

Anti-Intellectualism and Liberal Arts and Science Education

As academics, we may live in something of a bubble. Days, or even weeks, may go by before we talk to anyone with a worldview fundamentally different from our own. One of us has spent his career teaching our students about archaeology and the distant past, while the other has taught about how language develops and is processed. These are very different areas of study but there are important overlaps as well. Like in all of the liberal arts and sciences, we teach our students logical thought, reason, communication, and evidence-based decision making.

However, there seems to be a paradox in the way our society views universities and their role. A college degree is seen as valuable, but the work that occurs in a university, the pursuit of knowledge, is poorly understood or even derided. The paradox makes sense, though, if we recognize that many in our society, including some of our leaders, see the purpose of universities as not to educate students, but to prepare them for jobs. Anything other than the job-training aspects of college is seen as “intellectual elitism.”

Anti-intellectualism is not new in the United States, which has always respected populist movements and trusted the wisdom of “ordinary Americans.” We share that respect, but we see an increasing trend toward a more dangerous brand of anti-intellectualism, an aggressive and willful ignorance.

The late Isaac Asimov, biochemist and science fiction writer, referred to anti-intellectualism as the “cult of ignorance,” which is the “false notion that democracy means that my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge,” that all arguments are equally valid.

Our most notorious modern example is climate change. The overwhelming majority of climate scientists concur that global warming is not only dangerous but also caused by humans (as reported in 97% of scientific papers on the subject published in the last 20 years). Yet we a lot of the public, and many members of Congress, deny the science. As easy as it is to gain access to the foundational research that backs up claims of climate change, it is equally easy to find websites claiming that decades of research is a hoax.

This denial of evidence could have dangerous consequences. We realize, of course, that politicians often take positions based on who votes and who contributes to their campaigns, and energy companies have financial interests that may make science denial attractive, but it is troubling that such ideas get so much traction.

The ultimate danger is that irrational political ideas taken to the extreme can be a blueprint for fascist, totalitarian control. We hope this would never happen in the United States, but historically, every totalitarian government has persecuted, imprisoned, or killed intellectuals, including in places as near as Argentina and Brazil.

What is the answer to this growing trend toward anti-intellectualism? We immodestly suggest that it is a liberal arts and sciences education. Here a person learns how to think

critically, understand how to evaluate data, and make rational decisions about our world. This would require returning to an understanding that a university's mission is to educate people for life in a democratic society, not solely to train people for jobs. When there is an absence of critical thinking and evidence-based decision making, there is room for individuals to make decisions based on emotion and fear. When we do not seek information, particularly information that may be in conflict with our own beliefs or opinions, we make ourselves vulnerable to demagoguery. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin said it best: "It is in the religion of ignorance that tyranny begins."

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http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/guest-commentary-dangerous-brand-of-anti-intellectualism-troubling/article_4bc250de-3c50-5f57-8d51-88a97cb139db.html