

POINT OF VIEW *By Richard H. Hersh and Richard P. Keeling*

Call for Renewal of Liberal Education Is Only Partly Right

In a statement issued in July, “Rebuilding Campus Community: the Wrong Imperative,” the National Association of Scholars calls for exactly the right thing—a renewal of liberal education, that broad and deep education beyond students’ majors—but misses the point about what is needed to achieve it. Claiming that liberal education has been hijacked by residence-life programs, the association distracts itself rather than focusing on the real opportunity that liberal education offers our nation.

To summarize briefly, the statement condemns the “spreading influence” and apparently hegemonic success of a “movement” that the watchdog group says student-life people and others call “the residential-life revolution”—and that the group itself calls the work of a “new campus regime in residence life” that is “illiberal throughout” and “hostile” to the nature, purpose, and value of a liberal education. As an example, the statement cites a 2007 dormitory-based, mandatory program on diversity at the University of Delaware in which students said they were forced to discuss controversial and divisive issues like affirmative action, gay marriage, and abortion. (The program has since been suspended.)

Some of what the association espouses in its statement is beyond debate in our minds. The explication of liberal education is succinctly eloquent, and here we paraphrase: Liberal education is emancipatory, opening and sharpening minds through exposure to the robust debates that have provided civilization its most creative tensions. It focuses on rigorous thought, thereby widening horizons, broadening knowledge, and strengthening intellectual confidence. Who could disagree?

The association also has its history and assignment of accountability right—the professoriate has given up on the practice of liberal education and indeed must reclaim it; that is the faculty’s professional and moral obligation. “For several decades,” the statement acknowledges, “faculty members have allowed the definition of the educational mission to slip from their hands... [and] retreated into the redoubts of their scholarly specialties, paying less and less

attention to the fulfillment of broader purposes. Teaching has often been scanted or dulled. The once serious concern for individual mentorship—the guidance of students through initial encounters with new ideas and systems of thought—is also fading.”

Finally, the association properly acknowledges that the roots of the “movement” it decries were legitimate: the need to improve the sense of community on campuses, or, as the statement puts it, to respond to the fact that “the university had lost many of the norms that once gave it cohesiveness.”

But the rest of the association’s analysis sacrifices one very good point—the desperate need for renewal of liberal education—to a brutal and self-serving caricature. It maligns student-life professionals, whom the statement labels “imperativists” (after the “student-learning imperative”), bent on transforming students “in a doctrinaire and coercive way.” The statement claims that the modus operandi is subversive: Student-affairs “revolutionaries (“their own term,” says the association) have moved in on faculty turf, elevating what is going on in residence halls as every bit as important as what is or is not going on in the classroom, and viewing themselves as equal partners “instead of consulting with the faculty about how to invigorate traditional ideals.”

We suspect that residence-life staff members—dismissed by the association as “res lifers”—are amazed to learn that they have so much power. Does the idea of experiential learning in dormitories really unseat the primacy of professors, courses, and academic credits?

Many will rise to defend the so-called imperativists; many others will suggest—and rightly so—that partnerships between faculty and student-affairs professionals offer far greater promise than do conflicts and caricatures. But our purpose is different: to suggest that the ideals of a liberal education—the fundamentals that motivate both good faculty members and their student-affairs colleagues—do in fact require attention to students as whole people who, during their engagement with higher education, learn in and out of the classroom, always and everywhere.

The association's statement says, regarding the goals of liberal education, that "widened horizons, breadth of knowledge, power of thought, and the intellectual confidence born of wrestling with serious issues are its culminating legacy." But those goals are not limited to an intellectual understanding of the world; they include the ability to make meaning in the chaos of available information, ethical reasoning and behavior, a concern for others as persons of equal value (and the ability to take the perspective of another), and the capacity and commitment to engage civic questions and participate in our democracy.

Achieving those goals requires that the student who graduates is not the same as the student who first matriculated. It demands what scholars, practitioners, and teachers who study learning itself—the phenomenon through which learners make meaning of knowledge—call transformation.

This transformation is not what the association claims in its caricature—that learners are force-marched through a new ideology. It does not mean that they are indoctrinated in some cult or value system, or that their pre-existing values have been unseated in some mindless process. It does not mean that they were broken and have been fixed by higher education. It is not a religious conversion. It does mean that students have been inspired to prepare themselves as thinkers and citizens for a challenging world, question and affirm or change what they believe, and come to a greater understanding of the complex questions of life. They have been challenged, and they have responded. What else is higher education for? Liberation, or emancipation, requires transformation.

The elements of that transformation may occur anywhere in higher education, in or out of the classroom, in response to learning that is curricular or experiential. The National Association of Scholars offers, in its statement, a good start at a definition: Transformation is about intellectual deepening and broadening; it is about rigorous and humble introspection; it is about encountering the great human conversations as a means of learning how to construct meaning in far more defensible and rigorous ways.

But learning—and the transformation it fosters—is never strictly cognitive, as the association implies; it engages emotions as well as ideas. What cognitive psychologists, learning

researchers, and neuroscientists tell us is strikingly consistent: Learning engages the whole person. Learning is about being able to link thought and emotion, and all with action, in ways that are humane, caring, and responsible. It is about being able to read *Tom Sawyer* or *Alice in Wonderland*, for example, at age 22 profoundly differently than at age 12—and about reflecting on and choosing different personal behaviors at 22 than at 12.

Thinking, emotional competence, and appropriate behavior are inextricably linked, and it all, as a whole, must be learned—not by chance, not simply by peer affiliation, not primarily from the Internet and television, but with the intentional intervention of caring and demanding adults—parents, teachers, student-affairs professionals, and, yes, professors, among others. There are no organized barbarians at the gate; no fierce "imperativists" have concocted the destruction of liberal education. Yes, there have been residential-education programs that were wrong-headed: There are variations in the quality of practice and the competence of practitioners in student life, as there are in the faculty. And yes, a vacuum in educational leadership has emerged, and the faculty must step forward to deal with that deficiency.

The real problem is that America's colleges and universities need to regroup and renew as concerned campus communities to deliver on the promise of liberal education. Students, parents, our nation, and the world are waiting; the quality of our work force and society, and therefore our global economic and political position, are at stake. The lessons of learning research are extraordinarily clear: Learning is about the whole student. So we say to the National Association of Scholars: Don't miss the point—learning is about the whole institution.

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