

Dear Dean Rider and Department Heads McCallum and Bell

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I write this letter not just as the only philosopher of education left on the University of Tennessee's (UT) Knoxville campus, the research one level university for the state of Tennessee; I am now the only tenure track faculty member in any of the social foundations of education left on our campus. As you go through the difficult decisions of what lines to support for faculty searches and which ones to redirect, I hope you will appreciate the need for me to try to make a case in support of educational foundations (history, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy of education). I cannot make a case in terms of productivity or demand that cannot be out-matched by other fields of study in our college or across our campus, but I can make a case on moral and political grounds. A nation that does not have citizens who are knowledgeable about their past, understand their cultural roots, are able to analyze their social institutions, and able to make an argument for what should be on the grounds of justice, care, beauty, truth, and goodness is a nation that cannot hope to be a democracy someday. My work includes making the case that democracy is an ideal we are striving toward, it is not something we have achieved; it is something we must continually struggle for, someday.¹

Our k-12 teachers teach the next generation of America's society, the future citizens of our country. Their job includes passing on to our next generation the cultural wealth of the current and past generations. When schoolteachers lack the knowledge and wisdom they might gain from courses in educational foundations, how can we expect them to be able to withstand the daily pressures they experience as teachers and

help their students become the needed future citizens in our democracy-someday? Social foundations courses give teachers the base of knowledge needed to have a larger perspective of how the present compares to the past and how things continue to change. These courses help teachers know how to work well with diverse students from multiple cultural backgrounds. How can we expect education faculty who teach in teacher education programs and research educational problems and issues to succeed in deepening their/our understanding of the context within which our schools are embedded without having a knowledge base necessary for them to begin to understand? There is no significant educational research that does not require a theoretical base of understanding of one's self and the methodology that justifies the methods one proposes to use (what's my epistemology and ontology?) to help one understand an educational problem (what do we already know?), as well as the tools needed to analyze the data collected (whether it be survey data, interviews and field notes, archival data, or the ideals explored and debated in an argument where the data are ideas), critique the study/argument, and develop the implications for future research. I am worried for UT's Graduate School of Education, for the future teachers we are certifying and the future faculty in higher education we are awarding degrees. I am also worried about the students of our future k-12 teachers, the children who are our hope as future citizens to continue the process of the U.S. becoming a democracy someday.

I believe the strongest argument in support of social foundations of education's importance for our college is the liberal arts argument that can be traced back to Aristotle and is more recently offered by Martha Nussbaum with a cosmopolitan focus, similar to the multicultural argument that Dan Butin recently discusses.² Butin also suggests that social foundations courses help to lower attrition rates for employed teachers, which is my experience as well, but I will not dwell on this point since UT's social foundations courses are no longer a required part of our teacher education programs.³ I begin with a description of the current situation to illustrate that I do understand the pressures you are up against. I will then turn to an analysis of *democracy*, as my argument depends on us embracing the goal of achieving a democracy-someday.

Setting the Stage

We live in difficult times for social foundations at universities all across America, not just in Tennessee. In fact, there is a general crisis concerning the humanities in the Euro-Western world.⁴ Historians and

philosophers of education do not bring in a lot of external money to our departments, colleges, and universities that are very much in need of funds. We may have a chance of bringing in small grants to buy out some of our teaching load for a research project, or find a way to work collaboratively with others on a social justice project, for example, but in general private foundations and federal programs such as the National Science Foundation do not fund philosophers often and we do not add much to the appeal of funding a research project. Scientific-based research is what is getting funding. We may add clarity of thought and scholarly depth to the written narrative, and we may be able to contribute a thick curriculum vita of publications that helps lend credence to the claim that the work will be completed to everyone's satisfaction. What historians and philosophers of education bring to our colleges of education in terms of external funding is not significant compared to what our colleagues who work in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) can bring in, for example. Our colleagues in our college who work in nutrition eclipse social foundations monetary contributions by far, in terms of research support.

