



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

The ‘liberal’ in liberal education doesn’t mean what many people think

The word “liberal” within academics derives from the Latin word *liber* and the Greek word *eleutheros*, both meaning “free.” The liberal educational tradition thus celebrates and nurtures human freedom.



James Baldwin said that reading Charles Dickens “taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had been alive.” [Associated Press]

*“Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” —
James Baldwin*

The African American writer James Baldwin, one of America’s preeminent 20th century public intellectuals, spoke eloquently of the importance of protecting academic freedom and a liberal education on America’s colleges and universities. Baldwin wrote:

“The paradox of education is precisely this — that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish.”

Baldwin’s warnings resonate loudly to those of us who have committed our lives to higher education in the state of Florida. Gov. DeSantis and the Republican-dominated Legislature have systematically limited our students’ ability to question the status quo and achieve their own identity. DeSantis has complained about so-called liberal political indoctrination and “gender ideology” being inflicted on students. The public is given the view that there is a monolithic, highly politicized elite in our colleges and universities attempting to enforce a “woke” politically correct view of human life which is subverting traditional values. This highly charged political attack is profoundly false.

The Florida government's harmful actions have been well-documented by numerous organizations and scholars, and include: the hostile takeover of New College; defunding of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs; bullying of students and educators supportive of LGBTQ+ people; and attacking the academic fields of sociology and women's and gender studies.

The governor has, in particular, targeted transgender students, immigrants, school board members, higher education curriculum, accreditation and tenure. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), all of this has resulted in the "undoing (of) 40 years of civil rights legislation and practice toward greater equality and justice for African Americans, immigrants, women, and LGBTQ+ people." In response to the eliminating of DEI programs, the NAACP has urged Black student athletes to reconsider attending public colleges and universities in Florida.

In addition, Florida leaders don't want students to question a version of American history filled with romantic notions of our country's history. HB 7, known as the "anti-woke bill," specifically undermines academic freedom and instead demands professors adhere to political indoctrination and a strict conservative ideological agenda. The law prohibits "teaching certain topics or presenting information in specified ways" and bans teaching that "systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States." While the law is being challenged in courts, it has already succeeded in chilling and limiting the free exchange of ideas at colleges throughout Florida. The AAUP has characterized Florida's actions as a "political and ideologically driven assault unparalleled in U.S. history that threatens the very survival of meaningful higher education in the state, with dire implications for the entire country."

For those of us who believe in the fundamental link between an educated citizenry and democracy, the fight to reverse these pernicious actions and reestablish academic freedom in Florida remains a top priority. If we become complacent, Baldwin will unfortunately turn out to be correct and our democracy could perish. Universities play a vital role in teaching students to be able to distinguish between reasoned argument versus indoctrination. Democracy depends on an educated and informed citizenry able to make a distinction between cogent rational analysis as opposed to demagoguery and political opportunism.

To be clear: A “liberal” education does not mean an education that indoctrinates students in either the values of political liberalism or economic neoliberalism. Rather the word “liberal” within academics derives from the Latin word liber and the Greek word eleutheros, both meaning “free.” The liberal educational tradition thus celebrates and nurtures human freedom. Students are asked to develop the capacity to critically examine oneself and one’s tradition. This means accepting no belief as authoritative simply because it has been passed down by tradition or promoted by a governor or a college professor. All theories and ideas must be freely discussed and debated, including controversial approaches such as Critical Race Theory and structural racism. Ideas, theories and beliefs are thus accepted or rejected solely on the basis of reasoned argument, valid explanation and verified facts.

As teachers of the liberal arts, we expose our students to timeless themes on human nature that have guided humanity for hundreds of years. The writings and ideas of some of the major thinkers in human history (for example, Aristotle, Mencius, Shakespeare, Du Bois and so on) are placed in conversation with new 21st century topics of critical importance to American today.

As a professor for more than 30 years, I attempted to help students develop empathy and to try to understand what it might be like to experience life from a position other than one’s own. To accomplish this goal, new topics emerged, including the history and culture of non-Western peoples, the treatment of ethnic and racial minorities within the U.S., the experiences and achievements of women, the history and concerns of LGBTQ+ people and the idea of global citizenship. A liberal arts education helps students become aware of the connections we have to other people and the obligations within our democracy to use that knowledge responsibly.

It was fascinating to hear Baldwin say that reading Charles Dickens “taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had been alive.” Through reading Dickens, Baldwin was able to identify the commonalities between the position of the poor and disposed throughout history and connect them to the struggles of African Americans in his lifetime.

This identification of our common humanity across time and space, through reading the classic enduring works such as Dickens, is a powerful example of the impact of a liberal education. DeSantis often seems to imply that assigning the writings of queer authors like Baldwin is inflicting “gender ideology” on students. This is nonsense. Baldwin remains a stirring example of a liberal intellectual helping us better understand our world. Such knowledge makes us all enhanced citizens and strengthens our democracy.



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