Conrad, Clifton F. and Duren, Katherine M. "Review Essay: On Culture, Canons, and the College Curriculum." Review of Higher Education (Fall, 1997), pp. 103-110.

The Review of Higher Education
Fall 1997, Volume 21, No. 1, pp. 103–110
 (ISSN 0162-5748)

REVIEW ESSAY

On Culture, Canons, and College Curriculum

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William Casement. *The Great Canon Controversy: The Battle of the Books in Higher Education.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996. xv, 172 pp.

Lawrence W. Levine. *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. xxiv, 212 pp.

Jerry G. Gaff, James L. Ratcliff, and Associates. *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Comprehensive Guide to Purposes, Structures, Practices, and Change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. xxxvi, 747 pp.

Fueled by debate both outside and within higher education has come an outpouring of writing on the aptly named "culture wars" in the last decade. For the most part, two opposing camps—each armed with enough military metaphors to satiate the William Tecumseh Shermans of our time—have entrenched themselves. In one camp, the "traditionalists" argue that the shared culture—the canon—of the West is being eroded and universities are led astray by professors who embrace relativism and multiculturalism, have undermined the concept of a common core, and have turned their backs on the "the good old Great Books approach" (Bloom 1987, 344). In the other camp are the "new voices" who view knowledge as contingent, call for ongoing revision of the canon, and support multiculturalism in the curriculum.

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BEYOND A LITERATURE OF CRISIS

That there has developed a "literature of crisis" (Levine, 32) surrounding the "culture wars" of the last decade is an understatement. The apocalyptic view of the university advanced by many traditionalists has received the most widespread attention in books such as Allen Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987), Martin Anderson's *Impostors in the Temple: American Intellectuals Are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our Students of Their Future* (1992), Richard Bernstein's *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (1994), and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990). There have been countless publications—such as John Arthur and Amy Shapiro's *Campus Wars: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference* (1995)—conjoining traditionalists' attacks and advancing alternative agendas.

Set against this literature of crisis, two new books stake out competing positions in the "culture wars." The first is William Casement's *The Great Canon Controversy,* and the second is Lawrence Levine's *The Opening of the American Mind. Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum,* a work edited by Jerry Gaff and James Ratcliff, addresses the "culture wars" but focuses on undergraduate curriculum design, evaluation, and change. In brief, these three volumes not only provide welcome contributions to the contemporary discourse on the culture and the canon but also help inform people committed to strengthening undergraduate education. Moreover, inasmuch as the limitations of these books mirror much of the literature, they can serve as a touchstone for reflecting on the writing on college and university curriculum and, in turn, on our efforts to enrich our knowledge and understanding in ways that contribute to student learning and development.

William Casement, a philosopher and founder of the Great Books program at St. Thomas University, provides a traditionalist perspective on the canon debate in higher education by examining the historic and contemporary claims for and against the canon and then advancing his own position. Intended as an overview, his book is divided into three parts. The first, a historical account of the canon as centerpiece of the curriculum in the West since ancient Greece, examines the primary justifications of the canon over time, looks at the key challenges to the canon, and discusses how the canon has been revised in response to major historical controversies.

The next part examines the contemporary anticanonist movement, especially its two major objections—epistemological and political—to the canon. The epistemological objection is that knowledge is neither "objective" nor universal; rather, it is contextual and relativistic. The political objection is that the canon incorporates the works of mostly white and male

European or American authors and, by extension, is a tool of political oppression used by the dominant culture to deny voices in texts outside the European American tradition. While Casement devotes a few pages to summarizing the anticanonist claims, he spends most of his energy critiquing the "contextualist epistemology" and political agenda of the anticanonists. In the final part of the book, Casement stakes out his position as a "reform" canonist who rejects the "extremes" of "strict canonism" and, in turn, argues that canonists should "re-review" the "demands" of the "anticanonists" for the inclusion of "marginalized" authors. But Casement is clearly devoted to the canon, and his commitment to unity (commonality) at the expense of pluralism (difference) is unmistakable—as he makes abundantly (albeit redundantly) clear in his conclusion:

> To add to canonical reading lists a few works that duplicate the ideas of Western books on those lists, or replace the Western books, makes sense in the interest of pointing students toward an examination of the human unity that holds across cultures. But unless or until the world is much closer than it is now to a single common culture, it seems prudent for students within Western culture to be exposed mainly to Western works. Perhaps at a future time circumstances will have changed, but for now a reading list drawn mainly from the traditional canon of Western culture is still appropriate, supplemented by readings from outside the tradition that offer thinking missing from the tradition, and, in a few cases, that duplicate the tradition's thinking such that readers are led to examine and appreciate human intellectual commonality. (p. 133)

In *The Opening of the American Mind,* historian Lawrence Levine takes up the gauntlet against the conservative attack on the university by suggesting that the best rebuttal to the catechisms of Allen Bloom and the conservatives is to look to the history of the university itself. In broad strokes, he argues that, far from being driven by leftist professors who peddle the shibboleths of relativism and multiculturalism in advancing their political agenda, contemporary multicultural shifts in the canon reflect the historic openness of our colleges and universities to fundamental cultural conflicts in society that lead to the inclusion of multiple cultural heritages. Universities should be celebrated, not diminished, for their openness.

