

Wed, Jul 8, 2009

Barbara Moeller: The Texas Mugging Of Western Civ

Last November, Rob Koons, director of the Program in Western Civilization and American Institutions at the University of Texas, was abruptly fired from that position. In swift succession, the name of the program and its leadership was changed to conform more closely to the ideological tastes of the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts. It was reminiscent of the fiasco at Hamilton College, recounted by Roger Kimball [here](#). The common elements are a tenured, leftist faculty who are ferocious in their pursuit of intellectual homogeneity and the blithe betrayal of donors, alumni, and students.

The College of Liberal Arts (CoLA) at the University of Texas has all of the problems that plague higher education in America, only more, bigger, and with a better football team. It forms its own self-contained and self-referential world of all varieties of leftist thought, with only the occasional intrusion of voices from the right side of the intellectual dial. It's a place where it's assumed that if you are a middle-aged woman, you voted for Hillary Clinton, and would be forgiven, because you were motivated by a sense of solidarity. It's a place where a professor can say, in all seriousness that some of his best friends are liberals, but they are "[politically unreliable](#)" because they aren't far enough left. And where Dana Cloud, associate professor of communications, can, without a hint of irony, assert on national radio that there are many conservatives at UT- just look in Aerospace Engineering!

Needless to say, this kind of intellectual conformity, enforced by political correctness isn't good for education generally. It is buttressed by hyper-specialization, so that even at a university as big as UT, a top tier research institution, there are no survey courses in European history, to name but one gaping hole in the course offering. Likewise, the requirements for graduation from CoLA are a Luby's buffet of choices, where your course in "India's Non-Conformist Thinkers" counts toward your general culture requirement, but a survey course on the world's major religions does not, because there is no such course.

It was in response to this situation that a small group of professors began work on what would become The Program in Western Civilization and American Institutions. The committee, whose original members included Rob Koons, Dan Bonevac, Jay Budziszewski, and Marvin Olasky, conceived of a program that harkened back to the great tradition of liberal education, basing their curriculum on a survey of the Great Books. As a practical matter, that was an ideal, but even the introduction of a small number of courses that represented a systematic survey of Western thought would be a radical improvement over what was available to students at CoLA. They began their work in 2002. By 2006, a concentration in Western Civilization & American Institutions was approved by the Faculty Council.

The "concentration" conveyed few administrative perks, but it gave Dr. Koons, the director, an official UT website and the ability to promote something. He devised a

speaker series that was memorable for the broad range of political orientation and disciplines the speakers represented. Robby George, Martha Nussbaum, Victor Davis Hanson, and Michael Berube, among others, all spoke about the advantages of a great books curriculum. This series, and a second one the next year, were extremely popular with the general public as well as the academic community and proved an effective marketing tool. Dr. Koons won friends among influential alumni, a group that was crucial to the Program's next advance.

The College of Liberal Arts appointed a new dean in the spring of 2007. Randy Diehl's most pressing order of business was to rebuild the relationship with the Liberal Arts Advisory Council, a formal UT entity composed of alumni that raised money for the College. A rift had developed between the group and Diehl's predecessor, due largely to his "redirection" of donated funds to purposes against the intentions of the donors. Dr. Koons used his good offices to help Diehl mend fences. Diehl was in Rob Koons's debt, and made it known that the Program had his wholehearted support.

This outward show of support, however, belied a systematic undermining of the program by Dean's office. The program was beset by rules and regulations that seemed to appear out of nowhere (and indeed, in at least one case, did appear out of nowhere) and delays in funding that were inexplicable. Dr. Koons found himself in the Kafkaesque world of finding out that he was in violation of some rule or other, always *ex post facto*. Later, he realized that other people in his position were trained so that they could avoid the pitfalls, or at least have a reasonable knowledge of what the "rules" were.