Sociologists and anthropologists of education do have chances of contributing significantly to funding demands for colleges of education today as qualitative researchers who are out in our schools and communities doing engaged scholarship in the form of ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews, etc., helping to measure such things as the impact of *No Child Left Behind* on teachers and students.⁵ They are finding ways to get funding and are finding jobs in higher education, but as qualitative researchers more likely than as sociologists and anthropologists.

Social foundations faculty also do not draw in a large number of students to enroll in our colleges and universities. I have had the privilege of serving on 56 students' committees (masters and doctoral) and chairing 24 students' committees since arriving at UT in 2000. We work in the land of the Tennessee Volunteers, Go Vols! Our sports programs are very popular at an undergraduate *and* graduate level; they bring in much funding to the university and college through their tuition dollars. And our faculty in health, exercise science, and nutrition are working together to try and solve important social issues such as the U.S.'s obesity epidemic, which draws graduate students and funding to UT. Similarly, our faculty in child and family development are seeking to understand the impact of important social issues such as children growing up in war zones like Palestine and more recently Egypt. Our college has to compete with other colleges on our campus who are having the chance to work with researchers at places like Oak Ridge National Lab, which

is connected to our campus, and they bring in even more research funds and tuition funds to our university.

How do I compete with all of that? I cannot. However, UT's social foundations faculty have earned a strong reputation at a national, even international, level and they do draw talented students to their program. I have had the privilege of working with students from countries such as Korea, China, Japan, Kuwait, and Ghana, and from various regions of the U.S. Three of the 14 students whose dissertations I chaired have won awards for their dissertations. I can say proudly our students are strong scholars and our completion rate is high. We also draw diverse students from all over the campus who want to get a cognate with our program. Of the 56 students whose committees I have served on, not counting the committees I have chaired, only 10 of them were Cultural Studies in Education (CSE) students. Forty-six were from other programs. Without support for the social foundations of education, I am worried that students will no longer be able to find me, thus removing the reason why I moved to UT to work.

Democracy-Always-in-the-Making

My former program, (CSE), was formed at Highlander Research Center in New Market, Tennessee, in the mid-1990s while under the leadership of an innovative dean, Richard Wisniewski, who guided the college through significant redesign. This exciting program drew five social foundations faculty to come work at UT, including myself. Two of the original faculty involved in its formation were Clint Allison (history of education) and Kathleen DeMarras (anthropology of education), as well as the dean of the college, Wisniewski (sociology of education). Social foundations of education faculty helped develop and grow this program from its inception, but have retired, transferred to other institutions, or taken other jobs in higher education as the stress of our thinning support has worn on. Dean Wisniewski left UT before I even arrived, and we have been on a starvation diet since the year after I arrived, making 2000 the best year for the program for me.

Highlander, an adult center for learning leadership skills and how to be a social change agent for social justice, was built on principles of democracy. However, Myles Horton, its founder, resisted definitively defining *democracy* throughout his lifetime. In *The Long Haul*, he tells us people got angry with him for not carefully defining what he meant by democracy, but he says, "I've never been able to define democracy. ... it's a growing idea."⁶ Horton began Highlander Folk School in 1932 by relying on Dewey's concept of a democratic society as a mode of associ-

ated living that depends on equal access and participation as well as freed intelligence.⁷ However, he worked for close to 60 years on further developing this concept, based on what he learned from his experiences through Highlander during the socialist times of labor union organizing, the anti-racist times of the Civil Rights Movement, and beyond. Horton learned that democracy cannot be built on individualism: it can only make room for equality, respect, and freedom of choice for *all* when we join forces and work together to change oppressive social conditions.