Levine anchors his book in an opening salvo that seeks to rebut the traditionalists' critique of the university and defense of the canon and simultaneously to provide a rationale for his use of history to debunk the conservatives' ahistoricism, especially their invention of a mythic and stable past to justify a fixed canon.

The remainder of the book is divided into two parts. In the first part he examines the major debates over the curriculum and canon in the last 200 years—for example, the debates between Harvard's Charles Eliot and

Princeton's James McCosh in the 1880s over "diversity" and "uniformity" in the curriculum—and touches on how such curriculum battles both presaged contemporary curriculum conflicts and mirrored cultural conflicts in the larger society. In a similar vein, he examines how the two world wars affected the rise and decline of Western civilization curricula. In the second part he examines the historical underpinnings of the signature curriculum debates of the last two centuries by exploring the conflicts over what it means to be an "American" through, for example, tracing the role of immigrants in American society and how "their" cultures have interacted with and shaped the larger American one.

In *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum,* Jerry Gaff and James Ratcliff seek to "provide in a single volume an overview of the debates and reforms now swirling around the undergraduate curriculum" (p. xiii). To that end, the editors commissioned practitioners and experts throughout higher education to write the 34 chapters that comprise this compendium. The result is a kaleidoscope of topics, ideas, and perspectives that are organized into six major categories: historical, philosophical, and social perspectives; central aims of undergraduate education; academic disciplines and specialized learning; directions for reform across the disciplines; administration and assessment; and curriculum change.

Somewhat surprisingly, given its overarching purpose and breadth, few of the chapters in this book directly address the culture and canon debate—much less advance an impassioned view like those of a Casement or Levine—save through a few case examples of curriculum innovation. For the most part, then, the book does not focus on the content of the curriculum, especially across fields of study. Rather, it mostly concentrates on providing educators with a broad range of tools and examples of curriculum innovations that will help them participate in the ongoing effort to ameliorate the condition of undergraduate education—a theme amply explored by Jerry Gaff in the last chapter of the book.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

Each of these books has enhanced the literature on the "culture wars" and the college curriculum. Casement, besides providing a helpful overview of the history of the canon, has done a careful and highly accessible deconstruction of anticanonist epistemological and political arguments—especially their "contextualist epistemology." He is most convincing when he argues that the foundation of anticanon epistemology is limiting in its "self-referentiality." As he elaborates: "The claim that knowledge is inexorably context-bound is itself a knowledge claim, but what happens when it is assessed as such? By its own standards it can be no more than another context-bound claim" (64). While he can be persuasive in critiquing "Otheredness," Casement is far less compelling in defending his revisionist point of view on the canon, which he more or less oxymoronically labels as "reform canonism." Of particular note, his distinction between "strict canonism" and "reform canonism" is so specious that it is little more than, to pilfer the phrase of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a "loose canon."

Levine's book contributes to scholarship on culture, the canon, and the curriculum in several major ways. In terms of the "culture wars," Levine makes a powerful historical case for a dynamic canon, a multicultural curriculum continually changing in response to societal needs as they emerge through major cultural conflicts. He does so by effectively arguing that both society writ large, and our universities, are much the richer—the more open—for the historic and contemporary willingness of our universities to engage pluralism and multiculturalism rather than retreat to a false and privileging sense of unity that belies our legacy as a nation. More broadly, Levine's work has implications for how we think about curriculum and the canon in higher education. To wit, for the most part curriculum scholars in higher education, including many of us who embrace multiculturalism and a "contextualist epistemology," have neglected curriculum "context" in our work. Levine's work is a splendid example of how careful scrutiny of historical and the cultural contexts can illuminate our understandings of the shaping of the canon and the curriculum. Indeed, by viewing curriculum as a dynamic historical and cultural construct in which competing definitions of what counts as knowledge are constantly being negotiated, we problemmatize how knowledge is defined, approached, and taught and, in turn, more fully engage the newly emerging knowledge claims of feminists, interpretivists, poststructuralists, and multiculturalists alike. To be sure, this book begs for more evidentiary support and is strikingly similar to W. B. Carnochan's (1993) work in terms of its emphasis on the importance of historical context in understanding debates over the canon and the curriculum. Still, Levine's work deserves to be read by students of the curriculum and the "culture wars."

