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Can Love of Country be Taught?

Should the University of Wisconsin teach patriotism? When I read this question my immediate response was *no*. As I began to write, I kept uncovering complicating factors, and these complications prompted me to change my response five or ten times. This question is not easy, and your answer depends on your view of the purpose of a university education, your definition of patriotism, and your personal political beliefs. I say this because my response is influenced by all of these factors, as well as by the limits of my foresight.

To start, what does “teaching patriotism” mean? Would students study the term, its history, its different manifestations in both good and evil forms? Or, does “teaching patriotism” mean foisting onto students a patriotic sensibility that remains with them for years to come? Would students learn to be patriotic like they learn to solve differential equations or interpret Rousseau? Would patriotism become a part of their psyche, like an ear for music or language? For the purposes of this essay, I am going to go with the second option. I will consider “teaching patriotism” to be a deliberate effort to cultivate patriotism within university students.

Patriotism, I think, is a good thing. It must not be rooted in hatred of other countries. It must not be based on pride of a narrowly defined citizenry, a pride that only derives from exclusion of those who don’t look like you. It must not be a blind love of country, but a belief in that country’s potential and a motivation to work to improve it. I admit that I rarely feel patriotic. I look with horror upon the actions of America, past and present. But this feeling is grounded in

my belief that America can and must do better, for its people, for the world. Patriotism, then, is not an unconditional love, rather a highly critical one. A love that pushes and prods.

And isn't pushing and prodding part of a good liberal arts education? Don't we seek to answer tough questions and find solutions to problems in order to better our community and our country? The oft-mentioned Wisconsin Idea points to the university's commitment to public service, extending "beneficent influence" beyond campus and into communities around the state and the world. Wouldn't this service be more passionate, more fiery, if it were spurred by a genuine love for the country it was servicing? Wouldn't students work harder, with a new sense of purpose and drive? How powerful it would be to have a graduating class that enters into the workforce with the goal of bettering the country for everyone! Patriotism, it seems, would make perfect sense in the university's curriculum.

Execution, however, would be impossible. Why? Because patriotism is not something that can be taught. How can you teach love? This question, while admittedly banal, is legitimate. How would lectures work? What would be tested? What units would be covered? Everything I imagine reeks of indoctrination, propagandism. How uneasy we would be if we saw other countries doing this!

Moreover, in the modern political landscape "patriotism" is strongly associated with conservatism and, in some cases, dangerous and discriminatory nationalism. Even with efforts to be politically neutral there would be no way to avoid the baggage that accompanies the word "patriotism" in contemporary America. Images of the flag and chants of "USA" would undoubtedly put some students on edge and energize others. Ultimately, it would lead to more division, which is the opposite of what patriotism should truly seek to achieve.

I want to delve more into the potential alienation the teaching of patriotism could cause. My above statements about the imperfection of America historically and contemporarily remain, and I still believe a proper interpretation of patriotism is an acknowledgement of these imperfections and a desire to do better. However, execution is never perfect, so what follows are potential issues that could derive from imperfect teaching or biased curriculum. The university sits on Ho-Chunk land, and for Native students and community members the teaching of American patriotism could indicate an erasure of Ho-Chunk history. America was built on slave labor, and racial disparities and institutions built on racism remain prominent today. In World War II, America put Japanese Americans into concentration camps. Today, we are caging children at the border. I must reiterate that patriotic love cannot be blind, it must seek to do better, it must work to CHANGE the atrocities it sees. However, for some students, that is asking far too much.

So, after poking and prodding and second guessing and questioning, my answer returns to where it began. No, the University of Wisconsin should not teach patriotism. This love of country cannot be taught by reading a textbook, filling in a scantron, or even writing a paper. We would not teach any other love this way. It would be artificial, forced. Rather, the university must continue educating students to be well-rounded, community-minded, intelligent individuals. Through the trials of life, conversations with those around us, and conscious attention paid to the country's weaknesses and its strengths, this love may rise up in us organically. This is the only way.