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Revitalizing Discourse about a “Good Society”

By David L. Baker

The Aspen Institute

Searching for a stimulating pick-me-up next summer? Consider participating in the annual Aspen Institute’s Faculty Seminar. It invigorates discourse about what makes a “good society.” It cross-fertilizes ideas through facilitated, roundtable discussions. Highly interactive, academics supply multi-disciplinary perspectives in a comfortable, collegial setting.

The Aspen Institute offers seminars for applied academics concerned with infusing their work with aspirational and practical thinking about a “good society” in America and on a global stage. It accomplishes this by presenting educational and policy seminars. According to *The Aspen Idea*, the Institute’s flagship magazine, it strives “to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues.” You may check out the variety of seminars and events offered at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/about>. The Institute offers the “Faculty Seminar” at its Wye River Campus – just off the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, eight miles south-east of Queenstown, Maryland. Participants stay in comfortable, rustic lodges with nearby recreational activities. Discussion sessions take place in a state of the art conference center.

Seminar attendance is by nomination. The Institute invites university presidents, provosts, and deans each winter to nominate their best faculty members for the summer program. Your university underwrites the costs of the Seminar. Nominees complete an online application. Apply early. Competition for cohort seats can be intense.

Discourse Preparation and Diversity

The Seminar supports academics in informing their instruction regarding American and global citizenship. It requires rigorous advanced preparation. Each participant studies an anthology of 42 works, including a poem, a play, many articles, and selected excerpts from books. The Seminar brings instructors together from across the nation to contemplate historical literature and contemporary issues.

My particular seminar in July, 2013 consisted of an eclectic cohort of 23 (16 females and 7 males). They represented 18 disciplines, predominately but not exclusively from the social sciences. Six members had a background in political science or public administration. Three-quarters hailed from east of the Mississippi River. Both private and public universities across the country were about equally represented. Besides the diverse perspectives, the cohort contributed a wide spectrum of ages and differing

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academic career stages. The Seminar was moderated by Dr. David Townsend, the Aspen Institute's Senior Advisor on Seminars and Director of Wye Programs.

Format and Curriculum



Socratic discussions engage participants in deep dialogue exploring concerns and values fundamental to governance, citizenship, and interrelatedness. Simply, “What is a good society?” Are we there yet?

The seven-day curriculum rolls-out through seven themed sessions. Assigned readings set the table

for hearty exchanges. They include but are not limited to the following writings:

- “Our Founding Faiths”: The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution’s Preamble, excerpts from Abraham Lincoln, Roberts Bellah, Frederick Douglass, and letters between Abigail and John Adams
- “What is a Good Society?”: Excerpts from Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean Jacques Rousseau
- “State Efficiency; Individual Flourishing”: Excerpts from Adam Smith, James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, Tillie Olsen, and Ralph Ellison
- “Leadership”: Excerpts from Plato, Thucydides, Niccoló Machiavelli, John Dewey, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, and Constance Buchanan
- “Globalization and Responsibility”: The Qur’an, speeches from Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Rights, and articles by Fareed Zakaria and Ayann Hirsi Ali
- “Performance and Critique”: Sophocles’ *Antigone*
- “Education for the Polity”: Excerpts from Edward O. Wilson, Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Vaclav Havel

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My Takeaways

Each seminar session was intellectually intense, egalitarian, and highly interactive. Attendees pondered the readings, analyzed them for current relevancy, and chewed on practical issues of governance: liberty, equality, rights, security, dignity, trust, order, justice, efficiency, fairness, prosperity, and community. Thoughtful debate was tempered by respect for diverse views. The conversation freely flowed with an occasional pause as a poignant point was savored or the next salient idea surfaced.

The value of each session continues to resonate with me well beyond the Seminar. Discourse stimulated new dimensions of thought. With each session, participants seemed to experience a feeling of satisfaction as they climbed a staircase toward a better understanding of our mutual interrelatedness. The diverse perspectives arising from the dialogue formed a collective mosaic that made the Seminar unforgettable. New connections were made. New insights were discovered. New friendships were kindled. Everyone seemed to feel individual renewal while sensing collective reaffirmation in our common educational endeavor. We recognized that the seminar brought clarity to our collective faculty role in promoting a better American society. Moreover, there was a greater awareness of our individual teaching, research, and service responsibilities within that role. Applied academics should consider participating in the annual Institute's Faculty Seminar in the future. It makes for a revitalized summer and, just maybe, a better American society on a global stage.

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