

# Hacker and Dreifus's Higher Education? A Neocon Screed

July 26, 2010

I admire Claudia Dreifus's interviews with scientists in the New York Times Tuesday Science section, and particularly her attention to women in science, and I know of her honorable history in the left and feminism. So I befriended her on Facebook. There she publicized her book, with Andrew Hacker, *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing our Kids - and What we Can Do About It*, to be published by Times Books/Henry Holt on August 3. To my dismay, the book turns out to be propaganda for a neoliberal program of cuts in higher education, part of the international retreat from earlier social gains in pensions, vacations, education, health care, and part of the attacks on social services and on public employees. Although I was never an Obama fan, I guess I feel a little like those who were, but who now see their illusions smashed by another blast of right-wing centrism — in Hacker and Dreifus's case, dressed up as liberalism. I read Hacker and Dreifus's (HD) book. I found myself at home with their endorsement of unionization of teaching assistants, a cause in which I have long been active. And of course I share their disapproval of high salaries for college presidents (page 242). And although it never seems to occur to HD that government support might do away with exorbitant tuitions, of course one has to agree with their protests against through-the-roof tuitions. In their book, these generally available platitudes are used as the vehicles to carry conservative freight. With the above exceptions, HD is compatible with current right-wing thought on the frivolity of higher education and the need to cut it back. Indeed, although they solicited blurbs from liberals, support is beginning to emerge from neocons and will doubtless flower when the book is officially published and public debate begins. What is their program? HD seek to cut back faculty research, publication and sabbaticals as expensive gewgaws. They describe abolition of tenure as their most important goal (239-240). They want to banish medical schools and research institutes from campuses and send into such exile those who want to engage in research (242). They want to abolish paid sabbaticals: as they see it, we have too many new books and articles already (240)! (I had two sabbaticals in thirty-nine years of teaching, the last one at 50% of salary. In an era of HDian cutbacks, they are rarer and rarer.) They dismiss as a mere "mantra" (62) the idea that research is relevant to teaching, and they seem to understand the connection only in regard to keeping up with the literature - a notion that they dismiss with a quotation from right-winger William Bennett (83), who was among other things Reagan's Secretary of Education. HD like what Bennett says so much that they use it again: (238). They also call in that amazing Straussian (and defender of Lawrence Summers at Harvard), Harvey Mansfield, to testify in support of their ridicule of courses on such subjects as gay autobiography; and the break-up of Yugoslavia (84-85). It never occurs to them that doing research acquaints the researcher first-hand with the complexities of establishing truth - a notion that should be close to the heart of good teaching. But for HD, "there's an inverse correlation between good teaching and academic research" (89). (After I had predicted that HD's book would get a warm response from neocons, I came across the following in support of HD in a largely critical Forum on the Chronicle of Higher Education website. The writer, Robert W. Tucker, is a noted neocon ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_W.\\_Tucker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_W._Tucker)) "Great article! I appreciated the fact that you are willing to put yourselves on the line with concrete suggestions which, for the most part, generate empirically testable claims. .. Again, with so much rancor and narrow opinion expressed on these pages, it is refreshing to see your piece. My disagreement with some of your points is part of the rational process. Robert W Tucker) HD belittle the work of preparing and teaching and instead comment on "how little is asked from professors during the months when classes are taught" (26). Andrew taught Political Science at Queens College in CUNY, but there is next to nothing about this

besieged institution - with the exception of his retrieval from his years at Queens snide memories ("several years ago") of the job candidate who had the temerity to ask about teaching load and sabbaticals (13-14). (I retired from CUNY when I found that my body could no longer support a four-course teaching load.) What about the curriculum that HD's non-researchers will carry out? HD hope for a return to teaching the "Great Ideas." They praise Allan Bloom's teaching (80) but never mention this University of Chicago professor's national impact with his 1987 Closing of the American Mind - the right wing of the culture wars - of which their book is in a sense a sequel/updating. In short. HD don't think about the grotesque funding cutbacks for higher education while offering rationales for more of the same. Their vision for American higher education is quite Dickensian, with Oliver Twist as the professoriate that asks for more, not less, in pursuit of the goals of education for all.

