What Would Jefferson Do?  
UVA and the Crisis of Liberal Education

Thursday, June 28, 2012  
12:30–2:00pm

Program and Panel

12:30 p.m.  Panel discussion
            David W. Breneman, Newton and Rita Meyers Professor in Economics of Education and Public Policy at the University of Virginia
            James W. Ceaser, Harry F. Byrd Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia
            Michael B. Poliakoff, Policy Director at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni

1:40    Question-and-answer session
2:00    Adjournment
WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Welcome to the only panel in Washington D.C. today that is not on the Supreme Court’s healthcare ruling. It remains relevant, however. My name is Bill Schambra, and I’m director of the Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal. Kristen McIntyre and I welcome you to today’s panel entitled, “What Would Jefferson Do? UVA and the Crisis of Liberal Education.” I suppose you may be asking, what does the turmoil at UVA and liberal education generally have to do with philanthropy and civic renewal? The partially truthful answer is that many of the trends with which universities are wrestling today, especially the growing popularity of notions like strategic dynamism and other B-school concepts, are also making serious incursions into the world of foundations and nonprofits.

But the larger truth is that as I reflected on the turmoil surrounding past and future UVA president Teresa Sullivan, my mind suddenly experienced those wavy distortions that indicate we’re about to enter a flashback. And I spare you the Wayne’s World sound effects. I was transported back to the fall of 1967, when several scores of terrified college freshmen took their first tentative steps onto the hallowed linoleum of Case Hall at Michigan State University. Now, in just six years, from 1960 to 1966, MSU’s enrollment had increased by 75 percent, exploding from 24,000 to 42,000 students, in a nightmarish rendering of Clark Kerr’s then-popular vision of the multiversity. MSU now offered degrees in both liquid and solid packaging, along with hundreds of other pursuits not theretofore associated with a college degree. President John Hannah’s slogan for this school was, “Michigan State University, where the concrete never dries.” Russell Kirk, who had taught at MSU in the 1950s, had come to call it a behemoth state university.

In the face of this unfolding horror, a few brave scholars and administrators thought that something might have been lost from the college experience amidst the soviet-style housing towers of MSU. And so they plotted a counter-movement, the founding of a small enclave within the multiversity where several hundred students would be invited, as its first brochure put it, to come, live, and learn in a residential environment; community of mutually-assisting scholars, studying questions like war and peace, poverty and opportunity, justice and democracy. It sounds almost like what we used to call, in the benighted pre-multiversity age, a liberal arts college.

The new residential college, named for another Virginian, James Madison, would be housed in Case Hall, where all the students would live in the specially-designed faculty would have their offices. Careful course scheduling by a Madison student would ensure that one could go the entire bleak Michigan winter term without setting foot once outside Case Hall, as long as you could persuade someone else to make the beer runs.

Let me put your suspense at an end by confirming your growing suspicion, that among those trembling freshmen in that first class at James Madison College were Bill Schambra and one Terry Sullivan, who of course could never have been talked into making a beer run. I should point out that among later alumni of Madison College, which is a going concern today, is to be found our own Vice President at Hudson, John Walters. I’ve often wondered as I’ve read about Terry Sullivan’s ordeal at UVA if she didn’t recall her first effort to find some sort of traditional community of scholars in the face of what everyone was telling us then was the unavoidable dismantling of liberal education in the name of irresistible contemporary trends in higher education.
Okay, flashback over. We’re back with today’s panel, and I’m very grateful to all of them for coming together on such short notice. We’ll hear first this morning from David Breneman, University Professor at the University of Virginia, who has served as director of UVA’s public policy program at the Baton School of Leadership and Public Policy, and is Dean of the Curry School of Education. Then we’ll hear from James Ceaser, presently the Harry F. Byrd professor of politics at the University of Virginia. And finally we’ll hear from Michael Poliakoff, policy director at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and a longtime college teacher and administrator as well. So Mr. Breneman.

DAVID BRENEMAN: Thank you Bill. I was just learned about this panel yesterday, so I don’t have prepared remarks. However I will try to be brief and set the stage a bit and take a point of view. Just so it’s clear, in terms of this, if you want to view this, which increasingly we changed the tone, but it was initially adversarial, and I was very much on Terry Sullivan’s side and wanted her reinstated. If you had asked me a week ago, would I have taken a hundred-to-one bet that she’d be back in her position; I would have said you were crazy. I mean, we are witnessing, I think, something that if not unprecedented, so unusual and so rare as to generate an issue that will be debated and studied for years to come.

A classic governance tale as much as anything, and as such, it’s really, in some sense, a wrestling over the soul of the university. Whose university is this? Who owns it? Who runs it? Who can control it? Who makes decisions? How do people that make decisions get where they get? And now of course, we’re facing a new situation where we go back into a new world now with this behind us, and how that will play out will be, again, a part of the interesting story. Although, most of you, I’m sure, know how we got here in a sense, but I’ll just give you one person’s experience.

I had known Terry Sullivan for a couple of years before she became president. I served with her on a, and this is ironic, a National Research Council panel on measuring productivity in higher education, which just issued its report about three weeks ago. She chaired that panel. It was made up mostly of economists and the like. And so her interest in that subject is very deep and very real. However I had met her before. I had chaired the search that then brought the provost, John Simon, from Duke University to the UVA. So I was pretty close, and if not part of the inner circle, I’m no longer dean-ing, but I knew and was on a close-contact basis with the leadership.

I was out playing golf on Sunday morning, June 10th, a beautiful day, and I remember I stopped for lunch. And ironically, the past president of the faculty senate was out there with friends and family, and he got up in the middle of lunch and came over to me with his iPhone. He said he couldn’t believe it that President Sullivan had just resigned. He was in shock. I was in shock. I can tell you there was not one human being, other than the members of the board, and it’s not even totally clear how many of them were initially engaged, but not one human being saw this coming.

When presidents are toppled usually there is a chain of events, news stories and people may lay their bets. But no one saw this coming. There was no indication to any of us at the university, as far as I know, that there was this deep rift occurring between the president and the board. She
certainly hadn’t described it as such. So it was a total shock, which may account for some part of the reaction to it, as people gathered their wits and moved forward.

One of the other ironies, the faculty senate of the university is now being lionized as having helped lead and organize this event over the last two weeks. That was a near moribund organization prior to this event. I had actually been asked by the provost if I’d work with them this summer trying to figure out how to get them up to the point where you could get some pushback. He was looking for a group that could speak for the faculty, and as I said to him the other day, “job done.” I mean, that task is over.

Now, what were the issues? I’m going to now jump quickly to the title of Jim Ceaser’s excellent article in the *Washington Post*, “What would Thomas Jefferson think of the U-Va. Turmoil?” I’m not a Jefferson scholars to any degree, like many of my colleagues are, but it is interesting. When he set the university up, we did not have a president for the first 80 years. Our first president was Edwin Alderman, elected in 1905. Jefferson’s view was that the faculty would run the university with a Board of Visitors helping on some of the practical side. His view of student governance, which adheres to this day, is a very profound commitment to letting students run their own affairs. We have an honor code which basically gives a student group the power and the authority to administer the honor code, no lying, stealing, or cheating. If a student is convicted by a student group of an offense, the only sanction is complete and permanent expulsion from the university. All of that is in the hands of the students. Administrators don’t run it, students run it.

