



## Enabling Inaction

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When anthropologist Rayyar Marron tried to share her findings from a year of field study in the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in the late 2000s, she found—no surprise to *AQ* readers—that among contemporary scholars, “ideological commitments trump evidence.” She had seen with her own eyes that many Palestinians were engaging in racketeering and rent-seeking—demanding bribes and carving out areas of control—in order to profit from the enormous amount of UN-funded humanitarian aid that flows into the camps for projects designed to improve the lives of the people. No one bothered to engage with her data, but just accused her of—again no surprise—blaming the victim. If Marron is wrong about her findings, surely she should be vigorously challenged.

“The experience reminded me of the consistent warnings I got as an undergraduate student that when I was older and working in the field,” she recalls, “it was my duty as a responsible social scientist to self-censor any unpalatable data that would reflect badly on the community I was studying because it could disadvantage them politically.” Now, she realized, she “was entering a discipline of taboos and navel-gazing literature that was useless in informing policies.” This scholarly “regime of conformity eats away at the very purpose of social science at university for generating new knowledge about our societies that can inform sound policies and allow us to take action to ameliorate problems.”

Ideological scholarship meets real life problems and guarantees nothing useful will be done, making an entire discipline close to worthless—lead-in to our special feature for this issue, “Incapacity: Enfeebling Higher Education.”

Even well-meaning prescriptions from well-meaning scholars for specific changes and hopeful progress in higher education can wind up enfeebling the whole academy. It can be painful nowadays to read eminent sociologist Nathan Glazer's arguments for affirmative action (especially since they appeared in *Academic Questions*). Glazer endorsed racial preferences in one specific instance, for blacks in admission to selective colleges and graduate schools, "because I think the radical reduction of blacks in selective institutions of higher education would be a terrible blow to their prospects in American society, and because it would reduce sharply the degree to which they can participate at the highest levels in our society."

One isn't sure which unintended (and discouraging) insult is the worst, to blacks who are theoretically unable to succeed without going to selective schools, to the many young people who have not gone to selective colleges or to any college at all, or to America herself, for closing off the "highest levels of society" to so many citizens.

Glazer considered the objections but dismissed them in a way that can make us cringe today. He acknowledged that "the dropout rates of blacks from the selective institutions is two or three times the dropout rates for nonblack students," but the majority do graduate, he insisted. Of course, "They may not do as well in their tests for admission to medical school and business school, but affirmative action in these institutions keeps their numbers up."

Unlike other proponents of affirmative action who pretend to know otherwise, Glazer acknowledged "that academic tests do predict academic performance," and that blacks with their lower average scores on the relevant qualifying tests for law and medicine "may do worse academically." Still, he insisted, "blacks do emerge from these professional schools and do become professionals, with the income, influence, and prestige of professionals."

Forgive me, but is this starting to sound like the scarecrow getting his diploma in *The Wizard of Oz*?

Glazer didn't deny that there would be observable differences in career achievement later on as he sketches out his plans. "One can probably see some effects of the original weakness in academic performance all the way through their careers. One would expect that fewer of the doctors would go into research, more into family practice and administration, fewer of the lawyers would go into corporate law and more into defense practice and government, and one would expect to see other variations in career—as we have seen for all ethnic and racial groups, whose members may concentrate more in one niche than another."

Glazer implies throughout the piece that blacks are different, that they can't be left to find their own "niches" as the white ethnics have done. Moreover, it

doesn't occur to him that these observable differences might begin to rankle as signs of ongoing discrimination and inequality even within the dispensation of affirmative action. (See Heather Mac Donald, "The Partner Chase," *City Journal*, Spring 2019). As with the legendary journey of "Charlie" on Boston's MTA, there are some trains that never seem to stop.

Nevertheless: "It is clear most blacks are willing to accept whatever disadvantages for them they see in affirmative action—the stigma on their achievements, for example—for the advantages of a larger number attaining professional and higher paying positions," Glazer confidently asserts on behalf of blacks, while also dismissing measures like improving the public schools and encouraging young blacks to work harder.

"[H]ow long will it take for the schools to improve," he asks, "or for black students to get the message they must work harder? We have been trying to improve our schools for twenty years, and while there has been some progress, it has not been of the order of magnitude necessary to increase substantially the number of black students who qualify for admission to selective institutions on the basis of test scores and other measures of educational achievement." Glazer doesn't stop to consider the nature and quality of these efforts, however, or what might be hampering their chances for success. "We are still struggling with school reform," he continues, "and no one can give any guarantee that the gap between black achievement and that of whites and Asians will be so sharply reduced in five, ten, or twenty years, that much greater numbers of black students will qualify on the basis of educational achievement."

Glazer spoke these words in 1998, and, sure enough, twenty years later, we are not seeing much improvement along these lines generally in the public schools, although some charter schools are definitely showing progress. But could that be partly the result of affirmative action confounding the need for hard work and real reform? With friends like these you don't need enemies, the saying goes. Or, as Jason Riley has written, "please stop helping us."