=====  
===== Dreifus-Lemisch discussion To her credit, Claudia Dreifus argued these issues through (though not satisfactorily) on Facebook. Here are some selections from the back-and-forth. With limited skills, I have attempted to arrange them with the most recent first. Lemisch: I welcome this discussion, Claudia, and hope you will stay with it. (It may be good preparation for what lies ahead :-)). About Bloom: you endorse a return to teaching the Great Ideas. That inevitably combines with complimentary mention of Bloom. I can't imagine doing that without at least a parenthetical mention of disagreement with his right-wing views, but I don't think you do disagree with those educational ideas. You say you don't view these issues "on a left-right axis." At a time of world-wide neo-liberal cutbacks in civilized gains in health, education, pensions, retirement, vacations, "entitlements," etc. you had better see the political context in which you propose your wholly compatible cutbacks. You appear to take the high road when you say, despite the Bloom matter, "we'll let students make their own judgments about ideology." Fine: but this hardly fits with your endorsement of Bloomian ideas for the curriculum, whose conservatism I know first hand from experience teaching at the University of Chicago. Your science interviews are wonderful. If you and Andrew achieve what you want in this book, I guess the scientists will be even more dependent on corporate funding. Certainly you don't want these unproductive drones taking up space in expensive buildings for their career-building research, and all the while, not spending enough time teaching undergraduates. Dreifus: Jesse, I'm a journalist, not a politician. I don't think about "political context." Lemisch: Say it ain't so, Claudia. People who don't think about the 'political context' are well on their way to accepting bad political ideas rather than questioning them. Lemisch: Yes, I've seen your blurbs. Your failure to think about political context leaves you ill prepared for praise from rightwingers. Really, except for your endorsement of adjunct unionization, I can't see much that they would disagree with, including especially your support for abolition of tenure. The approval you have received from Neocon Robert W. Tucker (Chronicle of Higher Education site) is a sign of what's to come. How you will deal with such praise for your program? It should make you think twice about ignoring political context — or perhaps you'll just be happy with praise from the right. Lemisch: Definitely: cut back on colleges and universities, faculty sabbaticals and research, etc. Run them more like prisons, and more cheaply! Really, Glen Beck et al will eat up these prescriptions. How do we distinguish contemporary centrism from the right? Dreifus: Hey Jesse, how about actually reading the book, or even the article for that matter, before making knee-jerk judgements and calling names. We're not talking about cutting back on colleges and education, but on hot-tubs and gyms. We're for paying adjuncts a living wage and valuing the work of people who actually teach the next generation. Paying senior professors NOT to teach is part of the escalating cost- game that hurts access, we believe. You may disagree, but that doesn't mean we're advocating anything at all like what you suggest. Lemisch: In fact I have indeed read the book. Good for the two of you about TA unions. But consider the following things you endorse: cut back on faculty research , publication and sabbaticals as expensive frivolities; get rid of the research functions of universities, even in situations like Minnesota where these functions grow out of earlier Progressive movements; don't talk about grotesque funding cutbacks while offering rationales for more of the same; return to teaching "the great ideas" (Allan

Bloom? You praise him while ignoring what he was about); return to "peasant soup" and the other horrors of traditional college dining hall menus (presumably including getting rid of Yale dining halls attempts at locally grown food). High priced presidents, Abu Dhabi campuses etc. should definitely go, but you use these as vehicles to convey otherwise conservative messages. Too bad. I know your positive side and regret that you have fallen into this stuff. Lemisch: I guess the tragedy of this, Claudia, is that you don't indeed think that you are advocating a conservative agenda, but with some exceptions, that's what it is. Look forward to adoring reviews from the right.