So Jefferson would have completely endorsed what happened here in the last few weeks in terms of a response to the Board of Visitors’ action. I can’t believe he would have, in any way, thought that what this small group did very quietly among themselves and without much outside conversation would have been viewed as a legitimate action on the part of those who are governed by it.

We had a session on Sunday that was quite interesting. You could see the tones, the initial week and a half was adversarial. There was anger, and it grew and it grew, and people were being demonized, and it was taking on tones that I thought were not right or appropriate for the event. And to my great displeasure, the students organized a rally on Sunday. I tried to reframe it out of this zero-sum, win-loss frame. The default mode in America now for any kind of dispute seems to be to immediately pick up sides, and there are going to be winners and losers. Nobody ever thinks about the possibility of non-zero-sum games, where everybody can win. And I tried to write a piece which suggested that the Board of Visitors acted, perhaps, precipitously, and they had acknowledged they had.

A hallmark of intelligence in true leadership is to be willing to revisit decisions you make in the face of new information, and goodness knows the university community was giving them new information. To their great credit, and I don’t know all the inside processes that got us there, I was really pleased that they did rethink it. And we had a kind of coming-together ceremony just last Tuesday.

So where do we go from here? Let me turn now, just to say a word or two about Anne Neal’s article that was published in the *Washington Post* about a week ago. And I reread that essay this
morning, and it appeared to me to be primarily focused on the cost, price issue, in point of fact, that universities are living in some sort of la-la land. Of course, the issue hadn’t been settled, but it was almost as if she were saying that if this doesn’t hold, the inmates will be running the asylum and the Board of Visitors will be severely weakened. That was actually a very severe concern, I think, on the part of several of the BOV members, that even if they had made a mistake, if they were to reverse it, it would make them look weak, and it would diminish them and empower others to be more significant in the roles in the university.

I think it was an act of wonderful good wisdom, and it really was a bringing-together of the community, for them to have made those reversals. But now let’s address the issues that both Anne Neal and the rector were putting out there, namely that the world is changing for public research universities, that the good old collegial way of running ourselves, of which Terry Sullivan, I think, is an exemplar.

One of the things that Terry told me about her time at Michigan State was that when she was an undergraduate, Cliff Wharton, who became president, always had one or two very bright undergraduates who worked with him, mostly in his presidential duties. And she was one of those. He had spotted her talent and urged her to go on and make a career in this business. So her roots go back far in that perspective.

We were talking at lunch here with several staff members and folks who have children going to the university or about to go, and they’re worried about tuition. Everybody’s concerned about this. I haven’t got time to go into a story about how this has evolved, but it is a serious problem and it’s not to be dismissed. The trustees and the visitors were definitely on to something.

On the other hand, as I listened to the key things that the rector was pushing, I was hearing more a story about need for more revenue; I was not hearing a cost-cutting story. In fact, I went up and gave her a hug after the Tuesday event. I’d never met her before. Strange man walks up and give you a hug. Anyway, we got acquainted. [LAUGHTER] She pulled me aside and said, “You know, one of the messages I tried to get out and I guess we just couldn’t get it out well enough is that we were deeply concerned about the salaries of the faculty at the university. We wanted them increased.” And God bless her, I’m all for that. But that ain’t cost-cutting, folks. That’s expense enhancement, and that means revenue enhancement.

The big concern, which got into the press, seems to have been motivated by these most recent and somewhat imponderable actions of Stanford, Harvard, and MIT, where these gigantic online courses are being thrown out into the ether, and Harvard and MIT, apparently, are putting $60 million bucks into this effort. I can’t for the life of me figure out what the heck they’re doing. It doesn’t seem to me to have any kind of sustainable business model, and as such, I’m not clear why online education was going to be the solution to the university’s financial problem. So all of these are to be revealed.

I will make one final sort of snarky comment, just because I enjoy doing that occasionally. Strategic dynamism is one of these nonsense terms that the business community fixes on, and then you see them in airport bookshops, you know, seven effective ways to do this, that, or the other thing. That isn’t helpful. I mean, if anybody showed strategic dynamism, as I understand
that term, it was our Board of Visitors. They adapted flexibly and rapidly to a changing circumstances. And God bless them, they finally got it right. Thank you. [APPLAUSE]

JAMES CEASER: Well, what’s the meaning of the Charlottesville Spring? What does it portend for the future of the University of Virginia and for higher education? These are questions that many are asking today, as the turmoil of the 16 days of June now winds down. Most probably, people are seeking some meaning from this event. What does it mean and what can be said? I suppose if there were a deep meaning and something intelligent to be said, it would have already been said. And over the past week or two, I don’t think anything really new has been added to the debate on higher education.

Still, for many of those on the spot as we were, it led to an exhilarating feeling of being involved in some kind of world-historical event, as thousands of people in Johannesburg and Kuala Lumpur were following events at UVA, parsing every word, studying every memo. What was the import of the nuanced phrases in press conferences of the briefest interim presidency of all time? What was the real meaning of Rector Helen Dragas’ red dress? [LAUGHTER] And then, what about those wild-eyed radicals trampling on the grass of UVA’s famous lawn, channeling Thomas Jefferson and proclaiming that the tree of education needs to be refreshed from time to time with the blood of professors and recalcitrant board members. It is its natural manure. [LAUGHTER]

Well, these heady days are over, I can assure you. And this time, for real, the world will little remember what we said there. Still, I’m happy to be here this afternoon to treat these issues that at Hudson, a think tank reputed on balance, to favor a more conservative than a liberal viewpoint, because the events have vexed conservatives and divided them, more so than liberals. Liberals really had no problem taking sides in this event. In principle, liberals, I’m speaking now of liberals in the academy, they can be suspicious of both college presidents and of university governing boards both, as both can be fit into the category of the establishment and both can be described as occupying prominent places in the top 1 percent.

But in this case, with a woman president and a board comprised largely of business types, liberals were all agreed in declaiming and attacking the firing of President Sullivan. And I’ll say, my university was very fortunate in escaping, but just by an inch, one of the greatest cause celebre we could have had from the left. If the rector of the university had not been a woman herself, and if she had not been appointed by a Democratic governor, Tom Kane, but by Republican Governor Robert McDonald, the Charlottesville Spring would have been item one on the front page of the New York Times from the first day. It would have fit every stereotype that haunts and delights the leftist mind. I can see the headlines now—Right-wing board with business interests ousts first female president at UVA, ties being traced to Bain Capital.

