

How Preferences Have Corrupted Higher Education

John M. Ellis

Published online: 8 July 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2008

My colleague Rick Sanders has shown that some unintended consequences of preferences undermine their intent and so produce exactly the opposite result—the intended beneficiaries are harmed rather than helped.¹ But the unintended consequences of an action don't only impact what that action was trying to achieve. The first law of unintended consequences is that you can never know what they will be or how far they will reach. Like a wildfire, they easily get out of control and start to cause devastation in places that are remote from where they started.

My concern is with the unintended consequences of preferences that have damaged higher education in general. To understand the magnitude of this damage we need to think of it as systemic—that is, damage to the entire system of thought and behavior on college campuses. It begins with changes to the way in which a relatively small number of students and faculty are brought into colleges and universities, and that might seem to be a circumscribed kind of change that would not touch anything else that is going on there. But systemic damage happens when small changes trigger other changes, and those lead to still others, until the chain of reactions adds up to something that overwhelms the system.

¹Richard H. Sander, "A Systemic Analysis of Affirmative Action in American Law Schools," *Stanford Law Review* 57, no. 2 (November 2004).

John M. Ellis is professor emeritus of literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, and president of the California Association of Scholars; john.ellis@earthlink.net. He is a founder and former governing council member of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. This address was originally presented at "Race and Gender Preferences at the Crossroads," a conference organized by the California Association of Scholars and cosponsored by the American Civil Rights Institute and the Center for Equal Opportunity, held January 19, 2008, at the University of Southern

This story of the series of changes initiated by preferences begins in the 1970s, as pressure slowly grew for colleges and universities to admit more minority and women students, and to hire more minority and women faculty. Soon this pressure became intense, and every new faculty appointment was expected to help increase the numbers of minority and women faculty. Many departments began to do what was expected of them, and in the humanities and social sciences almost all did.

Inevitably, the people who were most enthusiastic about the need for preferences in faculty hiring were the ones who were most influential in the making of those appointments. And just as inevitably, the kinds of people they looked for and appointed shared in that enthusiasm. But enthusiasm for affirmative action correlated with something else, and that was a set of beliefs about why it was needed. Both the people who made the appointments and the people they appointed had a strong sense of the injustices of the past, of the need to break with it and its values, and to remake society in a new image.

Traditionally, when new faculty appointees were being evaluated, what had always mattered most was intellectual curiosity and a capacity for developing new ideas, but in this new atmosphere the quality that came to the fore was not intellectual flexibility but its opposite: a determined commitment to the need for major social change. There is a well-known name for people who think this way: they are called political radicals. The shared enthusiasm for affirmative action thus correlated with a shared political philosophy. And so we now have the first major unintended consequence of preferences in faculty hiring: as the number of these new appointees mounted, the entire political complexion of the faculty was slowly tilted, not to the left, but to the radical left.

If anyone had ever proposed a result like that as an explicit goal, it would have been strongly opposed by the college faculty of the time. A broad consensus then existed that the mindset needed for academic teaching and research was quite different from that of a political radical. Academics need to let their conclusions go wherever facts and logic want to take them. Their business is original thought and new ideas, and that is always unknown territory. By contrast political radicals have a fixed mental framework and they can't let the argument go where it wants to go, because they know in advance where it must go. College-level teaching is all about getting students to sift evidence and weigh alternative explanations intelligently, and you

can't do that if you only want to lead them to a fixed point that has no alternatives. That won't teach them to analyze issues and think for themselves—all it will do is give them a new set of beliefs, and you don't need college teaching for that. That is why political radicals were never thought to be well suited to academic work; their thought processes are un-academic, even anti-academic. They don't have the habit of examining competing explanations and carefully weighing how new evidence might change their relative standing, but instead the quite different habit of assimilating new evidence to their one existing explanation in any way they can.

