

The Problem of Scholastic Monoculture

(An Open Letter to the Academy)

Stephen M. Vantassel

Contemporary academia has a problem. The problem is too many scholars are unwilling to engage opposing points of view in a substantive and thorough way. In the view of this writer, the academy has been transformed from a space where debate over difficult topics is tolerated, if not welcomed, to a club where debate is only allowed in areas that do not matter such as the text critical questions of whether there was a nu at the end of a word or not or whether a poem was written by Shakespeare¹.

Put another way, academics, even tenured ones, avoid the crucible of debate, choosing instead to surround themselves with those who will only confirm their opinions or at best offer minor tweaks to improve them. Like a cocoon that protects the fragile butterfly pupa from the harsh realities of the environment, many academics sidestep difficult ideas in two ways, passively by avoiding research that conflicts with their own and actively by policing the membership rolls of the academy. For example, I was once speaking with a professor at a land-grant university about diversity. He was all for academic diversity. But his tone and demeanor took on a stern and oppositional tone when I raised the issue of intelligent design. One wonders, why he was so passionate about this issue. Was he concerned that having an intelligent design believing professor on the department's faculty would poison the minds

of impressionable students? Or was he worried that a peer, whose belief system, stood opposed to his agnosticism, would make his intellectual cocoon uncomfortable? It seems that Allan Bloom's observations about the academy published in 1987 are still true².

Academics also avoid engagement of ideas by their acquiesce to student protests. In recent years, American schools of higher education have cancelled numerous invited speakers³. Abby Jackson provides a list of speakers who were disinvited at universities in 2016.⁴ It is truly ironic that professors (both teaching and administrative) who are supposed to be our intellectual betters kowtow to student demands. Could it be that the professors agree with the students' position or think they are less intelligent than their students? I am doubtful. Or is it that faculty are simply afraid of their students and the customer role they play?⁵ Of course, all the above explanations could be simultaneously true at any given institution, but one suspects that one or two may be more likely.

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2 Allan Bloom. *The Closing of the American Mind: how Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. London,UK: Touchstone, Simon and Schuster, 1987.

3 Abby Jackson.“Disinvitations’ for college speakers are on the rise – here’s a list of people turned away this year. July 28 2016. <https://www.businessinsider.com/list-of-disinvited-speakers-at-colleges-2016-7> visited 11-20-2021.

4 Abby Jackson.“Disinvitations’” visited 11-25-2022.

5 Tom Nichols. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. OUP, Oxford, UK: 70-74, 2017.

University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law⁶, who attempts to defend the academy from the charge of intellectual group think by defining intellectual diversity as distinct from ideological diversity⁷. He writes (p. 156),

"Ultimately, this article concludes that the accusations of universities lacking intellectual diversity or otherwise stifling conservative ideas are without merit. These accusations represent an ideologically-driven charge made by people whose goal is not intellectual diversity or even ideological balance, which is itself impossible to ascertain. Rather, the goal is to undermine the very academic "marketplace" they claim to cherish by artificially granting more market share to certain ideas with which they sympathize. In so doing, they undermine principles of academic freedom that are integral to the functioning of universities."

Kammer's use of the distinction of intellectual versus ideological diversity to defend contemporary universities from the charge of intellectually monoculture is certainly a clever approach to be sure. But I think that Kammer fails to take seriously how much one's ideological lenses influence one's academic work (cf. pp. 180ff). But let's put that more philosophical evaluation aside and focus on Kammer's main claim that intellectual diversity should not be used as the standard to require universities to hire faculty who support ideas that cannot withstand intellectual scrutiny. At face value, I think Kammer's sense here is correct. Not all ideas or ideologies deserve a place at the university table. Just consider flat-earthers, Holocaust deniers, and those that deny binary genders. Unfortunately, if I have

6 <https://www.usd.edu/research-and-faculty/faculty-and-staff/sean-kammer> visited 11-25-2022.