All of this amounted to bureaucratic harassment but didn't set off any alarms (what bureaucracy isn't crazy and self-contradictory, right?) until the assistant dean, Richard Flores, refused to allow Western Civ courses to fulfill Area D requirements for graduation. The College of Liberal Arts' *de minimus* graduation requirements included coursework in four broad areas. One of these is Area D, General Culture, including Fine Arts, Philosophy and Classics. In addition, there are many courses that are approved by the Assistant Dean Richard Flores as "**alternatives**" that can also fulfill the requirement. Since the Western Civ Courses were based on the great texts of Western Civilization, they would not be out of place among courses that were listed in Classics, Philosophy, and such "exceptions" as India's Non-conformist Thinkers, German Cinema Since 1933, Arendt and de Beauvoir, and Islamic Law. These last, and many more, qualified as "general culture," but Intro to Western Civilization did not, according to Flores. As a practical matter, this had the effect of making all Western Civ courses "super-elective." Students could not major in Western Civ, and the courses didn't fulfill any requirements for graduation. In spite of this enormous disadvantage, the Program's Freshman Interest Group (a non-credit course) was fully subscribed and recorded exceptionally high attendance during the fall semester 2008.

Another layer of harassment came in the form of meetings with chairs of other departments who wished to register their disapproval of the name of the program. The departments of English, Religious Studies, History, and American Studies felt, variously, that the word "American" in this context was (a) taken and (b) triumphalist; that it's

redundant because everybody's teaching "western civilization-ish" stuff but are too genteel to actually use the words, and that this whole thing reignites the culture wars that had been settled to everyone's (!) satisfaction back in 1968. Again, Richard Flores, and later Dean Diehl would call these meetings to air everyone's views. In reality, they amounted to browbeating "truth" sessions.

While internal sabotage proceeded apace, things on the surface were very optimistic. Dr. Koons and his committee had managed to secure "field of study" status, which allowed the listing of course under their own moniker, WCV. To celebrate, a big event was planned for the first week of September 2008. The guest of honor, Anthony Kronman, had written a great analysis of the state of liberal arts and defense of the core curriculum tradition in his book, *Education's End: Why Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. Invitees to the event represented the political spectrum. The president of the University of Texas and the interim Chancellor, Dr. Ken Shine were there, as were dignitaries from the College of Engineering, Red McCombs School of Business and the Law School and legislative representatives, but as usual, none of the assistant deans in the College of Liberal Arts were in attendance.

The feelings of success that came from all of the progress and the Kronman celebration evaporated less than three weeks later when the *New York Times* published a front page, above the fold article entitled "**Conservatives Try a New Tack on Campus.**" In any other paper, it would have been considered a great plug for the UT Program. In the *New York Times*, it served as a clarion call to the Left to eradicate the scourge of conservatism from the academy. Judging from Dean Diehl's subsequent actions, he was on the receiving end of considerable anger from everywhere. There were resignations from the Program's steering committee as professors came under political pressure.

In the penultimate meeting between Dr. Koons and Dean Diehl, the issue of funding came up. Dr. Koons had been a very successful fundraiser. According to Dr. Koons's account, Dean Diehl was shocked to find out from the *New York Times* article that these funds came from conservative foundations. Never mind that all the checks went through his office (some faster than others.) The Dean asserted that this was a breach of trust and withdrew support for the program. Realistically, the program could not go forward in the absence of all support. Dr. Koons and his close advisors realized that their situation was untenable, but there was one bargaining chip left: the existence of the program. Western Civ had garnered national attention, and much favorable attention from alumni groups. Its outright demise would be an embarrassment to the university. Hoping to leverage this into a truce with the dean, Dr. Koons made an appointment on November 17th and informed Diehl that without the Dean's support, he had no choice but to disband the Program. Diehl reacted badly: in a hail of expletives, he fired Dr. Koons as director of the Program.

In the weeks that followed, Dean Diehl scrambled to cover himself. The precipitous firing of Dr. Koons was a ghastly error on several levels and reflected very poorly on the Dean personally. In light of the firing, his unfulfilled promises became understandable as symptomatic of his underlying hostility towards the Program and Dr. Koons, and could

not be fobbed off on the "slow wheels of the bureaucracy." His oft-repeated promise to make the Program a semi-independent "center," if carried out, would have created important safeguards for the Program's continuity, including job security for the Director.

Donors and supporters of the program protested the firing, calling attention to the wide gap between the rhetorical support and the incessant administrative sabotage. In the process of rallying that support, it was discovered that Dean Diehl had deliberately kept the firing a secret from the entire Dallas area alumni group, who were enthusiastic about the Program, so as not to endanger a large pledge that Dr. Koons himself had secured from a first-time donor.

