

# Cover Letter for Dereliction of Duty

15 August 2022

*[T]his institution will be based  
on the illimitable freedom of the human mind.*

*For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead,  
nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.*

Such is the ambition that sustains an undergraduate college or university committed to promoting the liberal arts and that exhorts the institution faithfully to encourage in its faculty and to instill in students entrusted to its care.

However, many observers -- including Mr. Thomas Klingenstein, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Claremont Institute, whose challenging essay appears below - - believe American higher education now responds to a different drummer. It no longer advocates for the "illimitable freedom of the human mind" or asserts the power of "reason . . . left free" to search for truth in an open marketplace of ideas and opinions.

Mr. Klingenstein argues, among other things, that this evolving "educational" preference is one result of faculty alignment with and promotion of a fashionable, overarching Orthodoxy -- at the cost of intentionally failing to expose students to the estimable accumulated thought and wisdom, traditions, and values that instructed the Founders and their successors, and that long have been at the center of curricula at universities such as ours.

He maintains that, instead of informing or supplementing instruction in the humanities, the embrace of this Orthodoxy has dethroned such instruction, causing unacceptable consequences to institutions themselves and fostering purposeful discouragement of independent or unOrthodox thought among students and faculty.

To borrow from the quotation above (attributed to Thomas Jefferson more than two centuries ago), even though many institutions have demonstrated a high degree of tolerance for error, they might wish again to champion viewpoint diversity and freedom of inquiry as means to enliven civil discussion and to reaffirm, with high confidence, that Reason can guide us to the right places.

So, even if Mr. Klingenstein's arguments and recommendations would be unwelcome at a number of other institutions, they should be welcomed at Washington and Lee, as they are in this forum – **not because they are Revealed Truth, but exactly because their content and underlying concerns should be debated.**

Respectfully,  
Bill Noell '64A

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## DERELICTION OF DUTY

*I begin by offering the trustees of my alma mater, Williams College, a bit of advice...*

by Thomas D. Klingenstein

I begin by offering the trustees of my alma mater, Williams College, a bit of advice: establish a board-level standing committee on free expression (COFE for short). Provide COFE with the staff and independence of the college's outside audit firm. COFE's purpose, to ensure free expression, is analogous to that of the audit committee. Free expression is at least as important as financial soundness, and there is no reason to believe that the former requires any less oversight than does the latter. To an "Eph" who claims there is no free speech problem at Williams, I ask two, admittedly barbed, questions: How could you possibly know? Do you recommend that Williams disband the audit committee?

What prompts this bit of advice? It all began in 2010 on a golf course in Maine where I, a conservative philanthropist, had occasion to explain to Bowdoin president Barry Mills my objection to "diversity"; too much emphasis on ethnic and racial difference and too little on our common national identity, I told him.

About a month later, Mills, in his annual convocation address, called attention to a problem: Bowdoin, he said, is "in the main" liberal and would benefit from exposure to the views of conservatives (among others). He then gave what he rather implausibly represented to be a verbatim golf-course exchange with a

conservative alumnus of Williams College. This boorish “guy,” according to Mills’ inventive version, had interrupted his golf swing on two separate occasions in order to deliver up the opinion that he (that’s me, though unnamed) had no use for the “wrong students” on the Bowdoin campus, where “wrong students” was clearly a reference to minorities.

In a speech calling for Bowdoin to listen to conservatives, one would have expected to hear examples of conservatives worth listening to. Instead, his audience heard about a conservative (perhaps the archetype) who is, in effect, a racist. From this, and other retractions in the address, I concluded that Bowdoin is not after all much interested in the views of conservatives. (For a full account, see “A Golf Story,” *CRB*, Winter 2010/Spring 2011).

Bowdoin disagreed. Well, are Bowdoin and similar schools interested in the views of conservatives or are they not? That was one of the questions posed by a National Association of Scholars (NAS) report, “What Does Bowdoin Teach?” This 360-page, heavily footnoted study was published in April 2013. President Mills said time was too “precious” to respond to it.

In his Convocation Address Mills asked Bowdoin to allow conservatives to speak, and then moments later as good as told conservatives to shut up. Campus speech restrictions are nothing new, but they have reached new heights: we now have things called “micro-aggressions” which amount to telling people to shut up before they even open their mouths.

## **Multiculturalism**

So, what is to be done? To remedy endemic speech suppression on campus, it must be recognized that an important underlying cause is “multiculturalism” broadly defined, and that multiculturalism, not the liberal arts, is now the purpose of colleges like Bowdoin. And this is because the faculty—who, through hiring decisions, control a college’s purpose - have chosen multiculturalism over the liberal arts. Thus, if the trustees desire free speech, they must: first, decide to be a liberal arts college, and second, regain control of faculty hiring.