So let’s leave liberal commentators out of this. It’s the conservative response that seems to have been divided. An editorial in the Wall Street Journal sided with the Board of Visitors more or less, and there were a few sympathetic writings on that score, as well as from other sources, which I suppose could be said to be identified with people who are more conservative in tone.
These are the facts, but is there any real connection between this event and conservatism? Is there any reasonable connection in the world between the Board of Visitors and the philosophy of ideas and values that they had, and the philosophy of conservative thought? The things that really matter to conservatives in higher education. Here’s the case for maybe arguing that there is a connection. It comes from the idea that there is some conservative philosophy, a business way of doing things, a business way of getting tough with the university. The board and rector represented this. They were business people and they were proponents of some coherent theory or style of management, a style that is capable of meeting and managing the problems of higher education today. It is the style known as strategic dynamism. Strategic dynamism wants, and I quote the Rector Dragas, “We need a bold, strategic, visionary leader to take us to the next level.” Well, I know one who claims to be, and I hope he’s available this November. Strategic dynamism, you can ponder that a little bit. Strategic dynamism was also defined as staying ahead of the curve, of taking big steps in a difficult time. Conservatives said they should back this. This comes from business and conservatives are supposed to support business, aren’t they?

Well, how do we evaluate this claim? I evaluate it not by denying it, but denying the premise. The conservatives I know, and I’m speaking here of conservatives in business, know the difference between business and BS. Spotting of terms like strategic dynamism, which is fourth-rate jargon, as David pointed out, is pure nonsense. Who really wants PR babble like this to be identified with profound theories of management? I refuse to accept this. I read as a college student, and a graduate student with my mentor James Q. Wilson, people like Peter Drucker and Chester Barnard. Take Chester Barnard. The functions of the executive would have taken a look at this theory and called it nonsense. Among the rules he mentions in this long interesting book, is to have an organization that secures the loyalty of a person is a complex and difficult task in efficiency. And all-around efficiency, not just one-sided efficiency. And to read that book is to see that the shibboleths of strategic dynamism, whatever it is, are not the thought of those who really have thought about business and running an organization. I can’t speak for the undergraduate commerce school at UVA, but I’m sure the dean of the Darden School would laugh at this stuff and laugh it out of court.

So we conservatives, let’s not identify ourselves with a theory of business that no sound business person or business educator would really adopt. Besides, if there is some coherent business philosophy in this slogan of strategic dynamism, if it is a model for how to run things, presumably then its proponents practice it. By their fruit, ye shall know them. Its greatest proponents evidently include some of the leaders on the board and how did the model work on its first trial run? It botched things. I don’t care which side you’re on in this affair, for or against, it turns out everyone, and I mean everyone, agrees that this decision-making process was about as botched as you can imagine. Why, I ask, should conservatives identify themselves with a model that has failed?

So I turn next to the question and ask, in any fashion did what the board express in any way resonate with what conservatives want to promote in higher education? Is there anything in these two words which would lead conservatives to want to identify with the Board of Visitors in this event? And I’m talking about the things that are important to us. Education in the liberal arts and those things that help to prepare some to be educated persons who carry out and carry forth a tradition, and who in doing so know something about what it means to be good citizens and good
persons, and who know how to think critically and deeply? Was anything of this sort ever
mentioned in the two weeks of debate on this issue? The answer is no.

I don’t necessarily condemn the board for this. Maybe it wasn’t the subject of discussion. But to
say that somehow this was something to which conservatives should attach themselves, when
every conservative value and concern in higher education was not part of the program, strikes me
as an odd position indeed to ask of conservatives. Furthermore, when it was reported that the
Board of Visitors was thinking of gutting classics and German, something which was denied, but
in any case, when it was suggested, did the rector and board come out screaming and saying, this
is the last thing we would ever do? Did they make a public point of defending liberal education?
No. When they appointed an interim president did they name someone who was a champion of
any of these things? The answer again, so far as I can see, is no. So far as I can tell, the Board
looked indifferent to the things that I think are important, as a conservative in higher education.

The things we care about, conservatives in higher education, involve the study of the liberal arts.
We are concerned with civic education before global education, an understanding of our own,
even as we try and understand the world, something which was in great jeopardy at our
university. We care about a faculty that is not built only with research interests and with
specialty, but is willing to give at least one quarter of its time to become real educators of young
men and women. And other reasons as well that are really at the core of what we’re thinking
about when we’re thinking about an important education.

Another reason that worried conservatives, maybe it’s more substantial, and David mentioned it,
there is a worry that the president now will no longer be responsible to a Board of Visitors, that
the power of relationship is reversed too much as a result of these events. They were, above all,
about a faculty becoming too powerful and trying to run a university, a horrific idea to think of,
let me tell you. These, to me, are real concerns.

Of course, the fault lies with the Board, that their own worry was about their prestige, not that
they had made the right decision in the first place, when they went back on it. They were worried
not only about the Board at the University of Virginia, but public boards all across the country.
Will they now be too easily ruled by a faculty member and by members of the community? I
worry about this as well. It’s an important point.

But when you speak of the legitimacy of the Board of Visitors at the University of Virginia, it’s
still respected as our governing board. Still, something should be asked. On a board of a
university, and as much as I favor the contributions of businessmen, I think that the board should
have many, if not most people in the business community. Still, on the entire Board of the
University of Virginia, there’s not anyone who could be called an academic or someone
interested, you’d say, in the theory of education, or who has spent a lot of time inside education
as an educator, a scientist, or an artist. And this is really something that the various governors
should answer for, and the Board itself for not requesting it. It’s simply unimaginable to think of
a university not having an academic or an artist or an educator on its Board of Visitors. This was
one of the most shocking things I found when I looked at the list of Board. All fine people, all
devoted and dedicated to the University of Virginia. But a Board without at least one or two
members, is something that the governor should correct immediately.
So what about conservatives at UVA, then, the real ones? Well, almost all, I’ll say all, and I
don’t know every conservative, but heck, there aren’t that many. Almost all that I know oppose
the Board decision. I won’t go through the list, but we could start with our distinguished
economist, Ken Elzinga. A few people in my department. Others scattered in various bastions,
hidden under rugs at the university. All of them opposed the Board decision, so far as I know.
Not because President Sullivan necessarily stands for the things that I mentioned, in fact, I’ve
never met President Sullivan, never spoke with her. I think the closest I got is I was driving a
little too fast by the president’s house and came pretty close to her as she was ambling across the
street. But I’ve never met her, I don’t know that many of my friends who have ever met her. I
will say that over the course of the last two weeks, what I’ve learned about her suggests that
she’s quite impressive in very many ways. The portraits that came out in the Washington Post
showed a very impressive leader. But that aside, it was not for this reason, I think, that
conservatives at the University of Virginia took her side.

We asked, what is a university, and especially our university, the University of Virginia? I don’t
really think very much helpful can be said about higher education. There are different institutions
of different sorts. They have different purposes. The University of Virginia, if it stays true to its
tradition, is going to be different than places like George Mason and Virginia Tech, both fine
institutions, but different institutions. Generalities about higher education could be dangerous. So
what about our university? What makes it special? A retired faculty member, Martha Derthick,
写了 me a personal note. She spoke at length to me about how one thing that is special about the
university is that it has a remnant of a gentlemanly code of conduct, which makes it so special,
different than other places. Every human institution I know that’s worth its salt has an ethos,
something that’s ingrained in it, like the DNA of an institution, not physical or palpable. And I
believe, without any other reason, the violence done to this code, which was palpable, was the
reason that conservatives instinctively rallied to her side. Thank you. [APPLAUSE]

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: The American Council of Trustees and Alumni supported the Board
of Visitors’ right to take decisive action and embrace rapid change, including new presidential
leadership for the university. We fully support the new resolve of UVA’s leadership to work
together rapidly to bring about UVA’s best interests, and we commend the spirit of unity and
reconciliation that it represents.