And so, when preferences had the unexpected consequence of adding many politically radical people to college faculties, that amounted to adding people whose mindset made it hard for them to think like academics. Not surprisingly, this soon leads to more unintended consequences. A college department that operates according to the academic values of analysis and inquiry is bound to be constraining for people who don't share those values, and accordingly they soon press for new departments of their own where they will make their own rules—not academic ones. New departments of women's studies, black studies, ethnic studies, and others like them soon arise. Only in the era of preferences was this possible. In the early seventies, the idea of a separate black studies department was generally rejected whenever it was raised. The spirit of that time called for integration, not segregation, and everyone then recognized that black history or women's history was first and foremost history. It needed a historian's skills and could only be evaluated by a historian's standards in an environment of other historians. For academics, the historian's methodology was basic, and the particular topic incidental. But for political radicals the reverse was true, and so the new departments were in effect a series of little anti-academies within the academy, places where un-academic thought and behavior could thrive in a general environment where they did not belong. The typical voice in those departments was not the careful, analytical speech of academic life, but instead the strident, carelessly expressed, and poorly supported conspiracy theories of street politics. The University of Colorado's infamous Ward Churchill was not an isolated case but a typical phenomenon of these new departments.

New departments needed additional faculty to staff them, which meant still more political radicals added to the faculty, and ever greater campus

influence for radicalism. Even so, they were still very far from a majority, and so one might have expected their influence to be limited, especially since they were out of step with the values of the rest of the academy. But in point of fact that was *precisely* why they were so effective. Their behavior was so unlike that of academics that administrations and faculty alike were completely unprepared for dealing with them. Academics are used to going their own individual way, whether in pursuit of a research program that they define for themselves, or in a classroom for which they set the agenda. Organizing them is like herding cats.

But political radicals knew very well how to organize themselves for a common goal, and how in doing so to create pressures that academics could not handle. In the academic world, reason and analysis had always been the most powerful weapons in any dispute, but that was only because everyone on campus had agreed that they were. When a group suddenly appeared among them that refused to respect the supremacy of reasoned argument and instead used the political means of demonstrations, sit-ins, and disruptions, academics seemed helpless. Their trusted weapons now seemed like bows and arrows in the age of tank warfare. The new appointees had the added advantage that the regime of preferences soon came to resemble a moral crusade on campus, and they were central to that crusade. In any confrontation, opposition to them could easily be made to seem simply immoral.

The unintended consequences of preferences had now developed through the initial stage of simply more radicalism on campus, on to separate radical departments and finally to major radical influence on campus—which meant that something that was completely out of step with the core values of academic life had now gained considerable influence over it. This is obviously a very unstable state of affairs, and it's not surprising that yet more unintended consequences soon followed. But what followed next was the most important consequence of all—and that was radical change in the curriculum.

To understand quite how destructive this proved to be for all students, not just preferentially admitted students, we need to remember the original rationale of preferences. They were intended to make high quality public education accessible to people who had not previously enjoyed it, so that they could achieve equality with people who had. In previous generations, excellent public education had been the engine of social change for the large

immigrant populations of, for example, Italians and Jews in New York, and Irish in Boston, and soon enough the result was senators, Supreme Court justices, and even presidents from those groups.

Paper academic qualifications in themselves could not produce results like these. They happened when people were given a thorough grounding in the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of their civilization—its history, institutions, constitutional framework, literature, and science. Exposure to the best of their society's achievements and thought gave them the trained minds of broadly educated people who as a consequence were able to participate fully in that society and enjoy all of its blessings. The original intent of preferences was for this to happen again with another group of have-nots, but to speed up the process. The trouble was that preferences didn't speed it up. On the contrary, they slowed it down. They didn't give access to this kind of transformative education—they took it away.

The obstacle to real educational progress for minorities that now surfaced had its roots in the fact that political radicals don't look at the past and see accumulated knowledge and wisdom, nor do they look at their society with respect for its institutions and achievements. Their natural instinct is to denigrate society as it is and has been, in order to make the case for the sweeping social change that they think is necessary. The only lesson they want to teach concerning the past is that it was bad and that its achievements do not deserve respect. What this meant was that the kind of education that in past generations had raised up low-status immigrant groups would stand in the way of a radical social agenda.

