

The Moral Deficiencies of a Liberal Education

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We have failed.

When a coalition of 34 student organizations at Harvard can say that they “hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence” and students at other elite universities blame Israel alone for the attack Hamas carried out on Israelis on Oct. 7 or even praise the massacre, something is deeply wrong at America’s colleges and universities.

Students spouting ideological catchphrases have revealed their moral obliviousness and the deficiency of their educations. But the deeper problem is not them. It is what they are being taught — or, more specifically, what they are not being taught.

Certainly, not all students wear these moral blinders. But the fact that many students do, and that they are at some of the nation’s leading colleges and universities, should be a cause for profound concern across higher education.

Those of us who are university leaders and faculty are at fault. We may graduate our students, confer degrees that certify their qualifications as the best and brightest. But we have clearly failed to educate them. We have failed to give them the ethical foundation and moral compass to recognize the basics of humanity.

The Hamas massacre is the easiest of moral cases. The attackers intentionally targeted and killed over 1,000 civilians. They killed babies and children, people attending a concert, and people from Thailand, Nepal and more than a dozen countries who could hardly be responsible for the decades of Israeli-Palestinian violence, as if that could be any justification. And then these same gunmen took civilian hostages, with the explicitly articulated intention to use them as deterrence and, if that failed, to execute them.

This case offers an unambiguous base to elucidate clear, shared moral principles. It’s what the ethicist John Rawls calls reflective equilibrium. The clarity of this easy example helps identify principles that allow us to wrestle through harder cases like how much an army is required to do to reduce and avoid collateral civilian deaths.

Ethics are rarely either/or. It is possible to condemn the barbarism of Hamas *and* condemn the endless Israeli occupation of the West Bank. So, too, is it possible to condemn the treatment of women and the L.G.B.T.Q. community in Arab lands and the attempt by right-wing Israeli politicians to neuter Israel’s Supreme Court. But without the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and to recognize the fallacies of moral equivalence, students won’t be able to marshal the nuanced reasoning and a careful assessment of responsibility required in times like these.

We in the academy need to look more deeply at how it is possible that so many undergraduates, graduate students, law students and faculty at our nation’s finest colleges and universities could have such moral blinders.

We need to ask ourselves: What is in our curriculums? What do we think it means to be well educated? What moral stands are we taking? The timidity of many university leaders in condemning the Hamas massacre and antisemitism more generally offers the wrong example. Leaders need to lead.

As a bioethicist, I support requiring students to take ethics classes. Some universities — mainly Catholic institutions, including Georgetown — still do. Having a two-course ethics requirement — one about general ethics and one about some specific area, such as military ethics, environmental and bioethics, ethics of technology, ethics of the market or political ethics — would be invaluable.

But ethics classes alone are insufficient to help students develop a clear moral compass so that they can rise above ideological catchphrases and wrestle intelligently with moral dilemmas.

Instead, colleges and universities need to be more self-critical and rethink what it means for students to be educated. For the last 50 years, with a few exceptions, higher education has been reducing requirements. At the same time, academia has become more hesitant: We often avoid challenging our students, avoid putting hard questions to them, avoid forcing them to articulate and justify their opinions. All opinions are equally valid, we argue. We are fearful of offending them.

This flies in the face of what a “liberal education” should be. Liberal education should be built around honing critical thinking skills and moral and logical reasoning so students can emerge as engaged citizens. The American Association of Colleges and Universities has described a liberal education as one that “empowers individuals with core knowledge and transferable skills and cultivates social responsibility and a strong sense of ethics and values.” This certainly is not the full vision, but even with this definition, it is very hard to recognize that what we are now offering as a college education meets even this standard.

There are many ways to construct a curriculum so we can certify graduates as “educated.” Starting in 1947, as a new era dawned after what it identified as “social upheaval and the disasters of war,” M.I.T. undertook a review of its curriculum, re-examined the almost 90-year-old principles that had guided its approach and imposed changes that emphasized the importance of the humanities and social sciences. The review committee saw among M.I.T.’s missions the preparation of each student “for the moral and ethical burden relating not only to his own acts but to the acts of which he is a part” and the “cultivation of the spirit of free inquiry and rejection of interdiction and prejudice.”

All universities need to echo that today.

Creating a curriculum must be a collective effort that engages all members of our colleges and universities. College presidents and professors should stop focusing on endowments and fund-raising, tuitions and the earnings of our graduates. We must focus on the core mission: figuring out what it means to graduate educated people. In turn, this requires us to articulate and justify what we think education is so that we never again have our students make patently uneducated and alarmingly immoral declarations.

When you enter into Harvard Yard through the Dexter Gate, an inscription says, “Enter to grow in wisdom.” On the way out, the lettering reads, “Depart to serve better thy country and thy kind.” Princeton’s informal motto is “in the nation’s service and the service of humanity.” Unless we provide a liberal education with strong moral and ethical foundations as the center of our work, students will never grow in wisdom, to the detriment of our country and humanity.

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