

Why We Built the Ivory Tower

By STANLEY FISH (NYT) Op-Ed 1143 words
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Stanley Fish will step down next month as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

After nearly five decades in academia, and five and a half years as a dean at a public university, I exit with a three-part piece of wisdom for those who work in higher education: do your job; don't try to do someone else's job, as you are unlikely to be qualified; and don't let anyone else do your job. In other words, don't confuse your academic obligations with the obligation to save the world; that's not your job as an academic; and don't surrender your academic obligations to the agenda of any non-academic constituency -- parents, legislators, trustees or donors. In short, don't cross the boundary between academic work and partisan advocacy, whether the advocacy is yours or someone else's.

Marx famously said that our job is not to interpret the world, but to change it. In the academy, however, it is exactly the reverse: our job is not to change the world, but to interpret it. While academic labors might in some instances play a role in real-world politics -- if, say, the Supreme Court cites your book on the way to a decision -- it should not be the design or aim of academics to play that role.

While academics in general will agree that a university should not dance to the tune of external constituencies, they will most likely resist the injunction to police the boundary between academic work and political work. They will resist because they simply don't believe in the boundary -- they believe that all activities are inherently political, and an injunction to avoid politics is meaningless and futile.

Now there is some truth to that, but it is not a truth that goes very far. And it certainly doesn't go where those who proclaim it would want it to go. It is true that no form of work -- including even the work of, say, natural science -- stands apart from the political, social and economic concerns that underlie the structures and practices of a society. This does not mean, however, that there is no difference between academic labors and partisan labors, or that there is no difference between, for example, analyzing the history of welfare reform -- a history that would necessarily include opinions pro and con -- and urging students to go out and work for welfare reform or for its reversal.

Analyzing welfare reform in an academic context is a political action in the sense that any conclusion a scholar might reach will be one another scholar might dispute. (That, after all, is what political means: subject to dispute.) But such a dispute between scholars will not be political in the everyday sense of the word, because each side will represent different academic approaches, not different partisan agendas.

My point is not that academics should refrain from being political in an absolute

sense -- that is impossible -- but that they should engage in politics appropriate to the enterprise they signed onto. And that means arguing about (and voting on) things like curriculum, department leadership, the direction of research, the content and manner of teaching, establishing standards -- everything that is relevant to the responsibilities we take on when we accept a paycheck. These responsibilities include meeting classes, keeping up in the discipline, assigning and correcting papers, opening up new areas of scholarship, and so on.

This is a long list, but there are many in academia who would add to it the larger (or so they would say) tasks of "forming character" and "fashioning citizens." A few years ago, the presidents of nearly 500 universities issued a declaration on the "Civic Responsibility of Higher Education." It called for colleges and universities to take responsibility for helping students "realize the values and skills of our democratic society."

Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard and one of the forces behind the declaration, has urged his colleagues to "consider civic responsibility as an explicit and important aim of college education." In January, some 1,300 administrators met in Washington under the auspices of the Association of American Colleges and Universities to take up this topic: "What practices provide students with the knowledge and commitments to be socially responsible citizens?" That's not a bad question, but the answers to it should not be the content of a college or university course.

No doubt, the practices of responsible citizenship and moral behavior should be encouraged in our young adults -- but it's not the business of the university to do so, except when the morality in question is the morality that penalizes cheating, plagiarizing and shoddy teaching, and the desired citizenship is defined not by the demands of democracy, but by the demands of the academy.

This is so not because these practices are political, but because they are the political tasks that belong properly to other institutions. Universities could engage in moral and civic education only by deciding in advance which of the competing views of morality and citizenship is the right one, and then devoting academic resources and energy to the task of realizing it. But that task would deform (by replacing) the true task of academic work: the search for truth and the dissemination of it through teaching.

The idea that universities should be in the business of forming character and fashioning citizens is often supported by the claim that academic work should not be hermetically sealed or kept separate from the realm of values. But the search for truth is its own value, and fidelity to it mandates the accompanying values of responsibility in pedagogy and scholarship.

Performing academic work responsibly and at the highest level is a job big enough for any scholar and for any institution. And, as I look around, it does not seem to me that we academics do that job so well that we can now take it upon ourselves to do everyone else's job too. We should look to the practices in our own shop, narrowly conceived, before we set out to alter the entire world by forming moral

character, or fashioning democratic citizens, or combating globalization, or embracing globalization, or anything else.

One would like to think that even the exaggerated sense of virtue that is so much a part of the academic mentality has its limits. If we aim low and stick to the tasks we are paid to perform, we might actually get something done.