Dean Diehl met with the Program's steering committee and associated faculty (Dan Bonevac, J Budziszewski, Tom and Lorraine Pangle, Devin Stauffer, Ernie Kaulbach, and others). He told them that Rob Koons had been fired for financial malfeasance. He cited Dr. Koons's relationship with the Witherspoon Institute as evidence, calling their putative financial arrangement a "slush fund." On reflection, perhaps, he had reason to regret that choice of words. He has never mentioned it again, in public or private, to anyone's knowledge. In any case, when asked why he fired Rob, different reasons were given to different people. In Queeg-like exchanges with some donors and faculty, Dean Diehl said that Dr. Koons was insubordinate for complaining about his dismissal to President Powers. The illogic of firing someone for something that hadn't happened yet did not seem to diminish his attachment to this explanation.

In the weeks that followed, there were many exchanges between the president, the provost, the dean, and at least one meeting with Bob Rowling, chairman of the Board of Regents and an enthusiastic supporter of Dr. Koons. Dean Diehl urgently needed an interim director so that the appearance of continuity could be maintained. It soon came to light that Tom and Lorraine Pangle were entering into a dialogue with Dean Diehl. What emerged from that dialogue was a greatly expanded steering committee, a name change, and a Center, with Tom and Lorraine Pangle as interim Director and Assistant Director, respectively. What didn't emerge was an apology or Dr. Koons's reinstatement.

There is no doubt, now that six months have passed, that the new and improved program, The Thomas Jefferson Center for the Study of Core Texts and Ideas, lost much when it lost Dr. Koons. The Pangles understood that his continued association with the Center would be critical to keeping key supporters on board. They offered to include him in many ways, unofficially, but he stepped back and asked for a hiatus, understandably citing emotional exhaustion. Ironically, it was his departure that best revealed all that he had managed to achieve against ferocious opposition. The change of management and name seriously disrupted ongoing activities: the junior fellows program, which included nine seniors, and the graduate seminar were completely dropped without a word. What events there were were poorly attended, even as the faculty advising committee became swelled with faculty happy to sign on to a new center whose name did not include the banned words: Western, Civilization, American.

Post Script: Plus ça change

Even as the Pangles were ushering in an era of rapprochement with faculty and administration, having conceded the name and Dr. Koons's reputation, Representative Lois Kolkhorst **introduced a bill to the Texas Legislature** that would create a School of Ethics, Western Civilization and American Traditions in the College of Liberal Arts. Hearings were held on April 8, 2009. Supporters of the core curriculum and traditional liberal arts education traveled from around the country to testify. The most effective witness was an undergraduate student, John Kim, who related how, as an immigrant, he could attest to what the rest of the world sees about America that most American students simply don't appreciate. (See John Kim's testimony before the Higher Education Committee **here**.)

The Pangles were also witnesses, testifying against the bill. In a telling moment, the legislators expressed real confusion about the name of the new center, which presumably would become the school. Indeed, the new, neutered name is a nightmare, in part because it's non-descriptive ("Core Texts and Ideas...of what?") but also because relaying it verbally is fraught with misinterpretation. Core Texan Ideas? Cortex and Ideas? Tom Pangle emphasized that the proposed name of the new school was a major source of his objections to the school per se. As he told a *Daily Texan* reporter, these, these words, American, Western, and Civilization were just too **"right-wing."**

But, by not including these words, the entire concept is adrift. The unifying feature of the new program is that the courses must be based on the Great Books, a concept that is uniquely Western, although Lorraine Pangle is quick to aver that there is no "canon." This, alas, has created a problem for the Curriculum Committee, which is the guardian of curricular integrity (occasionally) and is chaired by none other than Assistant Dean Richard Flores. The core texts, they point out are nearly all of Western origin. The word "Western" should be in the name, they advise.

And this is a problem for the new directors. The warm collegiality they now enjoy with their fellow faculty is heavily contingent on not resurrecting the culture wars, which the word "Western" certainly would do. A plea for counsel from members of the steering committee garnered a response only from Dan Bonevac, the lone member who was on the original steering committee for the Program in Western Civilization & American Institutions. In a thoughtful email about the pros and cons of the Western-less approach, he judged that Core Texts and Ideas of Western Thought would be apt. The rest of the steering committee so far is silent.

One wonders what the donors would think?

Barbara Moeller is a member of the Visitor's Committee for the Program in Western Civilization and American Institutions at the University of Texas.

[Click here](#) to read the article online.