7 Sean M. Kammer. "The 'Intellectual Diversity' Crisis that Isn't: Liberal Faculties, Conservative Victims, and the Cynical Effort to Undermine Higher Education for Political Gain. *Quinnipiac Law Review* 39(149):149-224, 2021.

read him correctly, Kammer appears to assume that academics arrived at their ideas based on a careful evaluation of the evidence of the various options. From my experience, I am not convinced that this assumption is true. Readers should ask themselves how often their professors assigned texts containing the best arguments against their professor's position? I have no problem with professors professing. Sadly, I have encountered too many teachers that failed to profess what they thought. However, I also believe that faculty unjustifiably censor content and ideas from their students. Ironically, it is Kammer's own testimony regarding the alleged superiority of Darwinism over creation science that supports my view that too often faculty have not adequately engaged alternative views (p.198) or at least criticisms of the views they espouse (see also Kammer's comments on the Covid pandemic).

How can institutions and faculty guard against improper scholastic monoculture? While no policies can ever guarantee protection against invalid group think as humans are just too tribal and fallen to be guided solely by enlightened principles (cf. Romans 1). Policies and principles, nevertheless, can help guard against our baser desires and foster the search for truth through relentless testing and inquiry much in the way traffic laws reduce collisions.

Permit me to list a few principles or guidelines that I believe would help address the problem of intellectual ghettoization. Principle 1. Read and assign publications with which you disagree. Choose materials that address a topic that is important in your field of study. For example, scientists regularly argue that evolution (often not precisely defined) is essential to understanding biological science⁸. It

8 Randolph M. Nesse, Carl T. Bergstrom, Peter T. Ellison, David Valle, "Making Evolutionary Biology a Basic Science for Medicine." *PNAS* 107 (Suppl. 1), 1800-

is argued that students who lack familiarity with the theory will be hindered in their discovery of new knowledge or its application. Let's assume that view is in fact correct. Would students be irreparably harmed by engaging the views of those, such as Laufmann and Glicksman, who deny the human body underwent gradual evolution?⁹ Or would the experience of engaging alternative viewpoints, fairly presented actually harden and strengthen their faith in evolution?

Principle 2. Invite speakers to campus whose ideas, you disagree with. In person dialogue has lots of advantages, not the least of which is that it humanizes those who hold beliefs with which you strongly disagree. In person communication also mitigates straw man arguments and caricatures which hinder honest and open dialogue. If nothing else, I would hope that all scholars would agree that legitimate scholarship always seeks to fairly understand views and positions, particularly those with which we disagree.

Principle 3. Be open to debates either in print or in person. Now I am sure that some of you are thinking, "Well the opposing views are unworthy of response". That is certainly true of some claims. I am not arguing that scholars must respond to every opposing view. Clearly, some claims are so outlandish that one would have difficulty knowing where to begin. My point is simply this, true scholarship is manifest by a willingness to engage opposing ideas. Too often bad ideas continue to exist because those who know the truth fail to systematically destroy the false beliefs¹⁰.

Principle 4. Practice humility. Engaging

other views in a purposeful manner is threatening because you might find that you were not as smart or correct as you thought you were. Contact with other views also helps you understand your own opinions with more clarity and depth.

My hope is that this journal is an example of a place where the walls of the intellectual ghetto that so frequently protects academics from inconvenient truths gets torn asunder. As the editor of the ERTP, I want this journal to be a place where scholars can feel free to make claims, destroy arguments, and do so without having to pay exorbitant publication fees or wait years for the article to see the light of day. Proverbs 27:17 says it well, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (NASB)." We need more scholarly engagement not less.¹¹ I hope you would agree and join us in this important endeavor.

1807. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0906224106>.

9 Steve Laufmann, & Howard Glicksman. *Your Designed Body*. Seattle, WA: Discovery Institute Press, 2022.

10 Nichols, *The Death of Expertise* (2017) argues that too often academics/experts fail to engage the public resulting in poorer public policy, 216-17.

11 My sincere gratitude to Anthony Royle for his thoughtful and constructive review of this paper. His comments made it a better paper.

