

Holly J. Duffy  
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## How can we critique our institutions?

This question came up for me because out of all the institutions I'm a member of—personally, spiritually, politically, academically—I've noticed that, regardless of the type of institution, we're really bad at addressing and resolving our systemic problems, that our institutions are getting worse because of it, and it's pretty clear that we either continue to not solve our systemic problems and watch our institutions decay or we sort ourselves out.

Given the setting of this discussion, I have chosen to focus predominately on St. John's College but I can't think of any of our institutions that aren't in need of sorting themselves out.

In 1941, St. John's College president, Stringfellow Barr addressed the board of visitors and governors and offered this extraordinary test of an education [we must ask:] [1] do our colleges prepare [us] to make fearless and responsible decisions under a Constitution like ours and [2]—equally important, if only recently relevant—does their preparation give a man anything that would stand by him in a concentration camp? A genuine discipline in the liberal arts would meet both tests," he says. (Levine)

I believe that today St. John's College fails this test.

One quick disclaimer: I do not hate the liberal arts or liberal arts institutions. On the contrary, I believe, as every one of you have demonstrated this weekend, the liberal arts enliven our hearts and liberate our minds. I am critiquing this institution because what it is capable of is too valuable to watch it decay. (Like how our parents use to tell us, and maybe still do, that we're wasting our lives—they do it because they love us.)

Now, for the sake of following along, this essay is divided into four parts:

- I. What do I mean by institution and why do we need to critique it?
- II. Why are we currently so bad at critiquing our institutions?
- III. What does action look like in the face of a complex problem?
- IV. Applying all of this to St. John's.

### I. What do I mean by institution and why do we need to critique it.

Institution definition and purpose.

Most of us don't realize that each and every one of our lives is a series of movements in thought or action through one institution to another. Every one of our subjective

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experiences occurs within the informal institutions of culture, customs and language; the formal institutions of our schools and places of worship; and within the primary institutions of government, economy and family.

Thus, our lives are an inheritance and a tradition of institutions, most of which will outlive all of us.

On one hand, as liberal arts students we know, as Nietzsche said, that “much harm is caused by thoughtless transplanting.” Or, to state the issue even more frankly through the words of Tocqueville, “Every man who receives an opinion on the word of another puts his mind in slavery.” (408)

On the other hand, Tocqueville goes on to acknowledge that institutions provide us with a kind of “salutary slavery that permits [us] to make good use of [our] freedom.” “Individual independence can be more or less great; but it cannot be boundless (408) And, above all, ...no society... can prosper without such beliefs...for without common ideals there is no common action, and without common action...a social body does not [exist].” (407) (Levine)

So, why must we critique our institutions?

As we know, our institutions decay, as Lincoln said in his Lyceum address, “if for no other foe, they are all subject”, to the “silent artillery of time”. Even if our halls remain pristine, as St. John’s tutor David Levine has said, “founding thoughts, no less than founding passions, are subject to ‘the [same] silent artillery of time.’”

Our institutions are manifestations of our ideas and, Levine goes on to say, while “ideas do not decay; peoples understanding of them can decay.” Through reexamining the later we can insure the proper continuation of the former. As Lincoln saw it, every generation is charged with the task of renewal not so different from the founding.

Or as Robert Hutchins, one of the founders of our modern liberal arts traditions, said, “It is the task of every generation to reassess the tradition in which he lives...” (Hutchins, *The Great Conversation*, p. 46).

Without rejuvenation, decay is inevitable. None of our institutions are perfect, and none of them started out perfect—that’s why they all have systemic problems and why they all move toward decay. When our problems and their manifestations become so prevalent that they hinder the good an institution is capable of providing, its time for a thorough, systematic criticism and a renewal.

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## II. Why are we currently so bad at critiquing our institutions?

We're bad at critiquing our institutions because we really, really don't want to go through a thorough, systematic criticism—we don't want to “reassess the traditions in which we live and refound our institutions. (We've got other stuff to do.)

