

Published On: 2007-09-06

Point Counterpoint

## Nancy Dye on liberal arts, plurality and women's education

Oberlin College was founded in 1833 in Ohio. It was the first US college to regularly admit African-American students (1835), and is also the oldest continuously operating coeducational institution (1837). The college is listed as a National Historic Landmark for its significance in admitting African-Americans and women. In 1970, Oberlin was on cover of "Life" magazine as one of the first colleges in the country to have co-ed dormitories. Oberlin is the only top ranked liberal arts college with a nationally top-ranked conservatory of music. A 2003 study found that more Oberlin College alumni go on to get doctorates than any other liberal arts college. Recent alumni include Marc Canter



(technologist: Macromedia), Eric Bogosian (playwright: Talk Radio), Avery Brooks (actor: Star Trek DS9), Johnnetta B. Cole (first female African-American president of Spelman College), William Goldman (oscar-winning screenwriter: Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid), Adrian Fenty (mayor of Washington DC), Jerry Greenfield (co-creator of Ben & Jerry's ice cream), and Julie Taymor (director: The Lion King). In 1993, the college gave simultaneous honorary doctorates to Muhammad Yunus and Amartya Sen. **Dr. Nancy Dye** was the 13th President of Oberlin College, serving from 1993-2006. She is currently Senior Advisor to the Asian University for Women (AUW), to be built in Chittagong (asian-university.org). She is visiting Bangladesh to give a lecture and visit the site of the AUW. **Naeem Mohaiemen** (Oberlin College class of '93) sat with her recently to discuss higher education.

**Naeem Mohaiemen:** Nancy, the title of your lecture is "Liberal Education & Pluralism." In the United States, pluralism often means multiculturalism, diversity, and affirmative action policy. In an international city like New York, it's the concept of the "melting pot." In South Asia, it may be defined along ethnic, religious and gender lines. What is your working definition of pluralism?

**Nancy Dye:** Pluralism to me is a society that is mindful and appreciative of differences and willing to say that, although we are predominantly one race, we want to be inclusive of people of different races.

The pluralism I was interested in at Oberlin went beyond the American experience. International students were very crucial to that experience. I recall Pakistani students telling me they had never met an Indian or Bangladeshi before they came to Oberlin. It made me think more of the role of higher education in bringing students together from a wide set of backgrounds. This is particularly important because people are afraid of each other in today's world. If you forge personal and social relationships, then you are not afraid of each other. It was significant that the students on campus from the subcontinent formed organisations as "South Asians" -- forming communities that were getting to know different parts of itself.

**NM:** Another aspect of diversity is economic class -- which is why financial aid is a crucial tool. Otherwise you would have international students who were ethnically

diverse, but came only from privileged backgrounds. I know there Oberlin had a big commitment to recruiting first-generation college students. After all, for the white American student who was the first in her family to go to college, she was equally under-privileged.

**ND:** Oberlin has always tried to be pluralistic in terms of class diversity. The relationship between race and class is very complicated in the United States. If you are white you are presumed to not have any disadvantages. But of course there are many poor white people in the US. And this is very visible in Ohio because of all the industries going bankrupt -- what we call the "rust belt." There are now a more complex set of ideas and thinking on diversity than was present fifteen years ago.

**NM:** Let's come to the other part of your lecture title: "Liberal Education." In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, there is now a big emphasis on very practical degrees: BBAs, MBAs, computer science, and accounting. People seem to be studying with one directed goal -- what will get them a high-paying job.

**ND:** This is increasingly the case in the US as well. More and more BA degrees are now in business. More practical technical degrees like nursing. The Federal government encourages this as well -- because there is a fear that otherwise America will turn into only a knowledge economy, and all manufacturing will be elsewhere.

Now Oberlin is very different from that. Most parents send their children there with the hope of getting a more well-rounded education. My personal belief is that history majors will do every bit as well as accounting majors, in terms of overall life experience. What a liberal arts education does is teach you to think, not just teach you facts. You may not use that particular knowledge in the workplace, but the process will teach you to think, write and speak.

**NM:** Let's turn to the planned Asian University for Women. What is your role there?

**ND:** Well, I am in Bangladesh to meet people in Dhaka and Chittagong. I'm going to see the site of the campus and think further about what future role I would like to have at the university. At the BRAC University lecture, I will talk about liberal arts education and the ways in which it privileges having a breadth of knowledge. That breadth helps you determine what your own values and aspirations are. It helps you be a citizen of the world, in terms of encouraging you to study and live with a very diverse group of people.

I'm hoping that young women at AUW will have a similar experience of interacting with those of different backgrounds, as did students at Oberlin. And with the international nature of this planned student body, you have a group of young women who can start thinking about what is needed in the world. What kind of development is sustainable? How to get international healthcare for all? And many other issues like that.

**NM:** Finally, can we talk briefly about the debate around coed versus single-gender education. There is an established educational theory of why an all-women's college can build strong women leaders of tomorrow.

**ND:** Well, I'm speaking as former president of the institution (Oberlin) that invented co-education. But I also went to Vassar as a student when it was still an all-women's college. I strongly believe that women do learn from, and interact with, each other in ways they probably wouldn't in a coed environment. It doesn't mean you should never interact with a male while you are in school. But women gain more confidence at all-women's schools. There are many things women are able to express in an all-women's community.

Think of all the distinguished women alumni who came out of the Seven Sisters colleges [Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Wellesley, and Vassar. Of these, Radcliffe has merged with Harvard and Vassar is now coed]. The mission of the all-women colleges was to teach young women that there is nothing you cannot do. It trained you for the world.

**Dr. Nancy Dye will lecture about "Liberal education and pluralism" at Brac University (Room No. UB 104), 66 Mohakhali C/A on September 6th at 4 p.m.**