

Letters

To the Editor:

Prof. Craig Klafter's letter in your fall (2020) issue is much appreciated, if for no other reason than that he pointed out my mistaking his clear reference to the mid-twentieth century (rather than the mid-nineteenth) when American higher education lost its way. I also appreciated that he specifically identified what those causes were, including the G.I. Bill, the National Defense Education Act and the Great Society, all examples, he believes, of the politicization of the academy. Perhaps these developments, certainly the last, introduced "immaturity" into the student body.

But maybe I thought of an earlier wrong turn caused by the South's corruption of the American Constitution (and therewith the higher learning within its governance) by teaching that human equality is a "self-evident lie" prior to the Civil War, and denying that slavery had anything to do with that conflict for another century afterwards. In short, the waywardness of higher education was already well advanced before the mid-twentieth century, even if the

conclusion had not yet been reached that it could make democracy into a universal aristocracy. For not only did southern apologists promote their old lie but they were joined by northern progressives who, in their zeal to reduce political conflict over matters of right and wrong (by their promotion of government by so-called experts), agreed with their erstwhile allies that only certain races were capable of self-government. Inter alia, those who cannot govern themselves cannot benefit from higher education. That apparently airtight conclusion did not survive owing to its false premise.

It is difficult for me to believe that encouraging military veterans (hardly "immature") to extend their education, or for our youth to contribute to the nation's security with scientific training, unmoored higher education in the United States from its original mission of preparing promising young people for leadership. Quite the contrary. By not making distinctions Prof. Klafter succumbs to the "neutrality" delusion that too many academic and/or political conservatives fall for in this age of "political correctness." First, the doctrines pushed by the left in our colleges and universities are not "correct," politically or otherwise, if the Declaration of Independence is to be honored and believed.

Second, because egalitarianism and libertinism are *not* correct, enshrining them in our schools, society, and government leads to precisely the deleterious consequences conjured up by the notion of “immaturity.”

Abraham Lincoln fully understood how an argument for the inequality of human beings based on color could easily morph into an argument based on intelligence or interest or any other excuse whatever. That is how the former oppressors of black people and their apologists could so easily slide into “the soft bigotry of low expectations” that has misguided and burdened several more generations of blacks and others. There is no conflict between affirming the equality of all persons in their rights and acknowledging the moral and intellectual distinctions among and between them. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison never could have dreamed that higher education was within the capacity of every individual, even as they had no objection to their fellow citizens seeking to accomplish all that was within their power.

But both yesterday’s racists and “the better sort” who appeared to be their antagonists are today’s egalitarians, their common tie being their failure to appreciate that skin color, however much it may *influence*

human beings, does not *define* them. Neither southern slave owners nor northern progressives ever imagined that everyone could benefit from a college or university education, but their misunderstanding of human nature led to their progeny’s embrace of that very idea. Academia’s patronizing and appeasing attitude toward the “immature” students who have terrorized campuses for decades (and in many cases, now rule them) is the very manifestation of the actual hostility to human excellence which oppressors and snobs of old clung to in order to justify their unmerited elevation over their fellow citizens.

Neutrality will not save academia.

Richard H. Reeb Jr.
Helendale, California

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Seth Forman’s article “Online Learning and Higher Ed’s Dark Secret,” (Fall, 2020), pointing out that much of the “earnings premium” attributed to a college degree is due to non-cognitive “signaling.” I’d add that the reported rate of return attributed to a college degree is grievously overstated and misunderstood for another reason. It typically compares lifetime earnings for college degree holders to those with only a high school diploma. But it ignores the fact

that the two groups already differ in other ways that determine lifetime earnings.

Upon graduation, those intending to go on to college are already from more affluent families, have higher HS grades, more educated and influential parents, etc. How much of their higher lifetime earnings can be attributed to going to college vs. these other factors? Who knows.

Robert Spaulding
Yuma, Arizona

To the Editor:

I enjoyed reading Seth Forman's piece on online learning ("Online Learning and Higher Ed's Dark Secret," fall, 2020) but have a different take on it based upon about twenty years of experience teaching managerial economics at Old Dominion University. I have taught up to 500 students in a single class in a single semester. Typically, I have about fifty students "live" in front of me. Between fifty and 150 are located at ODU's Virginia Beach Center and these students pick me up via fully streamed video. Ditto smaller numbers of students at the University's Peninsula and Tri-Cities Centers. Other students stream me at community college locations, some of which are not in Virginia. Some

students are on ships at sea. Many students are at their homes if they have good broadband connections.