ACTA deems it most appropriate to explain its position, and I really do thank the Hudson
Institute for its kind invitation to be part of this panel. It’s not only a decent respect to the
opinions of mankind and to the very distinguished political scientist sitting to my left that makes
ACTA so eager to be part of this forum, but even more so, an opportunity to emphasize the
urgency now recognized by both the Board and President Sullivan to make this great university a
more effective and more efficient institution.

If it needs to be said, let’s reiterate that the agonized and agonistic process of getting to this point
of resolution to work cohesively towards a, “deliberate strategic approach,” was deplorable.
Everything that Professor Ceaser said is absolutely true about the breakdown of civility and
process. My focus in these remarks, however, will be on the question of how to ensure urgent
action, rather than to analyze the flaws and missteps in the Board’s tactics.
The crisis in American higher education is very real. I’m going to start with a few observations about national trends, and then get right to the issue. What are the academic standards that Mr. Jefferson’s university must uphold? And what are the structures and operational principles that enable and maintain those standards? Thus, three guiding questions.

So what does it mean to be educated at the University of Virginia? This is a question that I’ve always asked as an academic administrator. What gives us confidence when we see a student receive a diploma that we’ve done our work? Not that I’ve turned out somebody to go to graduate school in the classics, or my colleague in engineering has gotten somebody ready for engineering, but what makes us think that we’ve educated our students? According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in 2008, on average, America spent per pupil in higher education a staggering $29,910, which is more than twice the average of the other 33 industrialized nations in the OECD. The increase in the sticker price of tuition, which has a devastating impact, particularly on the middle class, is notorious as student loan debt breaks $1 trillion, exceeding American credit card debt.

The research of UVA’s Josipa Roksa and NYU’s Richard Arum published in Academically Adrift shows a terrifying percentage of four-year college graduates who achieved little or no cognitive gains during their expensive college years, and lest any associated with elite institutions feel that is somebody else’s problem, the authors make it clear that the variation in outcomes within institutions is greater than the variation between institutions.

Employers are none too happy with the quality of newly-hired four-year college graduates. Some 400 employers who responded to a survey by the partnership for 21st century skills in 2006, 26 percent deemed the writing skills of new graduates deficient. They found less than one quarter with overall entry-level skills that were excellent.

The Bureau of Labor statistics tells us that the average worker age 18 to 44 will change jobs eleven times and a number of these changes will come in a worker’s late 30s or early 40s. ACTA’s survey suggests that higher education has, overall, ill-prepared its graduates for success in such a hard job market.

And now to Mr. Jefferson’s university. Jefferson, with his mastery of calculus, would balk at UVA’s decision to make mathematics optional for students. I don’t believe that this master of eloquence would be pleased to know that UVA students can be exempted from the first writing requirement. How would this Founding Father respond to the findings of ACTA’s survey? Would he approve of UVA’s academic regulations that allow such courses as, the idea of the university, or, film under fascism, ideology and entertainment, or, war and the media? As interesting and important as those courses are, they cannot stand in lieu of a foundational approach to American history and government. Well, Jefferson gave us his thoughts explicitly in his 1818 report to the commissioners, and he was, to say the least, firm about the need for mathematics, science, and American government in the training of the students.

So with this in mind, ACTA applauded the initiative of Rector Helen Dragas, that accountability for academic quality and productivity must increase. It is the Board’s responsibility, she wrote,
to ask for evidence, that the current curriculum is meeting its stated goals, and also to ask how well any particular curriculum or program actually prepares UVA graduates. Yes, this has to happen. It has to happen expeditiously. It should happen in a process that is productive, of course.

The rector was also right to be dissatisfied at the lack of evidence for academic effectiveness. The absence of, “a long-term program for assessment, reporting, and improvement.” Thirteen North Carolina public universities, including the flagship, appear on the voluntary system of accountability website. Instruments like the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which undergirds *Academically Adrift*, yield crucial information about academic strengths and weaknesses. And the Board’s impatience for UVA to move on this front was appropriate.

It is most unclear whether the board identified German and classics as programs to eliminate. And again, only a guess that the president’s dissent was one of the breaking points between the parties. So let’s imagine, and it is, I stress, only by imagination, that there was some Board of Visitors inquiry about these two programs. What would such a discussion sound like, and what would it say about the parties involved? German is a crucial academic program; I disclose that I spent 15 months at the University of Cologne on fellowship from the German government. It’s dear to my heart. But what’s the state of it in the nation? It is endangered at many institutions. It is a very low-enrollment program. The University of Southern California, in 2008, abolished its program. In 2010, SUNY Albany and Louisiana State University announced that they were going to follow suit. Next in line is the University of Northern Iowa. And heaven only knows how many others are going to terminate their German programs.

Meanwhile, eight North Carolina public universities, responding to an initiative coming from their universities’ general administration, have created a German studies consortium to share their course offerings. There is a partnership for a graduate program between Duke and UNC Chapel Hill. And a Russian consortium and Portuguese consortium are under consideration now. Meanwhile, in Pennsylvania, budget constraints have accelerated programs begun some years ago for low-enrollment language programs. Suspended degree programs at the 14 campuses can reinvent themselves and become shared courses across all campuses.

So what does this have to do with UVA and the possible threat to its German program? Well, UVA graduated in 2010-2011 two undergraduate majors in German language and literature, one MA candidate, and two Ph.D. candidates. The department of Germanic Languages and Literature has a faculty of 15—nine full and associate professors, two assistant professors, and four lecturers or instructors. In the midst of a budget crisis with tuition up 38 percent between 2004 and 2010, would it be so unreasonable if these questions were in fact asked, to raise questions about a more cost-effective way to have a German program and not to go the way of University of Southern California and Louisiana State, and heaven only knows who else?

In 2010-2011, UVA graduated a robust 18 majors in classics, and let me again disclose, I was for many years a tenured professor of classical studies, but only three MA students and no Ph.D. candidates. Might it be worthwhile for UVA to consider what three University of California campuses have done in forming the tri-campus graduate program in classics, to share resources and hold down costs? UVA has 11 professors in the classics department; its course offerings are
wonderful. But is it sustainable in its present configuration? That is a legitimate question to ask, if indeed it was asked.

The teaser for this discussion, if I can say that, Bill asked, how do we balance financial and academic bottom lines? Business innovator Clay Christianson is very clear about the disruptive innovation at hand. Successful institutions will grow their way out of the fiscal crisis. I would not think anybody would call Clay Christianson a forthright thinker. This deserves very serious consideration. And if you live in Northern Virginia and you have children, you can see plenty of reason and opportunity for growth at UVA. But it will not happen if we continue to think of an academic year based on an agrarian calendar with a long summer hiatus. It will not happen when expensive laboratory and classroom space is underutilized, and we know from the SHEV reports that UVA does not meet state guidelines for usage, even during the semester. I could not find the data reported, but I’d be curious to know how effectively how UVA uses its buildings at, say, 8am, or on Friday afternoons. Most of active studies of classroom utilization around the country show that those are dead zones. And I could think of many worthy students who would be happy to be in class, given the opportunity to be there at 8am or Friday afternoons.

