

The Scandal at UVA

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 26, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I am angry at myself for missing the scandal at the University of Virginia. In Connecticut for two weeks, excuse me, for a fortnight, to visit my Dad, I did not check in regularly with the Washington Post online, and I abstained from any of the cable news programs I normally watch. Sadly, the UVA scandal did not break through in Connecticut's local papers. That makes me angry too. This is a national story with very important issues and its resolution will likely point higher education down one of two paths, only one of which is worthy and respectable.

Earlier this month, UVA's Rector, Helen Dragas, a real estate developer, construction company mogul, and head of the school's Board of Visitors, led an effort to fire Teresa Sullivan, the president of UVA who has been at her post for less than two years. Apparently, Sullivan was not moving fast enough to reform the university in ways Dragas wanted, especially in regard to trimming or eliminating programs at the university that were draining resources and not contributing to the bottom line. Dragas noted the university's programs in German and Classics as targets for cutbacks. The subsequent outpouring of support for Sullivan has been broad and comprehensive within the UVA community. The Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Robert McDonnell, threatened to replace the entire Board of Visitors if they do not resolve the crisis at their meeting today.

McDonnell should replace the Board of Visitors anyway. [As columnist Tom Rosshirt recently wrote](#) [1]: "This is a stirring morality play. But the drama of Dragas' effort to fire the president obscures the deeper and more serious concerns that surround the story - the confused set of values in our society that put Dragas where she never belonged: in a position of power over a major public research university and a cherished American institution." Dragas is there, of course, because she is rich. Most boards of most universities now consist of rich people. In a democracy, this is worrying on its face. In a culture that celebrates equality, it is more than worrisome. Most of all, however, it makes me very, very angry.

Must everything be for sale?

Must every university, like both political parties, and most civic boards, and just about everything else in America today be governed by rich, stupid people?

A university must be incorporated under state law, but must universities be treated like, and understood in terms of, for-profit corporations?

As James Caesar, a professor at UVA, wrote in [Sunday's WaPo Outlook section](#): [2] "There are financial bottom lines, and then there are academic ones." Indeed.

The Post also noted that some scholars have argued that cutting back on some programs that seem unprofitable may backfire. They call attention to sudden need for Arabic speakers and scholars of Islam and Arab culture in the wake of 9/11. They have a point but I resist this sort of utilitarian thinking too. It is worthwhile learning about Islam and Islamic culture, about different languages and national histories, because learning is worthwhile per se. It is its own justification. We don't need 9/11 to justify such studies.

It is easy to invoke Thomas Jefferson at UVA. For starters, its inmates refer to the place as "Mr. Jefferson's University." He designed the buildings that surround the Lawn at the heart of the campus, the magnificent Rotunda, the two rows of classical pavilions that line the Lawn, the wonderful serpentine brick walls that surround the whole. From his home, Monticello, Jefferson could see the campus as it was being built in the early nineteenth century. The man and his mystique pervade the place.

So, it seems a bit strange, does it not, that these titans of commerce on the Board of Visitors did not bestir themselves to ask such an elemental question as this: Can one imagine Jefferson, can one understand the man's contributions to the nation's political founding, can one appreciate the architecture of the buildings at UVA in which Ms. Dragas was sitting as she hatched her plot, or of Monticello above, can one imagine any of that if Mr. Jefferson had not studied the classics? All of the most influential founders were deeply read in the classics. We need more education in the classics, not less. Surely one of the reasons our current crop of politicians seem like so many pygmies compared to Jefferson, Adams and Franklin is that, unlike these titans, one has difficulty imagining Mr. Obama or Mr. Romney, still less Mr. Boehner or Ms. Pelosi, bending over a candlelit desk, reading Tacitus or Sully or even Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*? C'mon, you remember it? *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres.*

The scandal at the University of Virginia should not be allowed to die. No matter what happens to Ms. Sullivan's presidency - she is not only the first woman president of UVA but the first Catholic president too? I hope she will become a champion of the liberal arts. I hope she will push back against these nouveau riche overlords not only at UVA but at all universities. Many scholars, most notably Peter Berkowitz of Stanford's Hoover Institution, have raised deep and troubling questions about the inability of the modern research university to prepare its students in those elementary skills needed to make them good citizens. Just because the job market wants engineers, doesn't mean an engineer who knows nothing of ancient Greece or Rome is worthy of a degree or capable of participating meaningfully and intelligently in democracy. I recall a conversation with a friend who went to a top flight university, but one with no core requirements. My friend was able to graduate without ever reading a book published before 1800. In what meaningful sense of the word is such a person educated?

This scandal is an issue for the Church too. I am tired, actually beyond tired, of those conservatives who mimic the Holy Father's warnings about the secularization of culture but conveniently ignore the way their own idolatry of the market furthers this secularization. Parents must work second jobs to make ends meet, and have less time to spend with their children. Unions, an essential expression of both solidarity and subsidiarity at the heart of Catholic social teaching, have been constrained or worse by right-to-work laws and union-busting tactics. Our Catholic colleges and universities, too, feel the financial pinch and might be tempted to turn over their boards to those whose pockets are deeper than their intellects. Now, as evidenced by Ms. Dragas, the plutocrats do not only want to contribute, they want to control higher education. Need it be pointed out that here in America, and at UVA of all places, in the education of our children, the future of our democracy should trump the market needs of the corporate class in deciding what is and is not taught?

Basta. Enough. Eat the rich or don't eat the rich, but I hope the Governor of Virginia, inspired by his predecessor, will tell the plutocrats to keep their money-grubbing hands off of Mr. Jefferson's university and that this over-reach of utility will get smacked down in Charlottesville and elsewhere. More classics, not less. More liberal arts, not less. The purpose of a university is to educate, not to serve as a training school for corporate America. Money is not everything. Mr. Jefferson, after all, died deeply in debt, but he also died with a nation deeply in debt to him. His education in the classics? and everything else? did not make him rich but it made the rest of us rich, rich in wisdom, rich in beauty, rich in learning. Shame on UVA and other U.S. colleges if they turn their backs on such true riches.

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