In the edited volume by Gaff and Ratcliff, there are a handful of chapters that contribute to the culture and canon debates. More broadly, this book deserves consideration for at least three major reasons. One, it is breathtakingly comprehensive in its reach—from the history and philosophy of the curriculum to administration and assessment. Two, it explores terrain that has often been omitted in books on the curriculum, namely, learning in the academic disciplines and reforms across a wide range of fields of study. Three, there are some splendid chapters in this book, particularly those on the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics. In regard to the culture and the canon, there is a wonderfully evocative article by Enrique Olguin and Betty Schmitz on "transforming the curriculum through diversity," and another by Elaine Maimon on teaching across

the curriculum. To be sure, this is a mainstream text that reflects traditionalist thinking on the curriculum—and, as such, more often than not pays uncritical homage to the past and the canon at the expense of inviting the reader to think more imaginatively about curriculum. Moreover, it is disappointing in its overall failure to explicitly link the "culture wars" of the last decade to curriculum development in the present and future. Still, it is a valuable primer on curriculum reform, planning, assessment, and change and, as such, it provides a useful set of conceptual tools that can help guide faculty, administrators, and students through the cultural and canonical landscape of higher education. Along with Joan Stark and Lisa Lattuca's recent book (1996), it should be especially helpful to members of curriculum review committees who are involved in designing and evaluating programs and in introductory courses on curriculum in higher education graduate programs.

Limitations as Opportunities for Inquiry

Notwithstanding their virtues, all three of the volumes reviewed here are not without limitation. From our perspective, their major limitations mirror the limitations of much of the literature on curriculum which, in turn, can provide us with a springboard for future research that is aimed at enhancing our understanding and enrichment of the college curriculum. We address three major limitations and corresponding opportunities.

First, while all three books help move us beyond a literature of crisis, they all perpetuate a dualistic view of the "culture wars." Two of the books more or less embrace a Manichaeanism at that: Casement clearly favors a traditionalist view, Levine a more contemporary, multiculturalist view that celebrates a canon that is continually changing in response to societal needs and wants. The third, by Gaff and Ratcliff, seeks to examine each view. The either/or thinking manifest in these three books, so quintessentially Western at its core, seems to have run its course and then some. Regrettably, it forces both scholars and curriculum practitioners to stake a position rather than remain open to alternative views.

Scholarship that gets beyond this dualistic thinking would be a welcome addition to the literature. To illustrate some possibilities, David Bromwich in *Politics and Other Means* (1992), has persuasively deconstructed some of the most imperious premises of both the right and the left—conservative premises masked under the slogan of "preserving the tradition" and radical premises masked under the guise of "opening up the tradition." In so doing, he argues that liberal education is becoming a major casualty of the "culture wars." In *Beyond the Culture Wars,* Gerald Gaff argues that "teaching the conflicts" through engaged argument can help emancipate us from our dualistic thinking. Both books suggest the possibilities of moving beyond

contemporary dualistic thinking to enrich not only our scholarship but student learning and development as well.

Second, all three books view curriculum as properly placed in the hands of faculty and administrators, with primary emphases placed on such "structural" considerations as purpose, content ("culture"), and the instructional process. Such a narrow lens has several major limitations. For one, these books focus on curriculum "inputs" at the expense of what goes on inside the "black box" of programs, especially the teaching and learning experiences of program participants. For another, all three books fail to look much at student learning—arguably the driving force behind curricula—both in terms of students' teaching and learning experiences as well as the effects of programs on students. To enlarge our understanding of curriculum and to enhance student learning and development, we need research that views curriculum as encompassing more than "structures" and "processes" and finds its touchstone in student learning and development—including a broader range of factors that enhance student learning, not least "teaching and learning" themselves (Jacoby, 1994). By way of but one possibility of using such a lens, a theory of program quality recently advanced by Jennifer Grant Haworth and Clifton Conrad (1997) suggests that high-quality curricula are shaped less by well-designed structures and processes than by redefining roles for both faculty and students to embrace mutually supportive teaching and learning that emphasize such cultural and human factors as collaborative and peer teaching and learning, risk-taking, and the active presence of diverse and engaged participants (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). Such inquiry—inquiry focused through a lens at once more inclusive and more centered than has often been the case in research on higher education curriculum—is vitally needed if we are to broaden and deepen our understandings of curriculum and to provide faculty, students, and administrators with more powerful tools for developing and evaluating curricula.

Third, all three books highlight the perspectives of generally privileged participants in higher education, including faculty and administrators with long associations with elite institutions. Missing—most silently but perhaps most deafeningly—are the voices and perspectives of students, program graduates, employers, and people in government and the private sector who are connected to colleges through myriad service-learning programs. From our standpoint, much could be done to enrich the curriculum discourse in higher education by inviting a broader range of stakeholders to our conversations about culture, canon, and curriculum—people with more diverse life experiences than those of us who continue to draw mostly from our limited experiences in sanctuaries of the higher learning.

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