

## Letters to the Editor

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thetically" acceptable?

3) Here is the biggie: what's with all this conformance stuff?

Our world, our existence, our Being, is one of multiplicity. There is sea life, land life, air life, and multiple manifestations within each group just mentioned. Life manifests itself in a truly infinite number of ways. Likewise, human cultures and their experiences, histories, values, morals, and theological views are just as diverse. There is no one right or superior lifestyle, simply different ones. When the NAS asks for conformance, do they know what they are really asking for, and do they know what it reveals about themselves? If conformity has its place, and it probably does somewhere, sometimes, it certainly is not in education.

Education is about learning new things, developing new ideas, and reaching new levels of understanding about the self, the cosmos, and the ways each interact and interrelate with each other. This is done via creative engagement of the self and what it already knows and feels, with new ideas, emotions, and perspectives. Then comes critical analysis, and either rejection of the new ideas or assimilation/accomodation of the new with the old. Learning is a continuous creative process in which the learner is an active explorer of new terrain, and not only a passive recipient of interpreted "truths" passed on from the "teacher" (conditioner?).

Conformity rejects diversity in Being; it rejects differences on all levels. It rejects active creative thought and expression on the part of the learner. It rejects true growth, change, and development. It rejects new knowledge and deeper, fuller, more holistic understanding.

Conformity promotes standardization, non-critical thinking, even any kind of real thinking for that matter. It assumes the conformists already know what is absolutely right or wrong, and therefore the right should be conformed to. It promotes a universal and single perspective which is believed to be the right and superior perspective. This is because the "universal" perspective is believed to be applicable to all people: their histories, situations, and morals. Conformity promotes conditioning, not true education. Isn't education essentially about learning how to critically (positively or negatively) question things, explore new territory in creative ways (be it intellectual, emotional, or spiritual territory), then to grow in relation to what is understood and believed by the learner? Conformity promotes stagnation, not growth. It promotes conditioning and socialization, not educating and truly critical reflection. It promotes intolerance of and prejudice against what is different from the "norm," which is usually extended into various oppressive structures against the diversity. This very intolerance of differences is what creates the -isms of society such as racism, classism and sexism.

People's desires for conformity exposes their true *fear* of things different from themselves, their sense of "loss of control" in their life, and their inadequacy in truly being able to live and be an equal among equals. Their desire exposes their deeper desire to place themselves on top as the "superior" so they can have power and control over both their own life and others. The question is: Why do they want such power, either over themselves or others?

Nature is diverse. Being is diverse. Cultures, values and practices are diverse around the world. Weather is diverse, skin color is diverse, dispositions are diverse. Does the conformist wish to change Nature? The creative process of Nature is sacred—it is a universal process which is birth and death itself. Life is this creative process, and this process is manifested in a multitude of dynamic ways, from different climates to geographies, to music, to food, to flowers, birds, food, beliefs, values, and so on. Life is a dynamic network, or web, of relationships all mutually connecting with and affecting each other incessantly. This process is sacred; it is what connects us all at our essence. It connects each of us to all of reality.

My concern with the NAS's desire for conformity at the expense of a "proportional representation" of different ethnic, racial, and religious views is that it supposes their standards and

values are not only correct, but the best. Also, that conformity lays down the foundation for judging other systems as inferior, which eliminates the possibility of us all living together equally and with respect for each other. We have only to look at Nazism and Tiananmen Square to see how far the desire for and belief in conformity can be pushed. The conformist view promotes oppression of what is not "standard" or "acceptable," which hurts people on many levels. Conformity cuts us all off from the beautiful and mysterious sacred process of Life itself. It cuts us off from diversity and the things we can learn from new experiences. It cuts us off from the wonderful and fulfilling tension which is caused by different things existing and relating together simultaneously, all of which is done in a naturally harmonious way, and which sparks growth and evolution to new levels of Being always. Conformity cuts each one of us off from our truest potential, and therefore cuts us off from society's greatest potential: egalitarian peace.

Matt J. Feinberg

To the Editor:

I am writing because I feel it is necessary to respond to the advertisement courtesy of William Burris entitled "Is the Curriculum Biased?" This ad is not unlike the one he put in *The Guilfordian* last year. I am both angered and excited that this ad was printed. I am excited that I belong to a community which gives me the opportunity to explore issues, such as racism and sexism, in a public forum. As James H. Cone said in a preface to *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1989, "It is easy to change the language of oppression without changing the socio-political situations of its victims. Today it is even more difficult to defuse racist behavior because it is not as over." So I am happy that the issues are on the table and also that *The Guilfordian* has a respect for Dr. Burris' otherness. At the same time, what Dr. Burris is saying makes me shudder.