My lectures are recorded, and students can access those at their leisure. I have extensive PowerPoint slides that contain the essence of my presentations that students can access as well.

Each week, students have a practical short essay problem to do. The bases for these are real world situations taken from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and other publications. I have two mid-term exams plus a final; all are essay.

The bottom line, however, is that at the end of each class, I do a multiple regression analysis of student performance. It is a control group analysis since I have a live group of students in front of me as well as the distance students. I must tell you that in twenty years, the analysis has never detected a statistically significant difference between the performances of online students and those who are live in front of me. Factors that matter much more statistically for academic performance in my classes include their SAT/ACT score, how old they are, if they are a military veterans, and others. So, I beg to differ re: the potential of online instruction to work.

Against this, however, it is not inexpensive to pursue the model I have outlined. While I doubt that most institutions and most professors are doing as much as I am, if they do so, then this generates costs. Hence, I do not see major financial economies to be had in online instruction when it is done well. Online instruction will, however, permit a wider range of students to access higher education. This advantage applies especially during COVID times.

James V. Koch
 Board of Visitors
 Professor of Economics and President Emeritus
 Department of Economics
 Old Dominion University
 author of *Runaway College Costs* (Johns Hopkins, 2020)

Seth Forman responds:

Thanks to Robert Spaulding for his careful reading the article and for commenting. He makes, of course, excellent points and any complete analysis of the college earnings premium would have to control for the factors he mentions. There are, on average, determinative differences between college-goers and high school graduates that reflect on lifetime earnings.

Professor Koch “begs to differ” with my article on distance learning, but I think we are in almost complete agreement. Professor Koch believes online learning is equivalent to in-person classes in terms of academic content, finding no “statistically significant difference between the performances of online students and those who are live in front of me.” I agree, and even go one step further to say “I can attest that my online students on average learn more course material than my in-person students.” But there is a problem with online learning that professor Koch does not acknowledge: namely, it makes college attendance too easy.

My point in the article was that employer preference for college graduates (as opposed to high school graduates or dropouts) stems from the non-cognitive skills (perseverance, sociability, conformity) attending college in-person signals to employers. Completely online learning fails to send employers the same signal because it reduces the sociability, rule-following, and patience required.

It’s not course content that is missing necessarily with online learning. I maintain that online learning fails to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate they can successfully navigate complex social

systems, something they will need in almost all jobs.

Seth Forman
 Managing Editor
Academic Questions

To the Editor:

I was appalled at the lack of historical knowledge on the part of Lauren Weiner in her article “Statues Come Down” in the Fall 2020 issue. Her comments on Nathan Bedford Forrest showed a blind acceptance of the prevailing narrative (that he was a racist).

Bedford did indeed form the Ku Klux Klan and was the first grand wizard, but it was a defensive group against the marauding postwar “reconstructionists” in the south; it was not an anti-black organization. When it turned anti-black he wrote in his General Order Number 1, “Whereas the Order of the KKK is in some localities being perverted from its original honorable and patriotic purposes; And whereas, such a perversion in the Order is in some instances defeating the very objectives of its origin, and is becoming injurious instead of subservient to the public peace and public safety for which it was intended . . . It is therefore ordered and decreed, that the masks and costumes of this order be entirely

abolished and destroyed. And every Grand Cyclops shall assemble the men of his Den and require them to destroy in his presence every article of his mask and costume and at the same time shall destroy his own.”

I expect at such a fine publication as *Academic Questions*, its writers would get their facts straight.

Nicholas B. Gilliam
 Dallas, Texas

Lauren Weiner responds:

Supposedly, according to Nicholas B. Gilliam, the Ku Klux Klan was not an anti-black organization but an anti-Radical Republican one. In fact, it was both, and from its inception. About that inception, Nathan Bedford Forrest—the former Confederate general and the group’s unofficial head—was cagey. To read the Tennessean’s testimony before the U.S. Senate of June 27, 1871 is to encounter an exercise in obfuscation.

Before I consider that, some background. Northern newspapers and journals extensively covered vigilante activities against the freedmen (and against the carpetbaggers, and the Southern Unionists or “scalawags”). The Reconstruction military authorities and the Congress investigated these activities. Allen Guelzo quotes from

depositions taken by these official bodies in *Reconstruction: A Concise History* (2018).