Oddly enough, for generations faculty have said to the trustees, exaggerating only slightly, “You raise and invest the money and, as regards the curriculum, we shall spend it as we like.” It shouldn’t be necessary to convince anyone that it is the trustees, not the faculty, who should rule. It says so in black and white. College charters give trustees plenary authority over the entire enterprise, not just a part of it. And this only makes sense, for if, as no one disputes, trustees are responsible for establishing the purpose of a college, and the curriculum is the means by which the purpose is implemented, then trustees must control the curriculum.

Nor do trustees have to be “experts” on education to oversee it. I sit on a board that oversees the granting of fellowships in neuroscience, a subject about which I am much less versed than is a trustee about education; yet I believe that my fellow lay board members and I, while not at all involved in awarding fellowships, have more influence than the scientists who are. Our influence comes from our role in establishing the purpose of the fellowships and the general selection criteria, and by monitoring implementation. We ask questions and feel free to look behind the curtains. That is all college trustees require:

common sense, good judgment, and the willingness to question management. They already have the indispensable quality of a trustee: detachment, which makes them much better suited than insiders to assess, among many other things, the state of free expression.

In the days before multiculturalism, Bowdoin (which I employ as a synecdoche for American higher education) had a very different purpose:

*[Bowdoin] aims always to give its students a knowledge of the culture of the Western world. They must understand and appreciate its origins and traditions, the forces essential for its operation and progress, and the values which it seeks to realize. [Bowdoin Course Catalogues from 1944 through 1965]*

More or less, this was once the definition of a liberal arts college. The liberal arts are “the arts of freedom,” which necessarily makes their focus the West.

Since Bowdoin’s current mission statement—almost 1,400 faceless words—makes no serious attempt at ordering objectives, I have taken the liberty of fashioning my own, more usable, version:

*The mission of the college is to prepare students to be global citizens in a global economy by teaching critical thinking and multiculturalism.*

The difference between the two missions is striking. In the multicultural mission, the goal is to teach global (not American) citizenship, and a skill and a concept (not a body of knowledge), and the mission sets its goals in the context of the economy (the mid-20th century mission did not).

For the sake of simplicity, I use the term “multiculturalism” broadly to include a number of concepts: a narrower definition of multiculturalism itself, diversity, social justice, and sustainability. It is not necessary for trustees to understand these terms, only to understand that multiculturalism denotes a world view, one fundamentally different from that of the liberal arts. Multiculturalism is not, as is often thought, subsumed under the liberal arts but is rather an alternative to them, one that concerns itself, not with universals, but particulars: not with human nature but with the nature of groups rooted in race, ethnicity, and gender; not with actual nations but with the “world.” The most important thing for trustees to understand is that multiculturalism is a political movement whose agenda is to liberate the presumptively exploited and victimized: the climate, the poor, the non-white, and so forth. And as with most political movements, multiculturalism prefers dissenters to shut up.

Gender studies is an example of multiculturalism at work. The liberal arts, particularly the humanities, begin their inquiries with certain assumptions about what is true. In the case of gender, the liberal arts assume that gender is somehow rooted in nature. But the liberal arts are not sure about what they claim to be true and so they listen to objections and are always alert to the possibility they are wrong. Hence the liberal arts’ study of gender (as with all else) begins with a question; in this case: what is gender?

Multiculturalism begins with its own assumptions, but these often take the form of assertions, which answer the questions the liberal arts pose. At Bowdoin, for example, Gender and Women’s Studies asserts (in the current Bowdoin course catalogue) that gender is “an institutionalized means of structuring inequality and

dominance.” This is not one point of view to be explored; it is the only point of view, and thus all courses on gender take this multicultural view as their starting point. Unlike the liberal arts, multiculturalism is certain that it knows the truth and therefore feels entitled to tell dissenters to shut up, which, in effect, is what Bowdoin’s Gender and Women’s Studies department does when it forecloses the possibility of the liberal arts understanding of gender.

The fight between the two approaches is not fair, particularly when one considers that multiculturalism has the official endorsement of Bowdoin. It is not surprising, therefore, that multiculturalism is gobbling up the liberal arts. Gender Studies and the other group-based Studies departments are virtually all multicultural, and their highly politicized pedagogy is seeping (gushing in many cases) into the non-Studies departments, in particular the humanities, the core of the liberal arts. Indeed, in some departments at Bowdoin, the multicultural dragon has nearly finished its meal—in Literature, for example.

### **Speech Suppression**

How might Bowdoin trustees confirm these claims? For starters, they might inquire of conservative professors. One such professor, while criticizing the NAS study for being one-sided, opined that its main theme, the advance of multiculturalism, was “spot on.” Another conservative professor, according to his own account in Bowdoin’s student newspaper, was told by President Mills, in effect, to shut up after the professor had gently criticized Mills for derisively dismissing the NAS study and encouraging certain faculty members to do the same. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Mills was licensing these faculty members to shut up other dissenters. Have the trustees inquired?