Most important, the growth that UVA needs will not happen if we hold sacred that teaching more than two courses a semester, on average, is an unreasonable burden for tenured or tenure-track faculty. I realize that’s a heretical statement, but I make it anyway. These sorts of changes are not easy. But if the president, her staff, and the Board of Visitors have taken the last two weeks as a wakeup call, UVA can be a model of academic excellence and public access, exactly what I think, I have the right to say, Mr. Jefferson would have wanted. Thank you. [APPLAUSE]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: That was great. Thank you very much. As I customarily do, I’m going to poke the hornet’s nest a little bit here, and I’ll begin, since Mr. Poliakoff is outnumbered two-to-one, I’ll ask a question of the company from the University of Virginia, and especially Jim. Mr. Poliakoff’s observations about the problems with higher education today are widely shared in the conservative world. If you look at any of the blogs, you read about the higher education bubble, which is the next thing after the real estate bubble to burst here, momentarily. And in large measure because of all the inflated costs that we’ve talked about. And I can imagine, Jim, and I don’t know Mr. Breneman well enough to say this about you, but I know Jim fairly well, under other circumstances, you could sit on a panel in which you would have all sorts of very harsh and critical things to say about the university today, along the lines of that more kids today know who Beavis and Butthead are rather than General Washington. How do you handle that kind of critique? The conservative defense of traditional liberal education is almost a defense without an object today, given the state of higher education.

JAMES CEASER: Well, don’t get me started. And I think I indicated, I have serious reservations about other trends that have been going on at UVA; many of those that Michael spoke to eloquently. Absent the particular vents, I think probably 95 percent of what he said would be things that I would say. The failures of UVA have been very dismaying. He spoke, for example, of teaching loads. It’s interesting, to say the least, to see many who come in as younger professors under the illusion that they’re going to be able to follow the sorts of careers that people follow at, say, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale, where they teach one or one-and-a-half courses a semester. It’s not going to happen, they should be told.
Not only that, they should be told that they not only have to teach undergraduates, but they have to give at least a quarter of their time to thinking how to teach undergraduates in a serious way that contributes to their undergraduates’ education. The curriculum at the University of Virginia in the arts and sciences is a travesty. Michael pointed to some of the courses. I’d say too many students end up taking what we call “fifth courses.” One interesting course out of five, okay, film and this, why not? But all of them?

I had students who, in a sense, take five fifth courses. And after two years at the University of Virginia, some of them have not seriously read any serious book, any serious text. They may have read textbooks, they may have had good courses, but they haven’t come to read a serious work of literature or philosophy. Surely it would be possible, with the proper leadership, to agree on a basket of six or eight things which students should know, even let them choose six out of the eight, and make sure that after two years, they would have a very good chance of being exposed to those six or eight areas.

And I know this, too, from speaking with the students. You think the students want choices when they come in? That’s wrong. They really want to, in a way, be instructed. Maybe not take every course, but here’s a list of eight things you should know. Take six of them. They’re looking for guidance far more than for a smorgasbord of courses. So we could go on and on and on. I guess the only problem I have in all of this is linking this to the decision on Teresa Sullivan. As I said, I don’t know the person. She’s been there two years. If you want to fire someone from this, fire our last president. He was a good person, too, John Casteen. In two years, this is not going to fall into the bailiwick of the president.

If you understand a complex organization like UVA, the usual way it works is the president first would hire a provost who is more or less the fulltime academic operation officer more than a president. And she did so. I think there was, from what I know, I’m not in on the decision-making processes, but with the people that I speak to that are, they’re very impressed with this person who’s been there nine months or so. So we have no disagreement philosophically. But to make this the basis of a firing of a person struck me as being a violation of all codes. And then, I have no indication from anything that the Board said that they were the champions of what Michael was speaking of, or if they were concerned with that. Was there a discussion of this? Where was the putting of first thing’s first? I would have no confidence that the result of a president hired by this board under those circumstances would be more devoted to these things than the current president whose views, as I say, I don’t know exactly on this issue.

I’ll add one point. The hiring of a president, especially in today’s modern consultative era, isn’t so easy. It takes, after everyone is consulted, or the illusion of consultation is proceeded, it takes 13 months or so. I know how long it took to hire the last president. President Sullivan’s been here for two years. She’s going to be eliminated, you’re going to have an interim president, and then another president. Two years without a president. Now, unless this person as president is pretty bad, or unless you have in mind someone who’s pretty good, this strikes me as an act of such rashness and imprudence as to defy comprehension. I think this was the feeling of many,
who as I said, really didn’t quite know who stood for what, and still don’t know exactly who stood for what.

DAVID BRENEMAN: I won’t jump into the curricular matters except to say that was a former liberal arts college president at one stage in my checkered career and I believe deeply in these institutions that do it right. I think we’re still trying to overcome the events of the late-60s, which in a way, threw the whole curriculum into a tailspin. My first teaching job was at Amherst College in 1970, and we voted the last shred of, what had been a very tightly constructed curriculum, out the window. We turned it into a smorgasbord, 36 courses. And I think institutions are still struggling to come back from that episode, and that’s 40-plus years ago.

On the costs side, I should just mention that the major signature initiative of President Sullivan was to completely revise and dramatically change our budgeting system internally. For the past 20 years at least, it operated on pretty much on the classic, you get what you got last year plus anything that comes in. And if there are cuts, you get it across the board, and there’s no strategy involved in any of it. It’s just very simple-minded and that’s the way we functioned.

I was a dean for 12 years. As a dean, I had no incentives. It didn’t seem to matter if I raised my enrollment, it didn’t change my budget. I cut students, it didn’t change my budget. I went to out-of-state students. It didn’t change my budget. The only incentive I had was to raise private money. That is not a good way to generate efficiency in an organization like the University of Virginia, nor is it wise to think that you’re going to do this top-down.

What Terry was bringing in was a model which is not unique by any means to the university. She was bringing it partly from the University of Michigan, USC, Penn, Harvard, responsibility-centered budgeting, or activity-based budgeting. Essentially it takes each of the schools and empowers the deans to be more involved in determining the fate of their own schools in that they earn a share of their own tuition, they pay a negotiated share of the overhead burden, and it causes them to take a look at an under-enrolled course, or an under-enrolled field, and make a hard decision.

If it’s losing on the budgetary front, I make a decision. I either reduce it, or I shift it, or I decide it’s so important to the mission of the school that I subsidize it out of the earnings of my other revenues. And that model is not easy to implement. She was working hard to do it, coupled with the buy-in of the faculty that she was getting through her other, I think, very adroit human skills, that’s the vehicle by which you get change in a university. The kind of nonsense of talking about strategic dynamism ain’t the way to do it. That isn’t going to get you to first base. It won’t even get you past home plate.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: So Mr. Poliakoff, trying to bring together the two arguments here. You point out that efficiencies in the curriculum, and I think there seems to be quite wide agreement on this panel that the University of Virginia is struggling with this, with content and trying to restore some liberal arts education to the school. Nonetheless, was there any evidence that the Board of Visitors had any such larger substantive concerns or interests, or was it all a
kind of a repetition of sort of third-rate buzz words? What in the action of the Board of Visitors
did you see that went to this problem of the substantive content of liberal education?

