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Higher education distortions enter into debates

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Regional

Higher education distortions enter into debates

One of the books that impressed me the most as a teenager was the novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four” (or “1984” in later editions) by the Englishman George Orwell. Born in India in 1903, Orwell – whose real name was Eric Arthur Blair – distinguished himself in his writings by his abhorrence toward social injustice and opposition to all kinds of totalitarianism. Even though he was a socialist, his other famous novel “Animal Farm,” published in 1945, was a criticism of the social system of the Soviet Union.

“1984” was his best-known novel and it is still today a very much read book. Published in 1949, Orwell fantasizes in it about a degraded society in the future, a view that was later popularized by the term “dystopian.” That view of society is totalitarian in nature and could easily be either fascist or communist since both share many of the same characteristics. And one of those characteristics is a fear of independent thinking since that defies the lies and distortions being told by the governing regime.

During the current political campaign, we have heard already a number of lies and distortions that are directly or indirectly related to higher education and the products of its endeavors. Take, for example, the recent statement by Sen. Marco Rubio who, during one of the GOP debates, said, “Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.” The fact of the matter is that, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, the median wage for welders is \$37,420 while for philosophy professors is \$63,630.

Then we have Ben Carson who, despite his degree

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in neurosurgery, spreads ideas that have no basis in reality, such as that the Egyptian pyramids were built by biblical figures as granaries, not as burial monuments by the pharaohs, a notion that any serious archaeologist and historian would argue as totally unsubstantiated. The same can be said of his statements that the big bang theory and the theory of evolution were engineered not by the Belgian Catholic priest Georges Lemaître or the British naturalist Charles Darwin, respectively, but by Satan. It does not matter that both theories have the virtual unanimous support of the scientific community worldwide.

Sometimes distortions originate also on the other side of the aisle. Take, for example, the statement by President Barack Obama, a former college professor, who on January 30, 2014 during a visit to a General Electric plant in Wisconsin stated that, “Folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.” Again, a teacher of history in postsecondary education earns a median salary of \$66,849, almost double that of a welder. He later apologized and called his remark “glib.”

Earlier, on Jan. 13, 2012 during a visit to Central Bucks High School West in Pennsylvania, Vice President Joe Biden – whose wife Jill has been a college professor for many years – declared, “Salaries

for college professors have escalated significantly. They should be good, but they have escalated significantly.” Yet, according to data from the annual faculty compensation survey carried out by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), real year-over-year faculty salaries, adjusted for inflation, have declined 0.12 percent since the 2008 recession.

Why should we be concerned about these inaccuracies? First of all because people listen to what politicians say. And if that politician is in the same ideological camp of the listener, his or her statements will be taken as a matter of fact. After all, the average citizen does not usually read either the statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor or the reports from the AAUP, nor is expected to follow the scientific literature on cosmology or evolutionary biology.

And here is when the statement made by Rubio takes on much larger significance. One of the fundamental courses taught by philosophy departments across institutions of higher education is critical thinking, i.e., the analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment, or, to put it more simply, how to avoid being fooled by other people. In fact, many colleges and universities require their students to take a course in critical thinking in order to develop a skill everyone needs no matter what career they will eventually have. Some institutions even require that many of their courses contain a strong critical thinking component. Another very important subject being taught by philosophy departments is ethics. Given the current state of

morality in our society, particularly in political circles, there is a clear need for those courses.

The conclusion to all of this information is very simple. We need more philosophers and philosophy for the well being of humanity. After all, the very definition of philosopher from its Greek root is “lover of wisdom.” And nobody can argue that what we need today is more wisdom and less ignorance. And that takes us back to the “1984” novel.

In Orwell’s book the fictional English Socialist Party, the only political party allowed in the fictional country of Oceania has three slogans:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

It seems that politicians today are conforming with the Orwellian view of humanity its author envisioned more than half century ago. We may not live in the totalitarian society Orwell imagined, but the practice of lying and distorting by political leaders is alive and well. But the responsibility for this absurdity is not only theirs but also ours, for taking at face value what others say. For being too naïve or too lazy to check the facts. Too complacent believing what seems to fit our own biases.

After all, as the German writer Thomas Mann once said, “In the long run a harmful truth is better than a useful lie.”

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