

# Look at the NAS and Its Critics New Perspectives on the Block

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At the request of *The Guilfordian*, I am going to share some additional thoughts about the National Association of Scholars (NAS). Some readers will recall the statement about this organization that I placed in *The Guilfordian* last spring. They may also recall the student response. The response was a concerted effort, organized and orchestrated by one or more professors. It revealed more about the writers and the climate at Guilford than it did about the NAS or the issues about bias in the curriculum raised by the statement.

NAS is a relatively new organization based in Princeton, New Jersey. It has about 1500 members in approximately 25 state chapters as well as individual members in most other states. It publishes a respectable professional journal, *Academic Questions*, sponsors a Speakers Bureau and engages in the usual activities of professional associations of this sort. It is not a partisan group. Its members include liberals, conservatives, blacks, whites, Hispanics, men, women, professors both great and small and representatives from most academic disciplines. Members from outside the learned professions also play important parts in its affairs.

Its formation and expansion across the country reflects a conviction that "those who do not organize are lost." Our colleges and universities are now rife with politics. They are increasingly under the control of what is coming to be known as "tenured radicals." These are the activists

many, have urged that members of this organization be barred from serving on key decision-making committees. And, they have hurled the usual charges of sexism and racism at those who differ with them. It is instructive to note that the group of faculty who offended them includes 19 endowed professors, along with 28 others.

This is, of course, quite ridiculous. Why the screams of anguish when NAS appears on the scene? Why this fear of a small group of rather quiet professors who are simply asking for freedom of speech and reasoned discourse in the academy? What explains the planning, the organizing and the insulting litany? It is all quite simple. The politics of the street has found a comfortable home in American high education. And political tactics have proved successful in intimidating professors and administrators alike. More importantly, the radicals have gained control of the terms of all discussion on these matters. They control the rules of engagement. Just listen to the terms: racism, sexism, homophobia, multiculturalism, diversity, sensitivity, gender and empowerment, to name only a few.

The upshot of the whole matter is that colleges and universities are now expected to be instruments of social justice, not

## HEAD TO HEAD

*The increased profile of the National Association of Scholars has raised questions at some institutions about what should be included in the curriculum. Here we present two views about the merits of a traditional versus a more progressive canon.*

Carol Stoneburner

One hundred and twenty-five years ago there was no discipline of psychology. Were there any personalities? any unconscious behavior? any emotional tangles before psychology?

One hundred years ago there was no political science and no sociology. Were there no state uses of power or ruling bodies before political science; or no human groups and social classes before sociology? Or even more recently, were there no cultural mores or tribal behaviors before anthropology?

The answers are obvious. Of course these phenomena were happening. The perspectives to see them had not focused. The words to describe came less clearly and less systematically from older disciplines or ways of seeing and knowing.

So the second question can be posed. Did these new perspectives, new kids on the academic block, have to struggle to get into the games, to find out the secret rules, to learn to play games designed to capitalize and maximize different skills than they had? Did they then gang together and declare they weren't going to play by the old rules or decide to play different games altogether? The answer again is obvious. They had to do all these things, and the nature of the block changed—most people actually thought for the better. A few have never been sure of that.

During this century some very important new academic rules within existing disciplines have come into being. Just a few of them are the acceptance of the autobiographical, personal voice as a valid perspective, social history which lets lots of different voices become part of the interpretation of the past, and the entrance of scholars from diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds into higher education thereby adding to the growth of knowledge. They have brought new perspectives and new energies to ask questions and to create critical stances about the older ways of knowing.

Outside the academy and now even in the academy, several major social movements—the civil rights/black power; the second phase of the women's movement/feminism; the peace movement; the environmental movement; internationalism; and cultural and ethnic pride in numerous forms has been established. To parallel our structure—we should ask, did Afro-Americans, women, cooperative modes, the ecosphere, third world nations/people

exist before? Obviously they all existed. But it is a bit different to have been intentionally ignored by whole groups of kids who already lived on the block. It has been more wounding to not be seen. Thus the study of such groups is full of pain and danger as well as the excitement of discovery.

So during the lifetime of most Guilford students (20+ years) new kinds of studies have emerged—the study of women, Afro-American studies, studies of the environment, of ethnic groups, of peaceful and cooperative forms of power, of comparative cultures. All of these studies are at least partially interdisciplinary—that is, creating knowledge based on mixing the rules, changing the game or creating new rules to have a different game than the old one. All of this, plus much more, has gone

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on at Guilford as well as in the larger academic world.

Yet another question—is this metaphor of new kids on the block an apt and useful frame for looking at Guilford? Here the answer is mixed. It is useful to remind ourselves that the intellectual world is always in motion, not static, not so established that revolutions of knowledge cannot and do not occur. In fact, we should prize the new perspectives even as we honor and reform the older perspectives. And it helps to remember that disciplines, somewhat like children, become adolescent and move into more maturity as they develop. Each stage has some characteristic growth pains and perhaps may be better understood in that light. At Guilford, Interdisciplinary Studies are about 21 years old, Women's Studies about 17, Afro-American Studies about 10, Peace and Conflict Studies nearer eight, etc.

On the other hand, the metaphor has two

NAS does not object to the study of non-Western institutions and cultures... it defends the centrality and importance of the Western intellectual tradition, especially free speech, the right of dissent and the use of reasoned discourse rather than political harangues when important educational decisions are being made.

of the 1960s who have taken refuge in educational institutions, and now continue their demands for change in classrooms and committee meetings. And, the sad thing is that they continue to hold in disdain all views with which they disagree.

Essentially, they argue that American higher education is and always has been political, that it is Eurocentric and therefore, by definition, racist, sexist and homophobic. Western culture includes few if any values that should be passed down to students. And, there is no common culture that young Americans need learn. Any professor or critic who takes exception to their views is, well, "sick," to quote a local phrase. Opponents of NAS at Duke University, to cite just one example among

hallowed halls of scholarship and learning. Classrooms must become political forums, students must be guinea pigs and the curriculum must be an instrument for social change.

The greatest danger lies in reforming the curriculum. Once the study of Western intellectual traditions, which only a political activist could argue are racist, sexist and homophobic, is removed from the curriculum it cannot be restored in this generation. What will follow will be fraud parading as education. Multiculturalism is the flag under which these efforts are concealed. This term has a nice, harmless ring and very few professors object to it.

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