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: Jim Ceaser put his finger on it quite clearly. Every word in the
rector’s ten points or in President Sullivan’s 12 pages of strategic thoughts in her memo, every
word is going to get parsed. There will be a series of competing hermeneutics about these
documents, probably far outweighing the amount of time that was ever spent composing them.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Teach college courses on these documents. [LAUGHTER]

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: So in all candor and humility, we’re groping, and I’m groping even
more than the others. I wasn’t there at the epicenter. However, what might well have set the
board off, and I’m giving them the benefit of the doubt, it was more what wasn’t said in the last
couple of years.

And again, I agree with Professor Ceaser. Two years is a fairly short time, expect for the fact that
every year there are hundreds if not thousands of worthy students who won’t get opportunities
because of bad management and bad structures and poor curriculum, and absence of assessment,
I mean real assessment that will guide better education.

So I and my organization do tend to feel quite impatient about seeing change. For better or
worse, Teresa Sullivan is not Michael Crow. We were not hearing plans about a new American
university with new schools that would break departmental lines. There was some of that in her
strategic memo, but nothing like the $13 million a year that ASU has been saving since it
reorganized so many departments. We were not hearing the kinds of signals that would indicate
that there was going to be a real push towards access and excellence. Why that set off the Board
of Visitors and why the fuse was so short, I don’t know.

But I do come back to ACTA’s basic point that across the nation we are in a crisis and that crisis
affects UVA. And impatience is a good thing. There are better ways of expressing it than the
way the Board did it. That was clumsy, it was uncivil, it broke all sorts of academic protocols.
But I still want to give some credit to the spirit that underlies it, that things must change, and we
don’t have a lot of time to waste.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Let’s go to the audience.

Q: Amy Kass from Hudson Institute. Michael, imagining yourself as a member of the Board,
what were you hearing from Teresa Sullivan that might have given you pause?

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Or what weren’t you hearing?

AMY KASS: You admit that two years is not enough, but what were you hearing? You,
envisioning yourself as a member of the Board?

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: I would have been very bothered by a budget with 4.2 percent
growth. I would have been very worried, as was explicitly stated, by the peril of a budget that is
depending so heavily on clinical income. But beyond that, it would have been the silences that
would bother me. At the inaugural conference on assessment, I didn’t hear anything about the
fact that we have this remarkable scholar, Josipa Roksa, on our campus who could really lead us
to become much more scientific about teaching and learning.

I didn’t hear anything about a totally new vision of how we ensure that students leave with the
critical thinking skills that they need. I didn’t hear anything about the cries of distress that are out
there from employers about the lack of basic skills, indeed even from the students coming from
the most prestigious institutions. If that was said, I didn’t hear it. I didn’t hear anything about any
recognition that these low enrollment programs, crucial as they are, are heavily in peril, and that
we need a new vision to make sure that a great institution will be able to continue them, but
continue them in a way that will not deny the resources necessary for sound general education. It
was the silences that would have bothered me on that Board. But again, I am speaking here from
somebody who was not there.

DAVID BRENEMAN: The statistics on the classics just happen to be, in this case, very
misleading. It was one year in which there were no Ph.Ds. In fact, it produces a large number of
PhDs relative to other classic programs who are prominently placed and has a large number of
undergraduates as well, sometimes in courses in the languages, but sometimes in courses in
history of the classical world. As for Germanic studies, I’m not sure, I don’t have my figures on
it. But so many friends in the classics would have not wanted me back in Charlottesville unless I
reminded them of this fact.

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: Again, I have to say for the record, I know and admire these people
enormously, but let me give you a comparison. We used 2010 because it was the most recent set
of records we could get from federal data. The job market is pretty bad, and if they’re getting
tenure-track positions, they are among the most fortunate. Another separate conversation is how
many PhDs we ought to be turning out all over the nation, given where we are now.

But let me put side-by-side UVA and Hillsdale College. 100 students start Latin every year. 30
students start Greek, on average, in the school of 1,100, with a very robust number of majors.
How many people teach in that department in Hillsdale College? Four. Now, of course, they
teach four courses a semester. When I taught at Hillsdale, it was five, because we had to cover
the turf with only two of us. I’m not advocating that UVA, an R1 university, go to a four-and-
four teaching load. But these are the tradeoffs. Eleven professors is a very, very big workforce.
Sorry to use that term. I did glance at salaries. Annually, salaries alone are over a million dollars.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: In the classics?

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: In the classics. Not that they don’t deserve it, I want to keep stressing
that. These are fantastic, productive scholars. But there are hard choices in front of us. How do
we share our resources with other universities, maximize impact? That’s the kind of conversation
I would like to see the university have.
DAVID BRENEMAN: I’m an economist. That’s a million bucks on a $2.6 billion budget. I call that a rounding error. You think you’re going to solve the university’s problems by wiping out the classics department, you don’t know what you’re talking about. Pardon me.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: But as someone who knows a great deal about measuring outcomes in higher education, and someone who sort of defends the current state of affairs at the University of Virginia, what would you suggest by way of an approach to this? I mean, because the question does have to be answered.

DAVID BRENEMAN: Well, I’ve worked for 20 years with a gentleman named Pat Callan, who in various iterations, most recently ran a national center with Jim Hunt as the chairman. And we put out five annual reports, semi-annual, and bi-annual reports on the state of performance in American higher education called Measuring Up. We looked at preparation by state, participation, completion, affordability. And then we said, this is a report card. It was a benchmarking exercise. What state does these things best, and how does everybody else relate to them? It was learning. What do we know about learning?

First report we put out, we didn’t flunk everybody, we gave everybody an incomplete. This is an area that, in all honesty, the universities have not addressed as a separate issue from courses and grades and GPA. I suspect, as a professor, you feel that you evaluate your students in the courses you teach, and the sum of 36 of those becomes the evaluation of the institution. Now that is no longer viewed as acceptable.

I’ve been pushing for a decade, along with others, in working more and more toward reviews, the Collegiate Learning Assessment. We’ve used all kinds of things to try to get these measures out but it’s hard. It’s not like No Child Left Behind, it’s not reading and math at the third grade level, you’ve got a complex set of curricular materials. You’ve got a very heterogeneous set of institutions. Is remedial math at MIT the same as it is at Piedmont Valley Community College? Probably not. What does it mean?

So there’s work to be done, but it isn’t going to happen in 22 months and no president is going to come in and be able to get this thing done and settled and to everybody’s satisfaction in five years. You have got to work on it and it’s a big project.

Q: Yes, thank you. Rob Colorina. I’m an alum. I’m on the diversity board for the school. Two quick questions. One is, the fact that the state administration got involved in this first go around, as I recall, there was one voted against and two abstained. But the state administration came back saying, we wanted a unified decision amongst the board. I was curious, Michael, if you had some commentary to that, if there’s precedent to that, or did you expect that kind of wording? And then secondly, you had a couple of donor families in particular who came out publically saying that they’re going to freeze their continuations. What are your views on that because that comes back to the commercial aspects as well?