He seems very defensive, as if women, blacks and special interest groups are a threat to Western thought. Why is he worried? Is Dr. Burris saying that we do not already teach mathematics, the sciences and history? Or that classes not teaching western ideas are dangerous to him and to his belief structure? Is he saying that we should not teach classes such as "Death of the Imagination" and "Racial and Ethnic Relations?" He seems to think that when people seek education beyond the traditional curriculum, they are reaching beyond the bounds of the white patriarchal society that has prevailed for 2,000 years. What he has somehow managed to ignore is classes on the role of women and the role of blacks are a significant part of the experience he clings to. He also puts a qualitative Western value judgment on other works by blacks, women and other ethnic groups, by suggesting their contribution to the curriculum would be "adding inferior works." His ideal of the universal is, as I see it, dangerous. He is wearing a very dark, thick pair of glasses, or should I say an entire suit of armor, that is resistant to change and feelings.

My goal is not to attack the West but to invite it into mutuality and acceptance of true diversity. What I find dangerous about this article is the supposition that there is a single definition of education. After reading this article it seems that the underlying message is that every person must be schooled in a classical Western thought. It seems that Dr. Burris and his view of the universal presume that human intelligence, human goodness and moral foundations are based on an outdated Western ideal of ways to be human. Carter Heyward in her book "Touching our Strength" (1989) speaks to the danger of using terminology like "universal" as this article does. "Behind this astonishing claim is the far-reaching 'common sense,' cultivated with obvious ease by those who historically have held the power in place, that the most intelligent philosophers and theologians and the most moral religious and civil leaders are those who speak most universally of what is true and good and who, therefore, are the least distracted by the special interests, needs and experiences of particular people. In this context, the most knowledgeable are those few who can tell us more and more about less and less until they've told us everything they know about nothing."

Dan Baur

To the Editor:

I would like to thank the National Association of Scholars for expressing the very reasons for why the study of the oppressed peoples of the world is an essential part of a liberal arts education. As I read its advertisement in last week's *Guilfordian*, I could not help but notice the obvious contradictions and the self-defeating nature of their reasoning. Such weak arguments must rely on narrow presumptions and misunderstandings for support. I could point out all the weak spots in the argument, but I don't want this to be a letter of criticism but a letter of response.

I see a fundamental cause of this debate to be one of differing ideas of purpose of education. The National Association of Scholars seems to be primarily interested in educating students to uphold tradition and think in their "safe" prescribed patterns. While Western thought has produced valuable ideas and concepts, it is not the one and only origin of these. It is also not the ultimatum for humanity. Anyone would agree that there is much injustice in the world today, and most thoughtful people would agree that much of the injustice is in the form of oppression of one portion of society by another. As long as there is injustice in the world (which may be forever), I see no excuse for tolerating it and thus upholding it.

By denying the voice of women and minority groups, a liberal arts education denies the advancement of all students toward a more fulfilling existence. An education has not succeeded if it has not encouraged the student to come to a fuller realization of his or her own identity and self-worth as a responsible, thinking participant in the large web of relationships in society. Pure academic growth is not an acceptable goal for an education, for people are more than computers waiting to process and store information. We have minds, souls and life experiences which are the very source of all thought and creation. To deny the importance of creations arising from the life experiences of any person is to threaten human existence with stagnation and alienation (a force which is already strongly present).

Western traditional thought has consistently denied women and minority groups the right to creatively participate in the development of the foundation of our society and our relationship to it, even though we constitute the majority of the population. This belittling of our experience has led to feelings of alienation. The alienation of the oppressed group arises out of the conflict between what we feel and know from our direct experience and the lack of Western tradition to affirm these experiences as valid and valuable. I am driven to ask the question, "If I must learn from their life experiences, then why is it they cannot learn from mine?"

I am writing this letter to suggest the opposite of an attack on Western thinking, but an opportunity for improvement through the valuing of all human experience and interpretations of experience. In opening up to the value of all experiences, we increase the potential for creation, thus furthering the understanding of all facets of life. This is the goal of true education

Mendy Ozan

To the Editor:

I would like to respond vehemently to William Burris' advertisement. The National Association of Scholars fails to recognize, in its illustrious statement, that in limiting a person's access to a myriad of perspectives, his or her capacity for making informed, intellectual, thoughtful and reflective comments on, contributions to and changes in society is severely diminished. If an individual's life experience is not validated, the result is much personal internal conflict. I support any action that incorporates a multitude of perspectives from "blacks, other ethnic minorities, and women."

The purpose of incorporating these perspectives is not to subordinate the "canon" to a new range of works. It is to give equal time to valid interpretations. Speaking from personal experience at Guilford College, I did become discouraged because I was not exposed to literature that fit with my life experiences. Fortunately, I can thank a few role models who were able to help me find affirmation.

An assumption of the NAS is that inferior works would be