

Cheers for No-Name U.

by Jacob Neusner

The vast majority of college students stay in their home states, and enormous numbers live within a few miles of home—or at home. Add up the community colleges, the state colleges, the commuting universities, and even the principal campuses of the great state systems and what do you find? Nearly everybody. Only a negligible handful of students receive their education in the few schools that preen in the pecking order of rankings, gathering their pupils from all over the country. Like politics, most higher education is local.

Those of us who teach in local colleges serve the place-bound who come to us because we are all there is: the commuters, the part-timers, the unconventional students, the senior citizens, the women beyond child-raising, the early retirees and the military retirees—almost everybody except the handful of 18- to 22-year-olds with the money or the skin tone to get themselves a place among the entitled.

I teach at the University of South Florida (USF), a part of the Florida State University system with campuses in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Lakeland, Sarasota, and Fort Myers. I came here after 20 years of teaching at Brown University, an Ivy League school founded in 1764. When I arrived—recruited for the Florida system by a state senator with whom I served on a federal commission—everyone wanted to know, “Why?” Why had I left a hot school that was small, selective, prestigious, old, and in demand, for a massive, urban, 30-year-old multiversity, the typical full-service university on the urban frontier. Here we do not practice affirmative action, because everybody comes anyhow, and we do not condescend to our black and Hispanic students, let alone the Arabs and the Indians and the Asians, because everybody belongs by right.

My deepest convictions about teaching and academic professionalism are at the root of my preference for USF over Brown. I actually think it is a healthier place, a better place for learning. My students at Brown (always with exceptions) were children of parents willing to spend four or five times what public education costs on a degree of indeterminate worth, one lacking all course requirements. These students constantly claimed entitlements. Every chance they had, they would play “Notice me!” After all, they’d gotten into Brown! In my time, Brown students were geniuses at creating public scandals, if not at much else. (Recently the black women circulated lists of the black men



Illustration by Brian Ayer

who go out with white women, for instance.) And, of course, everything was theirs by right; they owed thanks to no one. Self-important and cynical, they made the classroom into a daily contest to see who could take the most class time and thereby garner the most adolescent prestige.

By contrast, my students at USF—nearly all of them commuting from home, working at part-time or even full-time jobs—know none of the trendy little games sophisticated Ivy Leaguers play to establish position. They do not think anyone owes them anything, and they’re thankful for the smallest courtesies.

One small tale tells the story. I make it a practice to have students invent questions for their exams, on the theory that the quality of the question, as much as the accuracy and balance of the answer, will attest to the students’ learning. Just now a USF student apologized, “I wanted to ask myself such-and-such a question, but I got it from you.” At Brown, in exactly the same situation, I recall a student saying, “You mentioned such-and-such a question, but that’s the very one I had in mind when I came to class.” The first student showed honest simplicity, the other played the angles. Whom would you rather teach? Or, if a parent, have raised?

Two memories of Brown stick out. First, the student who said, “How dare you criticize my writing? Who are you anyhow?” And second, the freshman who said, “How can you give me a B when I have never gotten anything but As before—and I told you I have to have an A! Who do you think you are?” I remember these things not because they happened once, but because they happened every semester. Brown students were constantly harping on “how much tuition I paid for this course—and therefore you owe me....” Fill in the end of the sentence yourself.

But there is another difference between No-Name University and Big-Name University: most of the students here live at home, and all of the students I taught at Brown lived on campus.

Learning Outside the College Ghetto

by Karl Zinsmeister

That means the students retain close ties to home and family, growing up in an integral community. They hear opinions other than those of their peer group, respond to concerns different from those of arm-swinging 18-year-olds. And we at Florida No-Name Number 3 face a classroom that gives new meaning to diversity. Here people follow their curiosity.

