

## Power to the Person

**Carol Iannone**

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Our first issue of 2013 is a perfect blend of old and new names, which reflects the continuing and expanding efforts of *Academic Questions* to present the best thinking on higher education available. We begin, however, with the lower grades, upon which the potential for excellence at the upper level depends.

Although the Constitution does not authorize it, federal involvement in education has been massive at least since the designation of a cabinet-level Department of Education during the Carter administration, capped off in a way by the dedication of its D.C. headquarters in 2007 as the Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building. The latest initiative to arrive on the scene, the Common Core State Standards, although not created by the federal government, has been enthusiastically embraced by President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as a means of “transforming” American education, writes Jane Robbins in “Uncommonly Bad”—and by dangling funds and waivers from other federal mandates, the administration has secured the acceptance of the standards by forty-five states and the District of Columbia.

The standards were designed for grades K–12 in English language arts and mathematics by a D.C.-based nonprofit called Achieve, Inc. Robbins takes a close look at the ELA segment, which she sees as making a virtual travesty

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of education in literature, a piecemeal approach in which short excerpts can substitute for whole works (even works that are already quite short), in which nonfiction is preferred to fiction (now known in Gradgrindian fashion as “non-informational texts”), and in which the utilitarian aim is to impart practical, workplace skills to prepare students to “compete in the global economy.”

Having seen a brief classroom presentation based on the standards on PBS, I would say there is much in what Robbins fears. In the segment I saw, a ninth- or tenth-grade class read an “informational text”—“Letter from Birmingham Jail.” The letter was evidently read in its entirety, but one had to wonder if this straightforward work necessitated the amount of rather superficial classroom discussion, in several different formats, possibly over several periods, that it was granted. Plus, as the culmination of the exercise, the students produced not a finished piece of writing but went online to blog.

On the other hand, Mark Bauerlein sees opportunity in “Common Core as Tactical Advantage.” While far from blind to the problems Robbins details—in fact, he is the co-author of a largely critical assessment cited by her—Bauerlein finds language in the Common Core directives that would permit the unapologetic assignment of the very classic texts that have for some decades now been dismissed as the work of “dead white males.” This can license a more traditional approach to literature for the individual teacher wanting to take advantage of the opportunity.

The rest of our articles have a practical, hands-on quality, suitable for the energies attendant on a new year, and reflective of the initiative needed to battle against the current.

*Wikipedia* has become a perhaps too indispensable research tool, offering much of value, but it is important to exercise care when consulting it. Walter Bruno, “Attempting to Balance Wiki-Feminism: A Case Study,” rolled up his sleeves and plunged into the Wiki-waters in order to introduce some important facts into two specific entries, and found in both instances that feminist ideology blocked the way to the truth. By the by, Bruno also gives us a glimpse into how *Wikipedia* works to construct knowledge and how in some areas bias is built into the process.

Allen Mendenhall, “The Law Review Approach: What the Humanities Can Learn,” argues that humanities journals can benefit from adopting some of the procedures used by law reviews, for example, speeding up the often

glacial pace of publication by taking advantage of the online systems that permit multiple submissions.

“College Sports: Revising the Playbook” comes from a chapter in William Casement’s *Making College Right: Heretical Thoughts and Practical Proposals*, published by NAS and available online. Casement advances a provocative and logically argued suggestion for eliminating the excesses of college athletics—as memorably depicted in part in Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons*—that is, professionalize Division I altogether, and put the teams of every other level on a strictly amateur basis.

In recent years Nancy Pelosi managed to make two disturbing remarks that will surely go down in history. When asked if the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—better known as Obamacare—were constitutional, the then Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States of America retorted, “Are you kidding? Are you kidding?” as if it were foolish even to expect our nation’s lawmakers to consider such a question. At another point, Pelosi said of the same legislation that would nationalize health care and place a sixth of the nation’s economy under the control of the federal government, “[W]e have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it, away from the fog of the controversy”—the fog of controversy known in some quarters as debate.

Both remarks bespeak a woeful deterioration in the understanding of civics and citizenship in our country. Enter Bruce T. Olson, whose interests in criminology, law enforcement, and local government led him to study the grand jury system in California and eventually to train citizens for grand jury duty. This in turn nurtured an abiding interest in civics education and the relationship of the citizen and the state. Olson shares his insights and practical suggestions in “Assertive Citizenship and Civics Education,” an interview with Ashley Thorne, director of NAS’s Center for the Study of the Curriculum.

The crucial *Fisher v. Texas* case looming before the Supreme Court means that understanding the costs of affirmative action is more important than ever. We cover two important new books on the subject in our review essays. In “Both Wrong and Bad,” Carl Cohen illustrates the extraordinary comprehensiveness with which Russell K. Nieli, *Wounds That Will Not Heal: Affirmative Action and Our Continuing Racial Divide*, details the research showing how pernicious are the effects of racial preferences, not least on their purported beneficiaries. Cohen adds his own analysis of how the policy is not only bad, but also wrong.

Russell K. Nieli takes his turn to review another landmark work on the subject—*Mismatch: How Affirmative Action Hurts Students It's Intended to Help, and Why Universities Won't Admit It*, by Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor Jr.—and sees in it “The Vindication of Thomas Sowell,” who wrote of the harm preferences do to recipients many years ago.

Two of our reviews also bear on the implications of affirmative action to some extent. Certainly the suppression of free speech on campus is not unrelated to group preferences. Mark Bauerlein reviews Greg Lukianoff's *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate*, and makes some suggestions for reining in arrogant administrators who flout freedom of speech on campus and offer sneaky, self-justifying rationales when doing so. Nor is identity politics, and in his review of Bruce Bawer's carefully researched and comprehensive *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*, Adam Kissel extends assurance that the criticism education traditionalists make of these studies is fully justified.

Michael Toscano finds much to like in *Seven Lean Years: Macalester College from 1968 to 1975*, a memoir by NAS member and founder of the Minnesota chapter, Jeremiah Reedy, whose experience of watching the decline of a fine liberal arts college will resonate with many readers.

But we can end on an upbeat. Bruce Bawer appears again in this issue to report on Niall Ferguson's *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, both the book and the TV series, and can detail the renowned and celebrated author's resounding affirmation of the unique achievements of the West.

Dale Schellenger makes a return appearance with two intriguing poems, and Robert Jackson resumes our Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest feature with a “Liberal Arts Roundup.”