Admittedly, talking to conservative professors will reveal only so much, if for no other reason than there are so few of them (at Bowdoin there are only two or three conservatives out of a faculty of about 200). But all is not lost. Occasionally, at an American college, there surfaces an incident of speech suppression that opens the campus door wide enough to get a clear view of multiculturalism and its campus-wide effect on free speech.

One such incident comes not from Bowdoin but from Scripps College in southern California, where George F. Will, the Pulitzer Prize-winning conservative commentator, wrote a column that got him disinvited from the campus. He had been about to be invited officially to be Scripps's only conservative speaker of the year, when his piece raising doubts about the putative "epidemic" of sexual assaults on American college campuses encountered profound disfavor. Here is how Scripps President Lori Bettison-Varga justified Will's disinvitation:

*We do not shy away from bringing strong conservative viewpoints into our community.*

*[But] sexual assault is not a conservative or liberal issue. And it is too important to be trivialized in a political debate or wrapped into a celebrity controversy. For that reason, after Mr. Will authored a column questioning the validity of a specific sexual assault case that reflects similar experiences reported by Scripps' students, we decided not to finalize the speaker agreement....*

*We will continue to welcome thoughtful, respected speakers representing diverse political perspectives to campus, and we look forward to the stimulating intellectual discourse that will occur as a result.*

The writing is foggy; still, it seems clear enough that Bettison-Varga is saying that sexual assault is not a proper subject for political debate. We are left to wonder how she knows this and how, if at all, the subject of sexual assault can be contested. Bettison-Varga elaborates slightly as she goes on to explain that Will was disinvited because he “trivialized” sexual assault. Her evidence? Will defined sexual assault more narrowly than does Scripps. While she does not express her reasons in the form of a standard, one can be inferred: outside speakers who make light of important subjects will not be allowed to speak at Scripps. I hardly need to point out that a “standard”, so elastic is no standard at all. Moreover, is it not possible that Scripps, in defining sexual assault “down,” is the one that has trivialized sexual assault? That appears to be a possibility that Bettison-Varga, in the haste of certainty, fails to consider.

We know from information elsewhere that Bettison-Varga believes that because Will “trivialized” sexual assault (her view) his presence on campus would create an unsafe psychological environment for some students. We now have another way to express a standard for a free speech exception at Scripps: that speech is forbidden which creates an unsafe psychological environment for some students. Of course, that is no more a standard than the first one. Bettison-Varga ends by saying that Scripps welcomes “thoughtful, respected” speakers and in so saying lets slip that she has this free expression thing rather backwards: the primary purpose of free expression, as she should know, is to protect not the thoughtful and respected, but speakers deemed *not* thoughtful and respected, like, say, Socrates.

The Scripps community almost certainly shares its president's backward notion of free expression. We know this because the decision to disinvite Will was widely and enthusiastically hailed. There was not a single dissenting voice so far as I can tell. A student editorial provides color: "It is not because conservative George Will spoke about sexual assault that he will no longer be brought to campus, but rather because his ideas do not align with the values that Scripps holds."

### **Free Expression**

The president's letter, the student editorial, and the community's unanimous public endorsement of both, together indict the entire college. The community's misunderstanding of free expression (the editorialist apparently having forgotten the concept altogether) and the thoughtless, cavalier disregard of its requirements simply cannot occur, even once, in a climate of free expression. Scripps's trustees likely will strain to resist this conclusion but what is the alternative? That the two women misspoke? That many people silently dissented from Scripps's ban on Will? That in all subjects except sexual assault, free speech is alive and well? These are all highly implausible.

Just how dramatically the commitment to free expression has weakened over the past 40 years is revealed by a 1974 incident at Yale, where students shouted down William Shockley, a physicist turned amateur geneticist, who advocated, among other things, the sterilization of blacks. As a result of this restriction on speech, the college developed a written policy, which required that *all* speakers be given a respectful hearing regardless of whose feelings might be hurt.

Yale understood that in a liberal arts college - whose central and overriding purpose is the search for, and transmission of, the truth—free speech cannot be balanced against other interests. Scripps, on the other hand, is a multicultural college in the search of not one, but many (group-based) truths, each with its own epistemology and culture. In this context, it may well be reasonable to balance the right of free speech of one group (say, conservatives) against the rights and interests of others (some women). Here again we come face to face with the multicultural dragon and its need, nay its requirement, to suppress speech.

Perhaps its trustees wish Scripps to be a multicultural college. If so, they are obligated to announce so publicly, an obligation that comes from the very nature of their enterprise: the education of the next generation of citizens. If Scripps is teaching the suppression of speech and argument then the rest of us are entitled to know, for the rest of us are entitled to know with whom we share the fox hole.