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: I think we’ve got to make sure we have the right wording. The governor did not ask for a unanimous decision, but he asked for the Board to come to a decision and to stop the divisiveness. And that struck me as a completely reasonable thing for the
governor to say, stop fighting. He did not say that you had to unanimously stop fighting. Nobody tells the Supreme Court it has got to be unanimous, but come to a decision and live with it, move on. That, at the very least, could be asked from a public institution.

What about donors? ACTA has always maintained that donor intent is about as sacred as you can get. Donors have every right to tell an institution that they will or will not give money, depending upon whether it is a cause that matches their funding objectives. I don’t consider that at all inappropriate. I wish there was more of it. That donors would think long and hard about whether an institution is actually fulfilling the goals that they are giving their personal treasure toward?

DAVID BRENEMAN: Just one brief word on that, I mean, we had people, high income, high donors, on both sides of this issue, whether it netted out, I don’t know. But we had a conservative hedge fund manager write a letter to the local newspaper saying he was all in favor of the Board’s action, implying his money would be forthcoming because they did it, or wouldn’t be forthcoming if they reversed it. I’m not quite sure what he was really saying. And then we had some people equally on the other side who were shocked that the institution they’d given so much money to was behaving this way. So I think that was a contested area.

Q: I’m Dale Hill, I’m an alumna from the first class of women, ’74. I am a monitoring and evaluations specialist and an economist. So I was very interested in your saying that one of the things Teresa Sullivan introduced was just getting the information in the budget, which is what really I think has to be the foundation for making decisions on how do you move forward. So my question was going to be a bit about that, but I think you answered it. My other question is about the composition of the board. I agree that it’s inappropriate to have all businessmen. And yes, maybe have some academics. But what about public policy people? What about some people who have worked for civil society organization or government? So I guess I don’t even know how the Board is decided, so I would like your commentary on that.

DAVID BRENEMAN: Well let me tell you how it’s decided, and then Michael, whose organization specializes in this area, can answer you. The 16 board members are purely picked by the governor. I mean, we have 16 board members, I guess technically we’ve gone to 17. And, as you know, the state of Virginia is the last state in the nation that has a one-term governor, four years. So in one term a governor can completely change the membership of the board.

In this case, of the 16 board members who were on the board when Terry Sullivan was elected, eight of them were gone and eight were still there. I think it produces a situation where people never even figure out where the restroom is before they are almost in their third year. So it’s not good, it’s not stable. There should be a different way of picking people, but I now defer to the more expert.

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: Having trustees, regents, visitors who understand the academic mission is obviously very important. These are choices that need to be made with real insight. Having the governor appoint the members of a public board is appropriate because the governor is elected, accountable. As we could see in this last episode, the governor understands in a very immediate way that if his appointees mess up, that is a bad reflection on him. He will be
accountable and we need that immediacy. So in terms of the actual appointment process, this makes a lot of sense.

Now, composition is a very, very important part of the quality of the Board and the accountability of the appointer. Getting academic expertise makes a lot of sense, although I hasten to say that the idea of a lay board is one that has been time-tested. It is very important that the Board not be under the influence of any particular constituency. It is the only entity in governance that should not have a dog in the fight, except the wellbeing of the institution and the public, in the case of a public institution.

Faculty, for good reason, what makes them great is their allegiance to their discipline. It is challenging, as Professor Ceaser has pointed out, to get them, at times, to go beyond their discipline to think about what is education at the institution. To move beyond the departmental and disciplinary loyalty and passion to a larger sense of, ‘Well my course shouldn’t be required, but the math department sure should have a slot in the core.’ That kind of public-spirited decision is often a difficult one to get from the constituencies that are at ground level.

A president, and this is not taking away from any particular president, will always live in fear of a vote of no-confidence. The president is not a free agent. So having a Board that can preserve that kind of independence is a crucial part of governance. One wants a well-informed Board, a Board with the kind of experience and open-mindedness to learn that will make all the members effective. But certainly the idea of people who are not necessarily coming from the fabric of the academy is not a bad idea.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Jim, I suspect you would be appalled at the kind of academics who might be appointed to the Board at the University of Virginia, and you would yearn for the day when there were nothing but businessmen on that Board. You would point to that and say, good old days when conservatives had at least some voice someplace in Charlottesville. Right?

[LAUGHTER]

JAMES CEASER: No, if I have to disagree a little bit with my faculty center, I do not personally favor a UVA faculty member on the board. What I do favor is reminding the Board and the governor that this is a university, so put on a couple of people who can speak to this in some ways, to mix with the businesspeople. It’s been a mistake of both of the last governors not to have done that and this is a chance for them to correct it, recognizing, as I do, the importance of the businesspeople. But some of them are other types of professionals, so they do have them. It’s not just businesspeople. But there should be a little bit more of this.

And it’s not really to the credit of a great university, or at any rate a wannabe great university, not to have a more intellectual account, understanding of the university right there on the Board. Michael, I think I could guess you as a good board member who can bring a lot of experience, which I doubt is available to many of the people on the Board, given what their life experience is.

Q: Hi, I’m Kate Birmingham and I’m with the Philanthropy Roundtable. My question is partly to Dr. Ceaser. You had mentioned that employers are unsatisfied with the writing skills of recent
graduates. So my question is then, why the response of all sorts of new strategies in higher
education, particularly online learning, and you know, whatever manifestations strategic
dynamism might take on at a university setting? Why not back to the basics that so many
conservatives champion about reading great books? Isn’t that how you become a great writer, by
reading great books and great texts? And doing so under the tutelage of a professional who has
done this, presumably, for several decades and can kind of guide you in the right direction.

And then the other part towards Dr. Ceaser, maybe, is it not perhaps time then for conservatives,
both in and outside the academy, to admit that there is maybe an incongruence between their
appetite for these kinds of new innovations? And true conservative-ism, isn’t that maybe sort of a
veiled kind of progressivism, that we’re trying to bring in all of these new practices and
measureable outcomes that are ill-fit for the skills that we ultimately want to instantiate in our
young graduates?

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: I don’t think there is anyone either at this table or in the audience that
would disagree that writing quality is at a crisis. It is a crisis in K-12, it is a crisis in higher
education, and it is a crisis among the members of the workforce. How do we solve that? It’s not
often that I find myself agreeing with Stanley Fish. But Stanley Fish actually even agreed with
ACTA in print in the *New York Times* on the basic point that students need a dedicated writing
course. Writing across the curriculum is great, but it is not the same as holding students
accountable for the mechanics, for coherence, for finally eloquence and rhetoric. That is a course
all to itself. It’s the reason why ACTA does not give credit for the general writing across the
curriculum.

I think one thing that we probably would agree on at this table is that there has been way too
much cliché-mongering and rhetoric in college catalogues. Everybody believes in the liberal arts.
Very few are willing to walk the walk. Everybody believes in the importance of writing. A
school that is responsible will ensure that there is good writing, and might even go the next step,
if necessary, to test that with a real instrument to be sure of their effectiveness. Yes, reading great
literature is, of course, one of the ways that one acquires a real sense of style and grace, but that
also needs to be accompanied by the detailed, meticulous work in the mechanics of writing.