When we look critically at our institutions our approach isn't a systematic analysis of the institution and pillars upon which it was founded, it's a laundry list of grievances of everything that runs contrary to our personal beliefs. We don't assess our institutions based on adherence to their founding principles and ideas; we judge them based on how well they align with our beliefs and worldview. It is no wonder why the prospect of discussion and compromise is at best unsettling, at worst a kind of personal heresy.

Sheer disinterest in the monumental task of refounding an institution aside, we don't like operating in the context of paradoxes, we like operating in the context of our opinions and beliefs.

This unspoken system of assessment and allegiance serves us only to the extent to which we deny paradoxes and complexities—all the contradictory yet equally valid occurrences within our lives. By necessity of needing to function in complex societies our beliefs are a product of simplification.

When we come to understand the all-encompassing role that institutions serve in our lives and the potential psychological effects of dismantling them, the link between criticism and existential crisis becomes palpable. We're at a moment today, when even in academia, we find it more and more commonplace to discourage the entertaining of criticism or opposing ideas, much less the appalling prospect of compromise.

So, how can we set aside our simplified, personal beliefs and take action?

(Good question...)

## III. What does action look like in the face of a complex problem?

Fortunately for us, over the last century and a half, several modern Western philosophers, namely those in the school of pragmatism, like its founder Charles Peirce, and others, like Derrida, have sought to correct the tendency toward single-mindedness in Western thought. Through their work, we've become increasingly familiar with questioning sense perception and paradoxes; we've seen a priori truths that stood for millennia disproven, and learned, through the work of Peirce, that your eyes do not connect you directly to the world but together with your mind, they interpret the world for you. Two of Peirce's most important conclusions were [1] that reality is a product of

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activities of the mind, meaning that there is no one external true reality, our minds shape our reality and [2] that's totally fine because we're not interested in an external, objective truth, we're interested in confirmation of belief!

Continuing to critique our institutions through the criteria of our personal belief systems has little to nothing to do with our institutions. It feels like a personal attack to each of us because wittingly or unwittingly, it is.

As a consequence, when we look at historical accounts of challenging or dismantling institutions, as former University of Chicago dean, Donald Levine points out in his book, *Powers of the Mind*, such actions are often accompanied by traumatic strains across communities such as disorientation, guilt, anxiety, fevered consumerism and the common inclination to seek "strong political authorities as a surrogate for authoritative directives."

And yet, despite all of these challenges, to learn to participate in and uphold our institutions in their best form while, if not understanding, at least respecting the personal beliefs of others is part of what Tocqueville called, "the apprenticeship of freedom" (I 229).

## Criticism in the context of modern liberal arts institutions

With all of that in mind, I would like to now return to the institution of modern liberal arts and the twentieth century pillars upon which many of our own programs are based.

Depending on the modern liberal arts program which you are most acquainted with you may be familiar with one or more of the following names: Hutchins, Barr, Buchanan, McKeon, Adler, Dewey, Wriston, Hirsh, Klein, Hyde, Harper, Aydelotte

These academics were thinking and working together in the 1930s and 40s at a time when the self-image of the West, with all its traditions, progress and notions of superiority had culminated in genocide, mass destruction and atrocities of war too great to number.

They viewed these external threats as well as internal changes in higher education and social concerns as indications of institutional decay. In response, they systematically criticized and refounded their own liberal arts institutions through the practice of reflection, experimentation, reflection and revision.

Donald Levine states, that "in seminal papers of the 1960s, Richard McKeon showed that interpretations and uses of the liberal arts have changed continuously over the past 2,500 years. He went on...to fault contemporary responses for simply redistributing old disciplines in new packages and for failing to take the present world situation into

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account. [He argued that] the liberal and humanizing arts must be constituted anew as they had been reconstituted in the past to meet new problems.”