For instance, I taught a course on the Talmud, in English, to the following: the imam of the local mosque, an engineering student, a Muslim feminist, several Bible-believing Christians, a retired administrator in the Social Security system, two retired professors, the head of plastic surgery at our medical school, conventional degree-seeking students aged 19 to 45, and so forth. For the younger students, working together with people in their fifties through eighties as complete equals raised the stakes of the classroom: learning was all that mattered. Everyone came to solve problems together.

Living familiar, everyday lives, the students come to us for what we have to teach, see each another mainly in class, and still participate in the ordinary world in which they have grown up and to which they return every night. Learning for them does not take place on a narrow island, in a protected enclave populated by the young and smart, if also the aimless and self-absorbed. The campus here has no walls. The community flows in and out, in tidal waves.

Purposeful and effective, well-educated citizens will come from the healthy, normal life lived at home, in families and communities that give students their place and learning its context. On the other hand, it would be difficult to design a psychologically more corrosive situation than that formed of residential late-adolescent students, unemployed and healthy, with worries only for themselves. What do the elite college students see of disappointment and disillusion, of sickness and death, of fatigue and age? Yet for the humanities, these primal experiences define what is at stake in learning: the record of human experience, of lives lived in anguish, and what humanity has learned from them.

A generation ago, no one doubted the value of education among "the best and the brightest." The elite schools today lie in shambles and disgrace. Who wants to emulate them? Stanford has turned its curriculum into an engine of propaganda. Lacking requirements of weight, a Brown degree certifies nothing. The English department at Georgetown has repealed literature. Berkeley is a zoo, Harvard a jungle filled with prestige-hungry predators, and Yale cannot even keep the roof from leaking. But no matter: higher education in this country still prospers. That is because most of the students and professors work at No-Name Universities where, too provincial to follow the trends and too professional to have time to, everyone just soldiers on, doing the job that the people of this country want higher education to do for their and their children's future.

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A few years ago, author George Gilder wrote in his Harvard reunion yearbook that since leaving the university, he had engaged in "a laborious effort to rediscover the truths taught to me by my mother and...my father, and untaught during my time in college." In a similar vein, the poet Robert Frost told Dartmouth graduates in a 1955 commencement address that he had made a particular effort "to come through college holding my own so that I wouldn't be made over beyond recognition.... It's a poor sort of person, it seems to me, who delights in thinking, 'I have had four years that have transformed me into somebody my own mother won't know.'"

This is an important criticism of university teaching. For colleges not only spread knowledge, they obliterate it as well. And today's institutions of higher learning claim the right to cancel other kinds of learning more and more with each passing year.

Some "unteaching," of course, is valuable—specifically that which breaks down false prejudices. But a good deal of the present variety is directed not at falsehood but rather at common-sense truths, the evolved verdicts of history, and natural human attachments. In areas ranging from sex to language to family structure to religious belief, much of today's professoriate is bent on undermining traditional practice, overthrowing time-tested judgments, and discounting the wisdom of parents, elders, and local communities.

On questions of politics, economics, race, and religion, today's universities tend to be deserts of conformity. Views falling outside a very narrow band are discouraged and even attacked. Despite their superficial diversity and openness, our leading colleges thus tend to create a disturbingly homogeneous product: an elite class possessed of fairly uniform intellectual and moral standards, in whom unfashionable beliefs have largely been excised.

Where is the welcome on campuses today for cradle Catholics, orthodox Jews, or evangelical Protestants (never mind Mormons, Christian Scientists, or Muslims)? How much acceptance is there in the contemporary academy for students who believe (as most Americans do) that there are important biological differences between men and women? How much toleration is there at colleges for the broader public's views on crime, child-rearing, capitalism, homosexuality, capital punishment, and military service?

A recent survey carried out for this magazine (SCAN, September/October 1995) indicated that only 2-6 percent of humanities professors at the typical elite university are Republicans, compared to roughly 35 percent of all Americans. Where is the stimulating range of perspective, the intellectual free-for-all, that colleges claim to sponsor? In a place as mono-minded as the aver-