

Mariko Silver on Cultivating Dissatisfaction in the Liberal Arts

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This opinion piece by Bennington College President Mariko Silver appeared in [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education, on September 1, 2015.

Dissatisfaction guaranteed—that’s how the liberal arts work

Frustrated by political deadlock in his home country, Nepal, a former Bennington College student runs as a protest candidate in an important national election.

Two years later, when his country is hit by a devastating earthquake, the political party that has grown out of Ujwal Thapa’s bid is already equipped with a strategic response plan and mobilizes within minutes, providing essential disaster relief and emerging as a formidable force in that country’s political landscape.

Dissatisfaction is as important to a liberal arts education as satisfaction—probably more so.

At my liberal arts institution, when students confront injustice—perceived or very real, local or farther afield—I have the opportunity to engage them in a conversation about what they, as students, can do to help address the concerns and shift “the system.” I have the obligation to demand of students (and often of the institution) a rigorous inquiry and create opportunities for them to come up against hard facts—for the institution, for the living and learning community in residence, and for those we serve in myriad ways beyond our campus. In my view, this is as important a learning experience as any a student could have in a classroom.

As liberal arts educators we need to help our students understand that the institutions they inherit are created by humans, and changed by humans. We need to show them that they have the power, indeed the responsibility, to demand more from the institutions that shape their lives and their futures, and we need to give them the wherewithal to reimagine and reinvent those institutions.

To do this, we need to cultivate dissatisfaction among our students, as much as or more than satisfaction.

Thapa is not alone in his cultivation of dissatisfaction.

As a Bennington College senior, Victoria Sammartino, having seen the deep impact of the justice system on her friends and community, launches a series of poetry workshops for women and girls. Within a year of graduating, the student, Victoria Sammartino, founds a nonprofit, Voices UnBroken, in her studio apartment. Sixteen years later, it is still going strong, having helped thousands of previously unheard and unheeded young people find their voices and express themselves in new, productive, and creative ways.

The dissatisfied student is the recent graduate who launches a campaign petitioning Facebook to replace its “feeling fat” emoji. The petition Catherine Weingarten organizes with Endangered Bodies

quickly garners nearly 17,000 signatures, and Facebook pulls the emoji from its list of status updates.

It is the alumna with a growing concern that the garbage we don't think twice about—our shed hair, gum, cigarettes—could be used to violate our privacy in unknown ways. Heather Dewey-Hagborg begins to collect things in public places that most of us go out of our way to avoid. She creates 3D portraits of the people whose DNA she has collected to demonstrate that it is both possible and ripe for abuse. The media will talk about how the technologies work, she says, but we should not be satisfied with that. To make smart public policy decisions, "we need to know how it breaks."

From this kind of dissatisfaction, this kind of pushing against existing conditions and frameworks comes a deeper satisfaction, because this realm of dissatisfaction is where revelations are found and new ideas are born. This does not mean colleges should create challenges where none exist, but it does mean we should ensure that the challenges of the world and of working in the world are made plain and, to whatever extent possible, legible to students—even if that makes them rage, as they say, against the machine.

I realize this runs contrary to current talk about higher education today graduating "satisfied customers." In search of a competitive edge in recruitment and retention, some argue that colleges and universities have made a subtle but important shift in how they think about the services they provide—from student-centered, to customer-first.

Putting aside what it means for our central mission that precious resources are diverted for such purposes as lazy rivers and zip lines, in providing students with everything they need (and want) at every instant we delay the moment when they have to confront what it means and what it takes to provide for their own needs as well as for a community's. We rob them of the opportunity to see themselves not as individuals whose needs must be catered to but as people who can evaluate, adapt, and transform existing systems and structures to better serve a wider set of needs.

A former trustee of my institution cautioned against what he saw as an emerging "learned helplessness" in people of all ages, most alarmingly in youth. It comes when people no longer view public and private institutions as theirs to influence, to direct, to disrupt; when the problems of the world and the systems undergirding them are understood to be too complex or too entrenched to change.

Colleges play a crucial role in interrupting this cycle—in helping students see the need for change, to see the possibility for change, and to see themselves as part of the systems that will ultimately effect change.

The days are gone when families send their children to college with deep confidence that higher education will ensure that life for the next generation will be better than for the last. This confidence has faltered even as the data show that on virtually every measure of economic well-being and career attainment—from personal earnings, to job satisfaction, to the share employed full time—college graduates outperform those with less education.

The value of higher education cannot be measured by economic indicators alone, important as those are. Any measurement must also take into account our capacity to call forth the best, most demanding work from our students. It should also gauge our ability to teach students what it means

to expect more from their institutions and how to make and remake those institutions to better serve all of our needs.

Perhaps most important to this value equation is our extraordinary potential to help students become not just leaders but stewards—of their own lives, of their communities, of the planet, and of our future.

These are the promises on which we must deliver, and I expect our students and their families to be satisfied with nothing less.