

## “A Crucible Moment”: Beyond Reason

By Mary Grabar

The agenda of “A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future,” “commissioned,” “funded,” and “nurtured” by the US Department of Education, is nothing less than an attempt to implement a “transformation” of America by “transform[ing] current academic norms about what counts as scholarship.”

The aims of what is presented as civic education are stated clearly by project directors, Larry Braskamp, President of Global Perspective Institute, and Caryn Musil, Senior Vice President, Association of American Colleges and Universities, as well as the roundtable members from these groups and NGO’s, administrators of current programs, college presidents, students, professors, foundation leaders, and heads of higher education and disciplinary societies. They are 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” and to address the “pressing issues” of “growing global economic inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation, lack of access to quality health care, economic volatility, and more,” all deemed “transformations necessary for this generation.”

This supposedly “broad coalition,” that produced a “National Call to Action,” though, never entertains the possibility that American civics education is not about alleviating “inequalities.” The redistributive agenda behind “sustainability” is an assumed good. There is no acknowledgement that scientists disagree about climate change, nor that the free market, despite its fluctuations (“volatility”), is preferable to planned economies. The fact that students

are to—in their words-- “do democracy,” through community service, collaborative projects, and consensus-building, reveals that the new “norms” of scholarship are decidedly anti-intellectual.

Let this document be remembered as the federal government’s official death announcement of scholarship and independent thought. When reading, contemplation, study, analysis, discussion, debate, and writing are replaced by “doing” we can congratulate ourselves on going beyond even the Soviet Union’s use of education for indoctrination. This will make the Marxist professor of yore who ranted about capitalism and George Bush seem like a mere annoyance. It will be the final blow to an educational system already corrupted by radicalism, as the National Association of Scholar’s report on California higher education, *A Crisis of Competence*, documents. Now, there will be no possibility of the kind of appeal that the NAS has made to the California Board of Regents.

We can know what such civic engagement projects will be like by looking at those already implemented with zeal by roundtable member Anthony Tricoli, President of Georgia Perimeter College, where I taught from 2007 to 2010. Shortly after Obama’s inauguration we began receiving email missives encouraging us to incorporate service learning into our courses. The college website bragged about a professor of American government who had his students serve food to the homeless, as part of the Muslim Student Association’s day of service. Many of my students had difficulty distinguishing verbs and nouns, so would be happy to do such assignments, writing “reflection papers” cataloguing their emotional impressions, as suggested in *A Crucible Moment*. “Retention” and “customer service” were the recurring themes of Tricoli’s speeches during teaching orientations.

Another example is a “civic engagement conference” held on March 16, 2012, at the National Archives in Atlanta, and sponsored by both Clayton State University’s Civic

Engagement Council and the *New York Times*. The three keynote speakers included two members of Occupy Atlanta, Tim Franzen and Shab Bashiri, and organizing director of Teamsters' local 728, Ben Speight. Students entered a writing contest, made student engagement presentations, listened to the speakers, and participated in "political blogging" panels--the kind of activity now given official blessing by the federal government. "Collective action" is highlighted as one of the four components of the "Framework for Twenty-First-Century Civil Learning and Democratic Engagement" as described on page 4 of the report. In fact, *A Crucible Moment* states that "full civic literacies cannot be garnered only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities also are honed through hands-on, face-to-face engagement."

This was the second year in a row that Franzen of the American Friends Service Committee had been invited by the professor organizing the event. Ironically, the topic was a Georgia Senate bill that would limit protest, described in the CSU website story as "unit[ing] the Tea Party, Occupy Atlanta, and unions, among others, in opposition." But there was no uniting at this federal- and state-sponsored event. The "broad coalition" consisted of two members of a subversive anarchist group that seeks to end capitalism, along with a member of a union that trains members of such "occupations."

No local Tea Party or citizen groups opposed to Occupy's agenda were represented. Even though a Tea Party representative would likely have faced an audience ignorant about Marxism and primed by their professors to distrust his message, an appearance would have allowed for the "face-to-face engagement" that *A Crucible Moment* report claimed to encourage. (While teaching there in 2006, I was met with blank faces as I described a story by Richard Wright as written during his communist phase. The college sophomores had never *heard* the

word “communism.”) Neither the Clayton County Tea Party nor the nearby Fayetteville Tea Party had been invited.

At the same time such projects are presented with the gloss of “civics” and “volunteerism” to the community at large. The Tea Parties, concerned with tax initiatives, and local and national elections, will not likely notice. But even if they do, they know that their citing of chapter and verse from the Constitution will be retorted with the postmodern neologisms of the Ph.D-ed rulers of the academy.

I’m afraid that the lucky few tenured conservatives, already professionally neutered by their radical colleagues and vastly outnumbered, will continue to distance themselves from the Tea Party, embarrassed by their enthusiasm, bunting, and lack of footnotes. So will the fortunate academics at think tanks who will continue to write commentaries about the assault on higher learning.

It is only a matter of time before the last remaining conservative professor attends his retirement party and retreats, thus allowing the radicals to do what they have been itching to do for decades: purge the libraries once and for all and take over the old professor’s office.

The continued low grumblings, reports, blog posts, opinion columns and Fox News flashes will do little to change the course of a power game conducted by devotees of Nietzsche and Foucault. Our impotent outrage will provide continued merriment for the tenured radicals at their university-sponsored conferences, banquets, and cocktail parties.

*So what will we do?*

Will we continue to complain about the decline in intellectual standards? If so, our well-reasoned, highly moral arguments will fall on ears deafened to such appeals. As *A Crisis of*

*Competence* shows, even administrators at the top refuse to do anything about politicization in the classroom. The roundtables, after all, included college presidents.

The alternative therefore is to join forces with legitimate citizen groups and demand equal representation when public facilities are used.

I wonder: will my tenured colleagues take the kind of stand that they herald the founding fathers for in terms of defending liberty? This fight does not require picking up arms. But it does require that the few remaining conservatives leave their think tanks and ivory towers, and bring their message to the people. If they don't, they will find themselves clinging to their books in a totally corrupted and Sovietized academy—and country.