

Perspective: Learning to think critically for yourself

By William F. Felice, Special to the Tampa Bay Times

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In the last year, in Ferguson, Baltimore, Staten Island and Cincinnati, an unarmed black male died at the hands of a police officer in each city. In June, nine African-Americans who gathered for Bible study in Charleston, S.C., were murdered.

These events have unleashed an outpouring of distress and soul-searching about race relations in America.

Demagoguery and distortions unfortunately too often dominate our current national discussions on race (and other issues, such as immigration). Liberal arts colleges have a key responsibility to help students become critical thinkers able to see through irresponsible claims and come to reasoned judgments.

Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey wrote eloquently of the relationship of the liberal arts and democracy. A liberal education is to a large degree designed to create informed, educated and compassionate citizens.

Yet the relationship between the liberally educated individual and the democratic state runs much deeper. A liberal education — including critical thinking, values identification and the ability to challenge powerful voices, including those of the majority — is crucial to protecting freedom.

Liberal arts colleges thus have an obligation to help students sort through misrepresentations and duplicities — advertisements, political appeals, punditry of all sorts. Our ability to develop a flourishing democracy depends



upon a citizenry able to understand the difference between deceptiveness and responsible argument.

As professors of the liberal arts at Eckerd College, we work hard to design a curriculum that helps students become critical thinkers able to effectively grapple with fundamental social issues, including America's current crisis in race relations.

For example, this fall our new first-year students will be reading Charles M. Blow's searing autobiography *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, an astounding story of his trajectory from deep poverty in rural Louisiana to college and eventually to the *New York Times*. Our seniors will watch Dawn Porter's film *Gideon's Army*, which traces the personal stories of three young public defenders in the Deep South who challenge the assumptions that drive our criminal justice system.

Both Mr. Blow and Ms. Porter will visit our campus and talk to our students directly. And in our discussions of "justice" in the first-year program, we will not only read some classical accounts of justice, found in Genesis, Mencius and Plato's *Republic*, but will also study Kwame Appiah's dazzling new essay *Race in the Modern World*. Our goal with these curricular changes is to deepen all of our understanding of this complex issue confronting our nation today.

Our objective is not to put forward a liberal or conservative view on race, but to provide a forum where our students can discuss these issues. In fact, at Eckerd College we profoundly believe in and are committed to nurturing intellectual independence.

We promote a type of education in which all sides of every issue deserve full debate and consideration. Intellectual independence is our very reason for being, and thus we promote an educational process through which every theory, proposition, and idea is open to every kind of reasonable challenge. For example, in our first-year core course we counter-pose Albert Einstein's devastating critique with Ayn Rand's eloquent defense of capitalist economics. We actually don't care which "side" of this debate students adopt.

Our job is not to proselytize or indoctrinate. Instead we strive to give students the tools and skills to understand the richness and importance of the debate so that they can engage these issues with sharp, critical minds.

Such an approach leads to not only individual self-improvement, but also to a deeper understanding of one's self in relation to society, and the ability to learn from each other in order to learn how to live peacefully with all races, cultures and peoples.

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