Accordingly, the newer faculty set out to dismantle the curriculum that had previously served as the engine of progress to full equality, because they did not want the have-not groups of the present to have access to it and so assimilate to society's mainstream, where they would simply add further strength to the forces that stood in the way of radical social change. Freshman core courses that gave an overview of the achievements of Western culture were the first target, and they were soon abolished almost everywhere. Mandatory courses in American history and institutions largely went too, and even when they were still taught, they took a jaundiced view of the national past that tended to discourage further study. Requirements for literature courses on the great classic writers were also dropped. A recent study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that the great majority of English literature majors can now graduate without ever having

read Shakespeare.² Here, too, even when classic writers were taught, the emphasis of the class was increasingly not on the power of their thought and language, but instead on their sharing in the benighted racial and sexual attitudes of the past. Preferences had also begun to determine curricular choices: just as preferences trumped achievement in admissions, preferences trumped quality in writers and thinkers. Minority and women students were told that they were making gains through new curricular choices of writers more like them, but when they read forgotten minor poets instead of Shakespeare it is hard to see this as anything but a loss, and a huge one.

In effect, preferences had placed control of an education intended to lead to full equality in the mainstream of our society into the hands of people who loathed that mainstream and did not want their students to be educated to join it. Instead they wanted to use those students in their war against their own society. When Jesse Jackson led the infamous march at Stanford University chanting “Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Western Culture’s got to go,” he was in effect destroying a precious chance for those he was leading to get the education for full equality that they needed and deserved.

And so, while the original intent of preferences was to provide an education for upward mobility, what preferences actually did was, by promoting campus political radicalism, to block access to that kind of education. This damaged all students, not just minority students, but even so, minorities still suffered from an extra disadvantage. A disproportionate number of them would wind up majoring in the departments that were created so that radicalism could operate without the restraint of traditional academic values. One can safely assume that not many senators or Supreme Court justices will result from that kind of education.

Let’s turn now to another unintended consequence of preferences, one that has an effect on the quality of teaching in the high schools. It’s often said that preferences are only needed because minority students usually get a defective high school education. But if that is indeed the case, it would have to be so because their high school teachers themselves are not broadly educated. If *they* had had a good college education in their society’s accumulated knowledge and institutions, high school teaching would improve, and the minority high school deficit would vanish. But that is precisely the kind of

²American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *The Vanishing Shakespeare*, report, released April 2007; www.goacta.org/publications/index.cfm?categoryid=7E8ADC7F-D3EE-892B-9740A83D92E0FA4F.

college education that preferences had by now undermined and corrupted, so that from now on high school teachers would be worse prepared than they were in the past. The result is a classic vicious circle: the minority high school deficit leads to preferences in college admissions, preferences lead to political radicalism on campus, campus radicalism leads to deterioration in the education of high school teachers, more poorly educated high school teachers increase the minority deficit, and that leads to even greater demands for preferences.

Another major unintended consequence of preferences is a transformation of college administration. If you were to examine any speech made by a university president forty years ago, you would find that the word “Excellence” occurs with great frequency. That concept was the guiding light of the academy. If you made the same examination now, you’d find that the word “Diversity” has taken its place. That change has altered both the relationship between administration and faculty, and the pecking order within the faculty. The arbiters of Excellence, those who defined it and judged it on any campus, were those members of the faculty who by common consent had *achieved* it. These were the faculty whose original thought had earned them national prominence in their fields. They were the natural campus leaders because they most embodied the core values of the academy. Administrators knew that they were mainly answerable to this faculty group, and appointments to the administration were made from its ranks. But with Diversity it was quite a different story. The arbiters of Diversity are not the intellectual giants of the campus, but instead the politically radical new appointees. They are the ones who embody it, judge it, and who can demand that their judgments be the basis of policy. And so, when Diversity replaces Excellence as the ruling idea of the academy, the constituency to which administrations are answerable also changes. Where formerly they needed the confidence of their most distinguished faculty, now they need to keep the Diversity lobby happy, and *it* is never satisfied. Thus faculty leadership on campus passes from those who are most committed to the academy’s core values to those who least embody them, from the academically strongest to the weakest.