Like Horton, the students attending Highlander learned to let go of their individualism too, for their individualism kept them isolated and trapped in their own ideas. They needed a place where they could experience what it was like to work together as a community and Highlander offered them this place. I want to suggest that the CSE program at UT has offered students that kind of place. Our classes are one of the few places where students from diverse fields of study such as sports studies, women's studies, community health, child and family studies, communication studies, as well as historians, sociologists, philosophers, etc., come together. Our courses are also uniquely the place where teacher education students in all the subject areas (science, math, English, history, the arts, music, special education, even agricultural education at UT, as well as the entire age span: early childhood, elementary, middle school, secondary, and adult education) come together. In these courses the students have the chance to hear differing perspectives on key educational issues, and they learn to dig deeper and look wider as they consider the implications of possible solutions to educational problems. They learn about the complexity of educational problems embedded within larger social issues, and what others have proposed and tried as possible solutions in the past.

Jacques Rancière argues that democracy is exactly *not* about individual satisfaction and private pleasure, the freedom to choose to do whatever one wants as long as it does not impinge on the freedoms of others.⁸ Democracy is a struggle *against* this privatization. Democracy is the process of enlarging the public sphere, and it depends on a belief in equality, that none of us deserves more than others due to our birth titles or natural given talents. Democracy depends on the belief that the law of chance, luck, affects us all, that another person's bad luck could just as easily be mine. Public schools become very important institutions for democracies because they offer us a way to enlarge the public sphere significantly, thus giving us more ways to help our children learn how to actively participate in our democracy. Also, the closer we come to offering an equally good education to all, regardless of children's birth

stations or natural talents, the more we are able to help our children compensate for theirs and our own bad luck.

In the U.S., our public schools are places where our children have the chance to experience what it is like to work together as a community, if and only if our teachers learn how to guide them on these important skills through their teacher education programs so that our children are able to: make decisions that take others' needs into account; value others and treat them with respect and dignity; attend to others with generosity and care; be patient and share with others, waiting their turn and offering a helping hand; be self-reflective and learn from their mistakes; seek to continually improve their abilities to communicate and relate to others; take responsibility for their own limitations and fragilities, and apologize and try to correct their mistakes and fix the harm they do; be intellectually curious and seek to continually develop their inquiry skills and improve their abilities to research, problem solve, and think constructively; be willing to work hard, expect much from themselves, and encourage others to work hard, too; be persevering and resilient, able to keep trying and not give up easily when they run into problems; be brave and courageous, able to take action against wrongs and help to right them.⁹

A society that seeks to be a democracy-someday is dependent on its children learning how to be the kinds of citizens who will have the necessary skills, such as: self-reflection, patience, generosity, curiosity, and caring for others who are different from them. Our homes and our schools are two of our social institutions that offer children places to learn these habits of heart and mind. Dewey and Montessori remind us that children have to learn to take an interest in each other's wellbeing and they need to have many opportunities to freely interact and relate to each other, as they learn how to get along and work together.¹⁰ They warn us of the need for children to learn how to secure social changes without introducing social disorder, so that democracies will not slide into chaos. How can our children learn these citizenship skills if their teachers have not had the chance to learn how to teach them, through their course work at universities like UT?

This leads me back to the arguments in support of educational foundations for colleges of education, their faculty and future scholars and teachers.

The Liberal Arts Argument

When I was an undergraduate, earning a liberal arts degree was considered a wise choice. It allowed a student to graduate with a "well rounded" base of knowledge and fostered the habits of mind needed for

critical inquiry and seeking deeper understanding. A liberal arts degree taught students how to critically think about what exists; describe, analyze and synthesize arguments; and imagine new possibilities. It opened up vistas and helped students make connections across different discipline bases, encouraging creativity. Concern for “what to do with a liberal arts degree” was not so significant, as one was assured that with a college degree in any subject area within a liberal arts college, jobs would be available. Added to the availability of jobs for college graduates was the awareness that social needs change over time and a liberal arts degree allows one to be adaptive and flexible, able to adjust to those changes. A liberal arts degree was welcome for students wishing to go on and earn graduate degrees that took them in more professional directions, such as law or business school, or to earn a teaching credential. In fact, UT’s teacher education model requires students to earn a liberal arts degree in a specific subject area prior to taking teaching methods courses during one’s senior year and fifth year as well as interning in schools for an academic year. This Holmes Model strongly supports the values of a liberal arts education.¹¹