Guelzo cites testimony that:

in “small squads of masked men” or in battalions of “two or three hundred masked and mounted men,” they broke into houses; shot, whipped, and raped the inhabitants; and warned any freedmen who “thought we were all free; that we could vote,” that “we will stop all of that.” In Tennessee, between three thousand and four thousand black refugees escaping Klan violence streamed into Nashville in 1868; on June 13, hooded Klansmen armed with pistols and ropes even hijacked a passenger train in Columbia, Tennessee, searching the cars for a Republican congressman.

The Senate committee that summoned Forrest in 1871 also heard from a black justice of the peace from Chattanooga, Andrew J. Flowers, who testified to being kidnapped and beaten by disguised men. The men told him it was because “I had had the impudence to run against a white man for office and beat him; that they were not going to allow it.” Flowers’s sister taught at a school for black children,

and about that Flowers testified: “They said they did not object to people having the school, but that the association of colored people [who had organized the school] had to stop meeting so often.”

Forrest appeared before the committee to respond to questions about secret vigilante societies in his state and throughout the South. He said: “I could not speak of anything personally.” Asked what he knew secondhand, he allowed that there was a group in Middle Tennessee: “Some called them Pale Faces, some called them Ku Klux. I believe they were under two names.” Asked about a press interview he had earlier given that confirmed the existence of the Ku Klux Klan, he said that he had been quoted inaccurately: “It was reported that there was such an organization in Tennessee, in fact throughout the United States; but I knew nothing about its operations.” He also said, “So far as I know, I have not seen anything at all to prevent the laws from being executed.” What the group was doing, insofar as it existed, was “protecting peaceable citizens from oppression.”

One of his biographers, A.J. Langguth, describes Forrest as wanting to get out from under the opprobrium of being a secessionist leader and the mastermind of the 1864 massacre at Fort Pillow. Forrest

had been indicted for treason during the war. In 1866, he was tried not for treason but for the murder of a black farmhand working on his land (he was acquitted). To forestall any revival of the treason charge, he sought a pardon from President Andrew Johnson, also in 1866, and Johnson granted it two years later.

Mr. Gilliam may believe Forrest's disclaimers, but what I see is a man playing rope-a-dope to try to stay out of legal trouble. Mr. Gilliam brings up the proclamation that Forrest issued, General Order Number 1 (January 1869), disbanding the Ku Klux Klan. Of this Wyn Craig Wade writes (*The Fiery Cross*, 1987) that "Forrest's declaration, of course, accomplished nothing. It merely dissociated Imperial Headquarters from responsibility for the behavior of rank-and-file Klansmen, which is probably all that Forrest hoped it would do."

Wade is not the only historian who has studied Forrest in depth and declined to take at face value his and the Klan's temporizing statements. Brian Steel Wills, in his Forrest biography, *The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman* (1992), describes a man of tireless business energy after the war:

Nathan Bedford Forrest fought to return rule in the South to the "proper" hands. An intimidating

personality, he was willing to go to great lengths and to employ violence when he believed it was necessary to reconstruct a new South out of familiar building materials. But the element of control was essential to him, and the same growth that signified the success of the Ku Klux Klan also contained within it the seeds of the secret [organization's] destruction, if Bedford Forrest, as Grand Wizard, ever reached the point that he no longer believed he could control it.

Mr. Gilliam appears to set great store by pro-black statements that Forrest made. Wills addresses this issue, pointing out what a double game his subject played. The head of the Freedmen's Bureau, for example, negotiating with Forrest over terms of labor for prospective workers on Forrest's properties, described Forrest as "disposed to do everything that is fair and right for the Negroes which might be employed." Adds Wills:

Yet this was the same man who was heavily involved in the slave trade and was the instigator of the Fort Pillow "massacre." Self-interest enabled Forrest and his Northern partners to act in such

an apparently contradictory fashion. By providing relatively good contracts and associating with Northern partners, on the one hand, and continuing to demonstrate a willingness to act as the intimidator on the other, Forrest was taking the action he believed was necessary, however drastic, to ensure desirable behavior from others. In this case, he not only acquired a labor force, but encouraged its docility.

I stand by what I wrote about the Klan and Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Lauren Weiner
Baltimore, Maryland