This change could be seen most clearly when new administrators were appointed. Search committees for deans and presidents soon had to include “underrepresented” faculty, possibly thought of as token at first, but it was these committee members who asked the candidates the key question: what would you do for Diversity if you were appointed? It was soon apparent that

any candidate for a senior administrative post who did not pronounce Diversity to be his or her highest priority could not be appointed. Public opposition by the campus Diversity lobby would be fatal. Everyone now knew that any sign of independent thinking about Diversity would mean the end of an administrative career. Thus began a whole generation of weak administrators who are easily intimidated by the diversity radicals to whom they owe their jobs. This is another unintended consequence of preferences that would have been bitterly resisted had it ever been openly advocated at the outset. But when higher education rushed to adopt Diversity (rather than Excellence) as its guiding principle, nobody understood that they were thereby handing control of college administrations over to political radicals.

Much followed from this. Under the regime of Excellence, administrations were above all the university's quality control mechanism. Their job was to monitor the quality and integrity of academic life. Deans would intervene if a department was performing poorly, or if academic values were under threat. Professors who misused their classrooms to promote their personal interests would be called in by their dean, and in those days deans were people with whom you did not want to tangle. But administrations provided this quality control *only* under license granted them by the senior faculty. That license expired when Excellence was replaced by Diversity. If you have ever wondered why administrations everywhere began to stand by and do nothing when visiting lecturers were shouted down, or when grade inflation went to absurd lengths, or when classrooms and even whole programs began to be used to promote political agendas, the answer is quite simple. When the administration's client was the senior faculty, it was licensed for quality control. But it now has a different client, and a different license, one that does not include enforcing academic values, because the administration's new client itself would be the target of that kind of enforcement.

Under the regime of Excellence, the administration was expected to ensure that argument was met only by counterargument, never by intimidation or suppression—because that is the tried and tested path to academic excellence. But where the administration's former client demanded free speech, the newer one wanted speech codes. The old client demanded free inquiry, but the newer one wanted only a privileged status for its own orthodoxy, one enforced by intimidation. The first demanded that intellectual honesty prevail at all costs, but the second aids and abets furtiveness and double-talk if that is needed to prevent a public outcry about the huge

discrepancy between test scores of students admitted by preferences and those who are not.

For the most part, the general public doesn't understand the change that has taken place, and so it was astonished by University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill's incoherent and very un-academic voice.³ The public immediately realized that something here was badly wrong. But Churchill's campus administration at first did nothing because it had grown used to Churchill's voice and countless others like it. Only as public outcry grew did the administration realize that while its abandonment of quality control had become a comfortable reality on campus, it was shocking to the public. At that point the administration understood that while it was in public view it had to behave as if it were still the administration of Excellence. This sudden change of gear spoke volumes about what was motivating the campus administration. It was obvious that fear of public wrath had trumped fear of the radicals, but equally obvious that any sign of a genuine concern for institutional integrity was nowhere to be seen.

Unintended consequences are not necessarily unforeseeable. Should we have expected this calamitous series of results to be foreseen? There are two considerations that should have made us suspicious at the outset. The first is that the university has a rather firm value system. When that system is working properly, only the truth counts, and little else matters. You can be amused by James Watson's description in his book *The Double Helix* of the bizarre personal twists and turns in the search for the structure of DNA, but finally all that counts is the inescapable logic of Crick and Watson's model.⁴ It's either right or it's wrong—you can't fake it. You fake things at your peril in an institution that is uncompromising about the truth. But preferences are organized pretense: they treat certain people as if they had done something that they have not done.

The second thing we should have realized was that when the academic world was persuaded to adopt Diversity as a core value, it was in effect being given a political purpose. That went directly counter to something that we have always known: that the academy needs to be protected from politics. Nobody noticed that preferences would have the effect of breaching the wall

³See my "Two Cheers for Ward Churchill's Dismissal," posted on 30 July 2007 under the heading "Our Essays," on www.mindingthecampus.com.

⁴James D. Watson, *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1968).

that had been erected to protect the academy from political involvement. The regime of preferences is a test case of how politics corrupts the academy, and why it needs protection from politics. The first step in getting the academic world back to a healthy state will be to persuade everyone that a first-rate educational system, just by being that, does more for social change and for upward mobility than any other institution can possibly do. But that can happen only if it stays away from the corrupting effect of direct involvement in political or social causes, and sticks to its exclusive concern with knowledge and inquiry. This may seem a slower path to social equality, but the attempted instant fix of preferences turned out to be a great deal slower, if it ever gets us there at all, and it has turned the academic world inside out.