Multiculturalism is so sure of itself that often it goes beyond “shut up,” as President Mills did in 2012 when he asked Bowdoin students to vote in favor of same-sex marriage. In the *Bowdoin Orient* he wrote:

*I set forth my views as a private citizen and a resident of Brunswick, Maine....*

*The conflict over these rights has divided our Maine communities for too long and has denied basic civil rights and freedoms to many of our fellow citizens. I understand and respect those troubled by my position on this issue, especially because many who oppose Question 1 are guided, in good faith, by their religious beliefs or their more traditional views of family. But while we are a nation grounded in the right of all people to practice their religion without the fear of*

*interference or reprisal, we are also a nation with a state of laws that recognizes and protects basic human and civil rights, regardless of religious, spiritual, and personal doctrine.*

*I am honored to lead an institution that is nearly as old as our nation itself—a college devoted unambiguously to providing opportunity to those willing to work hard whatever their means, background, or personal beliefs.... [A]s we go to the polls on November 6, I hope you will join me in affirming American and Maine values of fairness and equality by voting “yes” on Question 1 [i.e., in favor of same-sex marriage].*

Mills begins with the entirely implausible claim that he is writing as a private citizen—implausible because he wrote to students in the school newspaper, identified himself as the president of Bowdoin, and invoked Bowdoin values. He acknowledges, while violating, his duty to uphold the rules of free argument and debate.

By so doing, he brings down the weight of the college’s prestige upon those (extremely few) who disagreed with him. When the referee takes sides, he corrupts the game. Mills’ role is to encourage students to question orthodox assumptions such as: same-sex marriage is a civil or human right; or objections to same-sex marriage cannot be based on reason. Instead, however, of questioning such assumptions, Mills piles on. There were hosannas aplenty to his statement, including praise for his courage, but not a single public objection. Few dissent from campus orthodoxy, and those few—quite understandably—keep their mouths shut. I ask trustees to imagine the fury had Mills asked students to vote against same-sex marriage. There is only one explanation that fits both the

reaction to the actual event and the imagined (but still nearly certain) reaction to the hypothetical event: people are afraid to speak out. As with Scripps's disinvitation of Will, an incident of the Bowdoin sort simply cannot occur in a climate of free expression.

Although no one seemed to notice Mills' intervention into a political matter, everyone noticed when in 2011 racial epithets were scrawled on a black student's dormitory door. There were a number of protests including one at which some 200 students, their mouths taped shut, one by one peeled off the tape (apparently to signify that they were reclaiming their voices) and defiantly shouted declarations of personal identity and solidarity. "I am a Muslim woman, and I am Bowdoin." "I have two passports and I am Bowdoin." "I am a feminist, and I am Bowdoin," and so forth. Mills attended the protest and said he was "moved beyond tears." Surely no one condones racial epithets, but Bowdoin's overblown response was sanctimonious agitprop produced by "courageous" protestors who were standing up to absolutely no one. This was not a protest but a party rally where believers were fortified, and dissenters intimidated. Someone at Bowdoin ought to tell his community that manufactured diversity encourages students to judge each other by the color of their skin, and that is racism. If that cannot be said publicly on the Bowdoin campus, then I ask the trustees, "why not?"

### **Classical Liberals**

I have hardly exhausted the subject of free expression. The Committees on Free Expression at Williams and Bowdoin and elsewhere can take over from here. I do, however, have one further suggestion, one designed to remedy what I imagine to be a frequent misunderstanding of the liberal arts. Trustees, like parents, tend

to see the “liberal arts,” and their promise to teach critical thinking, as an all-purpose job skill, which conduces trustees and parents to wonder how on earth Johnny will get a job if he studies something as impractical as say, political philosophy. Under this utilitarian standard, the humanities cannot defend themselves. And today’s colleges, the natural defenders of the liberal arts, have mostly left their post. Having embraced multiculturalism, they are unwilling and probably unable to mount any longer a full-throated defense of the liberal arts.

Although trustees may sell short the liberal arts, there are still many on the faculty who do not. It is these faculty members—I’ll call them “classical liberals”—who must remind trustees of the importance of the liberal arts and the conditions, such as free expression, necessary for their flourishing. They must explain that the liberal arts teach what it means to live responsibly in freedom, and at their best, how to live well and nobly.

While the trustees need the classical liberals, the reverse, I suspect, is also true. Classical liberals understand that mainlining multiculturalism into the curriculum poses a grave threat to the liberal arts. Yet for the most part they do not speak out. They need cover, and an engaged board of trustees can provide that. There is the chance that were trustees in control they would meddle in curricular matters properly left to the faculty. That indeed is a risk, but given multiculturalism’s threat to the liberal arts, one that classical liberals should be willing to run. Classical liberals and trustees may appear to be an odd couple but, then again, such a marriage could be just the thing that saves the liberal arts.

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