Times have changed, and now we are living during the deepest recession this country has experienced since the Great Depression of the 1930’s. The recession has a global reach. There are fewer jobs available for students with college degrees, especially with liberal arts degrees. Those degrees are becoming the equivalent of what it used to mean to get a high school diploma, as more jobs are outsourced to other countries where labor costs are lower and which are increasingly accessible with improved technology. Students are being advised to get practical degrees that will give them a job skill, like computer science or engineering, or continue to develop one’s skills through internships and apprenticeships. Students are also being encouraged to earn graduate degrees, although even getting a masters or doctorate degree does not guarantee one a job in today’s economy. Jobs have certainly become scarcer for educational foundations scholars. My doctoral students are being encouraged to take their time with their degrees and build up expertise in multiple areas by earning multiple certificates in qualitative research, theory, and cultural studies, even quantitative research, as well as more than one specialization area, in order to have a chance of being hired in higher education. They are also being encouraged to look for jobs outside of higher education, as researchers for non-profit organizations and foundations, for example, or even to consider the possibility of starting their own school or non-profit business that addresses social needs and gives them a way to use their knowledge and skills.

While Aristotle may be a strong source for an argument in favor of

a liberal arts curriculum, he is not a good source in support of democracies.¹² I am not in the practice of citing Aristotle's argument due to its underlying elitist assumption that only citizens of the Greek state would receive an education that allowed them to live a contemplative life, while women and slaves were denied an education and required to do all the manual labor, thus freeing the citizens (property owning males) to have the leisure time necessary to further their education, become well-balanced human beings, and citizens and leaders of their society.¹³ However, in these tough times when the humanities such as history and philosophy are under attack, it is good to be reminded what Aristotle described as the importance of a liberal education. It is an education that allows one to live a balanced life, doing what human beings are uniquely capable of doing, reasoning, as well as learning to appreciate, critique, and create/perform art.

Martha Nussbaum has written an award-winning manifesto, *Not for Profit*, where she reminds us that the U.S. is famous for having a liberal arts model in higher education and that our model has drawn students from all over the world to study here.¹⁴ As a result of our valuing of the humanities, we have enjoyed a reputation as having higher education programs that promote creativity as well as critical thinking, for the curriculum encourages us to be playful and imaginative, as well as curious and full of wonder. Nussbaum argues that the humanities are indispensable for democracy and for cultivating a globally minded citizen. These subject areas help us understand our interdependency and teach us how to play well with others, cultivating sympathy and genuine concern for others. They promote a climate of responsibility and watchful stewardship. They teach us the capacity for positional thinking. They teach us how to transcend local loyalties and reach out to a wider world as they promote wonder, respect, and inclusion. They also teach us to think for ourselves.

Even UT, in the quest to become a Top 25 university, has recently re-embraced the importance of the humanities as "disciplines that are central to any well-rounded education by developing critical thinking, creativity, and intellectual curiosity, along with understanding, appreciation, and civic responsibility for our culture." UT has recently opened a Humanities Center that "aims to deepen and enrich research in the subjects like philosophy, history, languages, art, music, law, and linguistics, among other humanities subjects."¹⁵ Surely this is evidence in support of the case I am making for why we need to hire another social foundations faculty member in our college.

Conclusion

I have written elsewhere,

I am not worried about philosophy of education's future, as I know societies will always have the need to renew themselves and pass on their knowledge to their young. Our ability to educate our young is something that makes us unique, as humans. Philosophers of education help us think about what we should teach our children about beauty, goodness, fairness, justice, and truths, and how we should teach these. Teachers are faced with philosophical issues every day that they teach. It's unavoidable. I try to help them understand the issues and the resources that are there to aid them. I serve as a translator of deep philosophical ideas, so that those ideas are assessable to teachers, as fellow philosophers, who can then use the ideas to help them think through their daily dilemmas, and make decisions based on constructive thinking rather than just "past experiences." Philosophy can help us articulate our vision of what we want to aim for, and help us figure out how to get there. Philosophers of education are poets, prophets, and soothsayers who encourage us to imagine the possibilities of a better world and give us the tools we need to critique what exists and help us get there. My doctoral students in philosophy of education may have to find ways to adapt and take jobs in educational policy, curriculum development, comparative or international education, or as community organizers, for we live in times where there are fewer philosophers being hired to teach in colleges of education. This is a tragedy for our current times that philosophy is so little valued, but philosophers of education will always be needed.¹⁶

