f0ebdce026.pdf>, executive summary, 2; curriculum, 12.

<sup>28</sup>Debra Rowe "Response to Presentation at Penn State: National Context for Sustainability, Learning from and Serving as a Model," October 5, 2009, Power Point presentation, slide 12, [http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/NatlConf/Debra\\_Rowe.ppt](http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/NatlConf/Debra_Rowe.ppt).

<sup>29</sup>Take Back the Tap (<http://takebackthetap.org/>), Campuses, Video Contest, "Students Demonstrate That Anyone Can Take Back the Tap on Earth Day," <http://takebackthetap.org/campuses/video-contest/>.



to take a pledge not to purchase bottled water.<sup>30</sup> The movement against bottled water is rapidly gaining ground on campuses. Calling for small daily personal behavior changes—changes that will probably not “save the earth”—makes those who fail to go along stand out. It prompts people to conform publicly to a social ethic in which the substance matters less than the conformity.

Another popular manifestation of student activism is the “tunnel of oppression,” a novelty of the 1990s that continues to hollow out space on college campuses. Typically set up as a walk-through gallery, a tunnel of oppression often contains skits that portray disturbing scenes of “the dirtiest, ugliest, bloodiest issues” such as rape, KKK threats, and violence toward homosexuals.<sup>31</sup> At the University of Maryland’s 2007 tunnel of oppression, visitors concluded their tour by writing their thoughts on a “reaction wall.” Among the reactions were these:

Why am I learning organic molecules again? Why aren't we learning this? Why isn't this a CORE requirement?

CLEARLY I HAVE NOT BEEN EDUCATED. I thought college was about learning and discovering.

I second that thought about being educated for the past 18 years. All of that is BS. The real stuff is not in the classroom.<sup>32</sup>

These are the sorts of visceral “now I get it” reactions for which tunnels of oppression aim, and show how students who immerse themselves in rehearsals of guilt can be the ones pushing to make “social justice” the focus of their education.

### **Raise a Fist, Lend a Hand**

Many students are basically uninterested in activism. They roll their eyes when professors and administrators attempt to stoke “change agent” zeal. Fostering a culture of social and political activism has inherent complications, as the following *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles illustrate.

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<sup>30</sup>Think Outside the Bottle, <http://thinkoutsidethebottle.net/>.

<sup>31</sup>See “Tunnel of Oppression,” April 28, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-9StO50hr8>.

<sup>32</sup>University of Maryland, Tunnel of Oppression (<http://www.studentorg.umd.edu/umdtunnel/>), Reaction Wall from Tunnel of Oppression 2007, <http://www.studentorg.umd.edu/umdtunnel/reacton%20wal.htm>.

One teacher, frustrated by her failed efforts to inspire her class to activism, wrote about her disappointment in a 2008 *Chronicle* article titled “A Professor Tries to Teach Students to Be Activists.”<sup>33</sup> Ivy Helman, a graduate student in women’s studies in religion at Claremont Graduate University, described her experience the previous year attempting to teach a freshman seminar at Carroll University in Waukesha, Wisconsin. The seminar was titled, “Raise a Fist, Lend a Hand: Activism and Volunteerism at the Dawn of the 21st Century.” Ms. Helman’s students, however, seemed apathetic and determined to “stay in their comfort zones.”<sup>34</sup>

Ms. Helman had her students read *Ecotactics: the Sierra Club Handbook for Environmental Activists* (Simon & Schuster), which she called “a marvelous little 1970 book from the Sierra Club, which highlights college students’ environmental activism.” Then she “dove headfirst” into a book by a woman who goes by the name “Starhawk” and describes herself as a “peace, environmental, and global justice activist and trainer, a permaculture designer and teacher, a Pagan and Witch.”<sup>35</sup> Ms. Helman praised Starhawk’s book, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (New Society, 2002), as “a brilliant and thrilling account of both the dangers and rewards of activism.”<sup>36</sup>

But neither *Ecotactics* nor *Webs of Power* managed to inspire students when the time came to fulfill the seminar’s ten-hour issue-based activism requirement. Students wanted to satisfy the requirement by volunteering at an animal shelter, despite their professor’s sincere efforts to teach them the difference between activism and volunteering. Ms. Helman wrote:

Another obstacle I ran into all semester was a general apathy among the students, manifested in their procrastination and lack of interest. True activists are activists because of a deep-seated passion and world view. People without that core commitment do not make good activists, and struggle to connect with those who do. Most of my students did not express interest in or concern for any issue, not even the rather “in” topic of environmental activism, and therefore had no motivation to work for change.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Ivy A. Helman, “A Professor Tries to Teach Students to Be Activists,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 17, 2008, available at [http://www.acui.org/uploadedFiles/Programs/Online\\_Programs/2008/A%20Professor%20Tries%20to%20Teach%20Students%20to%20Be%20Activists.pdf](http://www.acui.org/uploadedFiles/Programs/Online_Programs/2008/A%20Professor%20Tries%20to%20Teach%20Students%20to%20Be%20Activists.pdf).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Starhawk’s Tangled Web, [www.starhawk.org](http://www.starhawk.org).

