

New Cogs for Old

Daniel J. Flynn

Published online: 14 July 2012

© The Author(s) 2012. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

There is a moment within *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future* when the report gets it right.¹ The academics tackle a National Governors Association study that envisions colleges as job training centers. The authors of *A Crucible Moment* recognize that “Narrow training is bad preparation for the economy as well as for democracy” (12). Alas, the narrow training desired by the politicians to produce economic cogs is countered by a desire of the professors for narrow training to produce political cogs. The professors correctly diagnose a problem, but it is one they have helped to create through vacuous course work unconnected to *higher* learning. The uselessness of the education that professors have provided to their students has given rise to education utilitarians, who see universities as trade schools for the professions. The camps may understand one another. Neither understands education.

The education promoted in *A Crucible Moment* resembles the activism whose absence in the lives of apathetic students has been long lamented by politicized faculty and administrators. Their solution to political indifference is to make activism a mandatory portion of the curriculum, establish a nationwide “Civic Action Corps” modeled on the Reserve Officer Training Corps, and reward professors who assign “service learning” with course

¹The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012). Further references to this work will be cited within the text.

Daniel J. Flynn is the author of *Blue Collar Intellectuals: When the Enlightened and the Everyman Elevated America* (ISI Books, 2011); flynnfiles@gmail.com.

reductions. The campus periphery imagines itself as the campus core. The staple of the new curriculum is the oxymoronic required volunteerism. The authors lament that three-fourths of community college students and one-half of four-year college students have never taken a course requiring service learning. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement's call to action contends, "The challenge for colleges and universities in the next decade is to make such opportunities pervasive, rather than random, across the institution" (6).

Their mission is to redefine the mission of higher education. In their reconstruction of the university, a retreat to think transforms into a hub for action. The sixty-nine-page Department of Education-commissioned brief lists various social movements embraced on campus in recent history. Overlooking the primacy of teaching and scholarship, the report enthusiastically maintains that because of these social movements "higher education eventually became the multiracial, multicultural site for democracy it is today" (19). The authors explain:

A Crucible Moment likewise calls for transformations necessary for this generation. A daunting one is to eliminate persistent inequalities, especially those in the United States determined by income and race, in order to secure the country's economic and civic future. But the academy must also be a vehicle for tackling other pressing issues—growing global economic inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation, lack of access to quality health care, economic volatility, and more. To do that requires expanding students' capacities to be civic problem solvers using all their powers of intellect and inventiveness. (p. 19)

The extracurricular has invaded the curricular, and *A Crucible Moment* is its declaration of war.

Perhaps as disturbing as what the report says is what it leaves out. The authors' conception of education for democracy includes numerous references to global warming and income inequality, but barely a mention of the liberal arts. In fact, liberal education appears just twice in the main body of the lengthy report: the first in reference to the National Governors Association study mentioned above,² and the second to define liberal education

²Erin Sparks and Mary Jo Waits, *Degrees for What Jobs? Raising Expectations for Colleges and Universities in a Global Economy* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, 2011), <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/1103DEGREESJOBS.PDF>.

in part as “acting responsibly toward the surrounding community in all its diversity” (50). By way of comparison, the phrase “service learning” appears fifty-nine times.

True teaching for democracy would mean a liberal arts education. Instruction in what Matthew Arnold dubbed “the best which has been thought and said” prepares a student to become a citizen. The issues activists argue about and the devices businessmen rely on will not be tomorrow what they are today. The political and economic activists who wish the educated to be reshaped into cogs by their crucible are championing ephemeral causes and technology. The liberal arts expose students to ideas that have endured for more than a moment. Perhaps opting to study Dostoyevsky over DOS may have seemed quaint in 1982. But Dostoyevsky survives and DOS, well, DOS not.

If education really were best served outside the campus gates, why preserve the academy at all? Instead of reading books, writing papers, and discussing ideas, students could clean litter from economically deprived neighborhoods or perform apprenticeships with seasoned community organizers. This is what service learning proposes for college education. Yet, there is nothing stopping any young person, dropout or scholar, from doing just that—and for free. Rather than seeing college as a cloister from the outside world, activist educators demand a jailbreak from the campus back to the world where the student has spent the previous eighteen years. A four-year respite from the world before joining it has provided young people with an environment to study and contemplate. Service learning demands action. This may be worthwhile or a waste, but it isn't *higher* education.

Like most reports authored by committee, *A Crucible Moment* loses something in translation from Bureaucratese to English. One is struck by the document's “problem solving pedagogies,” “transformative possibilities,” “social entrepreneurship,” and “deliberative dialogue.” These are the kind of phrases that tell you more about the writers than about anything written. After stumbling across “transformative partnerships” and “democratic, participatory, and reciprocal partnerships” a few pages earlier, the reader encounters “layered partnerships,” “formidable partnerships,” and an “exemplary, ambitious, and generative set of partnerships,” among other college-community partnerships, on page 66. *A Crucible Moment* is a text where nouns have a right to adjectives but words don't have a right to meanings.

The debate provoked by *A Crucible Moment* pits smart versus stupid rather than Right versus Left. This is convenient. Whereas framing a cause as standing against anti-intellectualism will generally find sympathizers in an academic setting, framing a cause as standing up to left-wing activism will find contempt. Aside from the dronish drudgery the report encourages for college credit, its presumption of one correct viewpoint for controversial questions stands athwart the mission of higher education. The idea of a university based on the search for truth is foreign to people who know that they already possess the truth.

The authors of *A Crucible Moment* are concerned about everyone's social responsibility save their own. Society's charge to them is to educate students, not propagandize them. Without a hint of irony, the report laments, "Today, a college degree is the credential that a high school diploma once was." *A Crucible Moment* provides a glimpse into why this is so.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits any use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.