You can almost feel the enfeebling in Glazer's own attempts to rationalize. "I would like to retain this autonomy for the educational institutions [to enact racial preferences], and am willing to tolerate a period in which they, or some of them, do this badly, with the hope that in time, and with the involvement of faculty and administrators making the best decisions for their institution and the nation, they will do it well."

Glazer passed on in January at the ripe old age of ninety-five and did not get to read NAS's report, "Neo-segregation at Yale," or hear Peter Wood and Dion J. Pierre discuss it in NAS's Curriculum Vitae Podcast #26 (or for that matter, Martin Burke describe the decline of the City University of New York as the

result of another well-meaning academic reform, Open Enrollment, in Podcast #33).

What light do our special feature articles cast on how well the academy has been doing since Glazer wrote?

In the first entry, “Fragmenting the Curriculum,” Daniel Bonevac notes how “gerrymandered requirements, narrow course offerings, and a lack of prerequisites” have combined to deny students “education as broad or as deep as was common a generation ago. They experience little more than a series of disconnected vignettes.” What a contrast with the relatively recent past, Bonevac points out, when survey courses provided a foundation for more advanced study of a discipline, or when programs such as those in Western Civilization drew on several fields to deliver a comprehensive education. Craig Evan Klafter highlights a problem that had seemed to go quiet in light of other campus urgencies (such as mob violence and the f-word hurled at professors). In “Good Grieve! America’s Grade Inflation Culture,” he notes the evil fruits of grade inflation (among them, it “penalizes truly exceptional students,” “disincentivizes hard work,” “permits those students who should not have been admitted in the first place to graduate”), and recommends revising appeals policies, in which students can petition to have their grades reconsidered.

Karen Swallow Prior’s new book, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*, has been garnering appreciative attention. In “Why We Need to Read,” she discusses the decline in reading skills and emphasizes that “the more deficient reading skills become, the less success in other subjects.” Prior also picks up on something that Sandra Stotsky has emphasized, that reading *literature* is necessary for developing complex analytical and interpretive skills. (Stotsky’s new book, *Changing the Course of Failure: How Schools and Parents Can Help Low-Achieving Students*, along with the recent book of charter school entrepreneur Eva Moskowitz, *The Education of Eva Moskowitz: A Memoir*, are considered in this issue in James V. Shuls’s review essay, “A Dangerous Belief.” Longtime NAS member Stotsky responds to Shuls’s remarks about her book.) I almost broke into tears when I read that in one exercise, students in Common Core spend fifteen minutes doing a “close reading” of the pretty straightforward Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”) By the way, Prior insists that students read from actual books in her classes.

In “The Incompatibility of Sports and Higher Education,” new contributor Josh Edwards discusses recent scandals involving sports in academe, including the infamous “Operation Varsity Blues,” in which parents paid coaches to verify

a prospective student's (non-existent) athletic prowess in order to gain admission to selective universities. This particular tactic may have benefited female applicants especially, though not exclusively, since colleges seek female athletes in order to satisfy Title IX.

Contrary to the many who thought that what happens in the academy stays in the academy, J. Scott Kenney argues in "Western Civ, Inequality, and the Diversity Shell Game," that when the academy is enfeebled, so is society. The special feature closes with "Liberal Education and Its Postmodern Critics." Philosopher Stephen R.C. Hicks outlines premodern, modern, and postmodern pedagogy, and explains that the first and the last (the one so prevalent today), tend toward indoctrination, not education.

Regular articles include "The Children of Political Correctness," in which Howard S. Schwartz discusses the irony of students being threatened by ideas. Mohamed Gad-el-Hak surveys the honorable and centuries old history of higher education and contrasts it with recent developments in "Academic Malaise: Bring Back the Groves of Academe."

In an exercise in peer review that should have been done by the prestigious magazine *Science*, chemist Ted Held critically examines the findings of a study of microplastics and their effect on fish in "Culpable Negligence at *Science Magazine*." Also in the category of examining research evidence is "Political Disparities in the Academy: It's More than Self-Selection," a joint effort by John Paul Wright, Ryan T. Motz, and Timothy S. Nixon.

In reviews, David Randall praises *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* by *AQ* advisor Wilfred McClay, and Dan Asia, also an *AQ* advisor, mostly appreciates Arthur C. Brooks's *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*. For poetry, Bruce Bawer's "Wild, Wild Nights!" nods to Emily Dickinson, and Robert Maranto makes a witty poem out of "Numbers from an Academic Conference (APSA 2018)."

Our new "Short Takes" feature is proving fruitful. We have my thoughts on dramatizations of William Makepeace Thackeray's nineteenth century classic, *Vanity Fair* ("All's Fair in Love and War?"); Donald M. Hassler's musings on his family's experience with going to college ("Grove City College Plays Yale: Academic Values in the Trump Era"); and Milton Ezrati's defense of liberal arts ("A Business Person Questions the Dean's Business-Like Approach").

An especially detailed Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest comes from the pen, I mean keyboard, of Peter Wood.