<sup>36</sup>Helman, “Professor Tries to Teach.”

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

Apparently not even trendy eco-activism could tempt Carroll University freshmen to “work for change.” Still, Ms. Helman concluded:

Requiring students to participate in activism came with its own share of trouble and conflict, yet my class syllabus will always have an activist component. I still hope that one day I won’t have to make activism a requirement in order for my students to try it.<sup>38</sup>

Ivy Helman’s resolve to turn her class into megaphone-carriers is revealing. She is determined to do so even if her students care nothing for the causes she offers them. Her activism requirement is the equivalent of obliging students to embrace religion or patriotism as a course assignment, both of which would necessitate outward manifestations of inward beliefs. Beliefs, however, belong to individuals, not to academic authorities.

Even if the students *had* shared Helman’s passion for social activism, her course would still have contributed nothing to their intellectual growth. The seminar skipped disciplinary substance and moved straight to advocacy.

### **Is It Our Job to Teach Activism?**

Xenia Markowitt, director of Dartmouth College’s Center for Women and Gender, does not share Ms. Helman’s certainty that teaching activism is her role. In “Is It My Job to Teach the Revolution?”<sup>39</sup> Markowitt describes an interaction with a student who asked her for advice on how to organize a diversity-related sit-in on campus. The conversation prompts Markowitt to wonder whether she and administrators in similar “social justice” roles *should* such give advice. “Is it our job to teach activism?” she asks. “To some that would appear essential; to others counterintuitive. So I struggle with how to make that decision.” Her inner debate is a good sign. She is concerned that teaching activism may be inappropriate for someone in her position. But Markowitt goes on:

So what do I do with this dissonance? Some would do away with advocacy positions like mine. Others are still waiting for me to take down the Man. As I see it, at a time when many college educators are

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Xenia Markowitt, “Is It My Job to Teach the Revolution?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 11, 2009, available at <http://cwgdirector.blogspot.com/2009/10/is-it-my-job-to-teach-revolution.html>.

concerned about developing the “whole student,” our role is to support students’ interests, even when those interests lead them to activism. Why shouldn’t students have opportunities for the practical application of what they learn in the classroom? How radical is that, really? It’s not as if we’re advocating the revolution.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps Ms. Markowitt should read that quote from Che Guevara. Her comment that activism is a “practical application of what they learn in the classroom” is a sour reminder of how advocacy has permeated academic teaching. In addition, she ignores the fact that the interests of many students do *not* “lead them to activism,” but that their education is being used to push them there anyway.

### Green It Forward

And this effort is meeting with success. A third *Chronicle* article, “Young, Green, and in Charge,” by Reeves Wiedeman, paints a picture of the new wave of college graduates who have gone from being eco-activist students to eco-administrators.<sup>41</sup> These young sustainability coordinators are said to “have tempered their convictions to work for change within the system.” As Jeremy Friedman, a twenty-two-year-old sustainability coordinator at New York University put it, “My views are radical by any mainstream judgment. I could rabble-rouse if I wanted to. But I wanted to see things happen. My view was, let’s get to work.”<sup>42</sup>

By placing recent (and radical) graduates in newly created positions of leadership on campus, activism has grown to be self-sustaining.

### Choosing Sides

What happens when higher education becomes wrapped up in activism? First, it turns “What have you learned?” into “Which side are you on?” As we saw with Bill Felkner at Rhode Island College, being on the wrong side had consequences. Those consequences ultimately prevented him from ever receiving his social work degree. For countless other students who find

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Reeves Wiedeman, “Young, Green, and in Charge,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 13, 2009, available at <http://www.elks.org/enf/scholars/news.cfm?StoryID=49462>.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

themselves on the wrong side of the ideological spectrum, they must either keep silent and compromise their beliefs or, like Felkner, face consequences.

Second, students miss out on the opportunity to learn to think objectively, to discern weak arguments from strong ones, and to pursue the truth. Courses that require them to demonstrate “a sustained commitment to the practice of social justice,” revolt against white America, combat global warming, and “learn the skills necessary to be a change agent” may teach them some things, but not the most lasting, most important things.

When activism is made the central purpose of the university, graduates leave with an upside-down view of the world in which wisdom matters less than current thinking. Ultimately higher education should be like a garden, where students can cultivate their minds and grow in knowledge, with the hope that they will produce the fruit of an ordered life. That fruit should be free to ripen on its own—without getting knocked down by zealous campus ideologues.