We have been sabotaged at almost every turn. When the National Council of the Teachers of
English published a polemic against diagramming sentences and the tyranny of grammar and
whatever else they’re saying, this is a disaster that higher education inherits. But the buck stops
with higher education, and it’s simply got to take the action it needs with that required course.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: You have to answer a young lady who uses the word instantiate, and
this is a pretty impressive setting.

JAMES CEASER: Yes, if she could define it for me that would be better still.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Well let’s not push it. [LAUGHTER]

JAMES CEASER: Well I’d say on this, I’m a little bit sort of sink your bucket down here,
which is an old expression. Look for what are the strengths already in place. Maybe this is a little
old-fashioned. I’m very dubious, however maybe it’s necessary for all this testing and assessing, but it seems to me to maybe not be necessary for a place that is of high quality. I believe in hiring people that have the right spirit and the right training and the right dedication. And in this profession, mainly the profession of education, I call it a liberal profession, liberal meaning you police yourself. That’s what I look at.

I like colleagues who police themselves, that don’t get into my business, I don’t get into theirs, but who are dedicated to the same thing. I think if you get a group of people who have that attitude who are at the core of your faculty, that most of the things that need to be done will be done. If you move some of the administrators out of the way, if you move the constant foolish assessments out of the way, maybe these are necessary, but this seems to me to be the attitude towards other places than a place like UVA that I would like it to be.

So that is kind of my view. Hire the right people, make sure they’re devoted to the tasks of the university, have a president and a dean that really is concerned with who the personnel are. Everything comes down to personnel. A person who is devoted to teaching or research, those are the ones who are going to make the place work. So fine with a little bit, I can’t fill out forms very well. I don’t like to do it. Maybe it’s the age in which we live. But that would be my solution, and go back to the traditions of a place.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Leon, last question. And as you answer this question, bear in mind these will have to be your last remarks.

Q: Leon Kass from AEI. I found this very interesting, both for the concrete comments about the UVA situation and Michael’s attempt to raise certain more general questions. Struggling on the basis of what I heard to see whether there are any larger generalizations about this problem that one might go away with. Jim Ceaser explicitly saying that he didn’t see any larger implications. And most of the discussion has been about a process, procedural errors and stupidities in a local place, happily at least for the time being resolved.

But let me offer just a couple of comments and see if I can draw you out on this. It does seem to me that the financial crisis in higher education is going to lead various kinds of boards, however constituted, to put pressure on the institution and to raise questions about how the institution is run. Whether they are doing the right thing and whether they’re getting their money’s worth by some kind of measure, known or imagined. That is going to continue.

Jim Ceaser would like there to be a clearer articulation of what education is all about, and not sacrifice that to various kinds of economic interests, though he recognizes here that in the defense of the president, or in the discussion that has taken place, that didn’t come up very much, and he’d be rather worried, I think, to have that kind of discussion come up within his own faculty as to whether the faculty would in fact agree as to what the overarching ends are.

Third, Michael, for all of your concern about what the students are learning, you come back often to what the employers are finding wanting in our graduates, suggesting that the measure of success in the university is not some kind of ideal of making good citizens or learning of what a cultivated human being is, but preparation for the workplace, which is increasingly a way in
which higher education is evaluated and judged, and therefore it basically concedes to the businessmen the right to say, are you giving us what our businesses need? And it seems to me that we are going to see a lot more of this.

And the question is, has this occasion been used to this point, and can it still be used to try to articulate some of the things that I suspect the panel shares in common once you get past the procedural irregularities, to say the least? Because I don’t see that the proper defense has been made of anything other than civility and good procedure.

DAVID BRENEMAN: I’ll leap into this. One of the things I write on is the financing in the future of higher education, and I just finished a book on that subject with some colleagues. We are in a very strange place right now where, and in a way I’m sorry this event happened at UVA, because one of the difficulties we have, and I mean UVA as a type of institution, is that this country obsesses endlessly about a handful of the leading institutions, and we study them, and that’s all you read about in the newspapers.

The big issues for this country of human capital and development and opportunity are being played out not in the UVAs, frankly, and not in the Harvards, they’re being played out in the regional publics, the non-selective privates, the two-year colleges, and, God-bless us, even the for-profit institutions now. Those are the ones that you never see written up, you never see the controversies. They don’t have any of the options that a place like UVA has; they can’t raise enough money privately, except for the for-profits in a different venue. They don’t have alumni donors. And yet, we obsess on only a handful of institutions.

Now the public research universities are, as a class, very nervous right now about their ability to stay in the competitive game with the private ones. If you go back a few years ago, the top universities would be about half public, half private. Now it’s lopsidedly private. It turns out betting on the stock market was a better bet than the state governments. I mean, that’s what it amassed to.

But if you look at what is happened nationally, we’ve had the president of the University of Oregon knocked off after less than two years. Richard Lariviere was fired. Eddie Martin at Madison, Wisconsin. The president of the University of Illinois. I mean, president of a public research university is a very tough job to take these days. Ironically, most of the presidents that have been knocked off that I’ve mentioned have been trying to push the envelope and do somewhat more radical things and they bump right into the establishment that smashed them right back down.

This is one of the flipsides of our strange situation. You had a Board pushing what might be called radical action and you had a president that was saying that they need to slow down because that is not the way it works. So they slapped her down. Again, I don’t know if there’s any general lesson to be had, but I think if anyone comes after you to be a public university president, be very careful what you say.

MICHAEL POLIAKOFF: Thank you, Leon, for that question and I think there are good answers to it. Let me start with something that will seem at first flippant. Robert Hagastrom’s
book, *Investing: The Last Liberal Art*, has a major chapter on St. John’s and its preparation for somebody who’s going to have a successful career in high-level investment. Now, what’s he after? Why am I starting with this odd answer? I don’t see that there is an inherent contradiction between a sound liberal arts education, which will be rewarding in helping a person live better, be a better member of the community, and success in a career. Those things tend to go together nicely. I’m very impressed that our four military service academies all have really strong liberal arts curricula. None of the people who are being trained to be officers in our armed forces are allowed to get out of there without a literature course. I hope that this is because they understand that by wrestling with the difficult complexities of literature, we will have officers who will make decisions that touch base with many different ideas, not simply a pragmatic and often short-sighted approach.

To study economics may be vocationally important, but ACTA believes everybody who goes through college should understand economics to be a good citizen, to be able to vote effectively. One of the things that amused me, if I may use that word, was when we were wrestling with this idea of whether education should be vocationally focused or should embrace the liberal arts majors that tend not to have a specific career in mind, I looked at the employment prospects for structural engineering, which right now are terrible.

Now, presumably a few years ago, parents would have been telling their kids to get a degree in structural engineering and they’d have a great job in front of them. Well, my guess is that the structural engineers who didn’t acquire some of the basic liberal arts that involve writing and eloquence and understanding of history and economics are the ones who are now desperately searching around for a career. Foreign language proficiency. Isn’t that what diversity and multiculturalism are all about? If you respect another culture, learn its language. So I don’t see that bright line between what employers want and what is good for us, as human beings, citizens, and as members of our community.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Jim, last word, if any. No?

JAMES CEASER: I had my say. I will study economics, though. [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Let’s thank our panel for a terrific discussion. [APPLAUSE]