The classical or medieval seven liberal arts McKeon was referencing and from which our modern traditions stem, were the basis for the education of the free person, they were focused on the individual, and had little interest in history or the philosophical conversations unfolding through time. (Venkatesh)

The liberal arts of the twentieth century, which emerged from that great historical period between two world wars, had two strands. Levine cites, “the history of general education and the history of honors studies. The former [rested on the] question—what program provides an appropriate education for all people associated in a community, or humanity, to enable them to develop their individual capacities and to participate in their communities—[and was] moved in programs devised to answer it from the Amherst of Alexander Meiklejohn to Columbia, St. John’s, and Shimer.”

Richard McKeon’s teaching style and the influence it had on the historical development of twentieth century liberal arts education is just one example of what this looked like in practice:

McKeon’s philosophy was not a doctrine, but a power... as Levine elaborates, “a power that manifests itself through the deliberate employment of paradoxical formations...McKeon’s teachings manifested the value of getting students to avoid the conventional “isms”. He and his colleagues worked to transform the focus of liberal arts from the practice of disciplines to the cultivation powers... meant to equip the student “to function in our natural and human environments to enjoy the beauty of natural and cultural forms [and]... to capacitate ways to articulate one’s place in these worlds and to initiate changes in them.”

#### IV. Applying all of this to St. John’s.

Is St. John’s College in need of a refounding?

Well, let’s turn again to Barr’s simply test of an education:

[1] do our colleges prepare [us] to make fearless and responsible decisions under a Constitution like ours and [2]—equally important, does their preparation give a man anything that would stand by him in a concentration camp?

As one tutor expressed privately to me, in regard to the structure of the St. John’s program, “It could be that the shape of the program ends up prejudicing the students against the world they have to live in. The texts may be all very present, and the discussions too, but the emotional effect is alienation. The chief symptom is when the best thing they can imagine on graduation is to become a tutor -- a sure sign that we’ve

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failed them! An education like this should make students excited about and interested in living -- and even if the course of life they choose is contemplative, they should still be excited about doing something different-- as opposed to being disappointed with the world because it is not like SJC! This I think is partly the tutors' fault in constantly touting the philosophical life as best (by which they mean SJC), partly the lack of back-up programs to show and encourage, partly the shape of the program...I think it is a good thing that we are more thoughtful about action, because there are too many people in this world who act out of complete certainty. But we do a very bad job of motivating Johnnies to do this: when everyone else can see how good most of our students are in whatever job they choose, how come Johnnies are so lacking in worldly confidence?"

I can't base the criteria for whether St. John's College is in need of a refounding on the authority of one man. But, what I can say, is that the assessment above is not uncommon and Barr's isn't the only test of an education that St. John's would fail.

The forming of our modern liberal arts curricula is one of the finest examples of how to critique an institution. While each of those men held personal beliefs about what a liberal arts curriculum should look like and the end of a liberal arts education, they all agreed on its necessity.

Without abandoning their own beliefs regarding the purpose, origins and benefits of liberal arts education, and without ever coming to a single consensus, they nonetheless worked together, investing over a decade of sustained effort and collaboration to systematically transform their criticism into our modern liberal arts curricula.

I think we are, as McKeon critiqued, "failing to take the present world situation into account" and as a result, today, our liberal arts institutions are again not what they set out to be.

And, once again, we're struggling with the same issue of consensus regarding the proper end of a liberal arts education and what the curriculum should be.

I believe a true liberal arts education should prepare us to critique our institutions, and not with academic jargon and philosophic references, but with a truly open mind, a detachment to authority and a desire to see what is in front of us.

The last refounding of our liberal arts curricula demonstrates that the problem of conflicting beliefs is both inherent and solvable—indeed I would go so far as to say beneficial.

And, if we at St. John's, with our intellectual and contemplative habits, ability to listen deeply, knowledge of our historical and ahistorical heritage, and practice of dialogue don't have what it takes to refound our institution, then we've failed and it's time for us to sort ourselves out.