

Universities & Mass-Produce Citizens  
By William Missouri Downs

Recently I read Upton Sinclair's book, The Goose-step, about censorship and politics at American universities in the early 1920s. Today, has anything changed? From coast to coast commencement speakers are uninvited, professors intimidated, speakers shouted down, and art that questions the status quo purged from quads.

In her book Reclaiming Conversation Sherry Turkle writes, "A recent study shows that college students all across the United States who declare themselves to be committed Republicans or Democrats will not discuss political matters with students on their campus who do not share their views. This means that they will avoid political discussion with those who live down the hall, who share a bathroom. We turn the physical realm into an echo chamber of what we have so easily created online. It's a cozy life, but we risk not learning anything new."

Ms. Turkle blames the problem on social media, but I also think it's caused because many universities and their supporters have little tolerance for free speech. Too many today think the purpose of a university is only to give students the information they need to find a job.

Walter Kaufman writes in The Faith of a Heretic, "If the point were simply to give information, we should not require universities. There would be no need for faculties and classrooms." He goes on to say that lectures could be simply copied or perhaps performed by hired actors rather than professors; certainly, talented actors would be better at making a tedious subject engaging.

By curbing speech and debate Universities mass-produce citizens who, as Sartre writes in Portrait of the Anti-Semite, want "instant certitude." They want to "...exist all at once and right away. They do not want acquired opinions, they want them to be innate; since they are afraid of reasoning, they want to adopt a mode of life in which reasoning and research play but a subordinate role, in which one never seeks but that which one has already found.."

This situation is exacerbated because many today think universities must be run with the capitalist efficiency of a corporation. The problem with this is that corporations also have little tolerance for free speech. No CEO would squander

money to give a voice to philosophies that do not reinforce the corporate dogma. But public universities must squander money to ensure that there are departments and faculty that allow all voices and ideas to be considered and studied.

A cozy education is not an education.