Unfortunately, without colleagues in social foundations of education, I will become irrelevant in our college as well as at UT. I am already reaching over to the College of Arts and Sciences to find faculty I can talk to about educational theory; I have joined the humanities faculty's Critical Theory discussion group and am a founding member of the Center for Social Justice. Recently I was invited to become one of the core faculty for the certificate in theory my humanities colleagues are creating. The humanities faculty are seeking to not become irrelevant as well in the current world we live, where universities are having to fund themselves and faculty are having to become entrepreneurs in order to keep their doors open and their programs alive. Through my years as a professor in social foundations of education, I have challenged future teachers to think deeply about what their aims of education are so that they can articulate these values to people interviewing them for possible jobs, and they can keep their aims in mind to help guide their decisions. I have asked them to deeply reflect on what their goals are that are so important to them that if they cannot work to achieve those goals they would not want the job.

With this letter I am imploring you, as leaders in our college, to re/consider the values that are guiding your decisions for faculty searches in our college. These are important decisions, not just for me to have colleagues and students to work with, but for the future of our teachers and educational researchers, and our country that hopes to become a democracy someday. The children in our schools are the future citizens in this democracy that is always-in-the-making; they need teachers who can help them develop the necessary skills and habits of mind and heart to be willing and able to contribute their talents and energy toward the goal of a democratic society, a goal I hope we all agree is worth striving for.

Sincerely,
Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon

Notes

¹ Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008) and Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Democracies Always in the Making* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

² Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Dan Butin, "How Social Foundations of Education Matters to Teacher Preparation: A Policy Brief," *Educational Studies*, 38(3), (2005): 214- 229.

³ For many years at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), Fred Pigge and Ron Marso conducted exit interviews for the teacher education program, asking graduating students what were the most important courses they took, and the students tended to list social foundations courses as least important. However, Pigge and Marso followed up their study with interviews five years later and for those still out in the schools teaching, the teachers said that the most important courses they took at BGSU were the social foundations courses. There is a strong connection between social foundations courses that examine schools as a social institution and teacher retention, which is a serious problem (over 200,000 a year leave teaching).

⁴ Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

⁵ Michele Fine, R. Jaffe-Walter, P. Pedraza, V. Futch, B. Stoudt, "Swimming: On Oxygen, Resistance, and Possibility for Immigrant Youth Under Siege," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38(1), (2007): 76-96. Kristin Sloan, "High-stakes Accountability, Minority Youth, and Ethnography: Assessing the Multiple Effects," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38(1), (2007): 24-41. Linda Valli, and D. Buese, "The Changing Roles of Teachers in an Era of High-Stakes Accountability," *AER J*, 44(3), (September 2007): 519-558.

⁶ Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 174.

⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, Mac-Millan, 1996/1916).

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, S. Corcoran (Trans.). (London & NY: Verso, 2006).

⁹ Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools*, 162.

¹⁰ John Dewey, *The School and Society [1900]*, and *The Child and the Curriculum [1902]* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990). Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method [1909]* (New York: Random House, 1912).

¹¹ Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers* (East Lansing, MI: Author, 1985).

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Philosophical Foundations of Education*, ed. Steven Cahn (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 107-120; Aristotle, *The Politics*, in *The Philosophical Foundations of Education*, ed. Steven Cahn (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 121-132.

¹³ Susan M. Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

¹⁵ See the University of Tennessee website at: www.utk.edu

¹⁶ Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, "Philosophy of education?" Special Issue of *Bajo Palabra: Journal of Philosophy*, (6), (2011).