

I want to take the opportunity of the Johnson prize to push forward the work of the Purpose and Plan Committee, in preparation for a conversation within Telluride in which I would like to participate.

As a preface, I interpret membership in TA as on a different educational level than participation in a TA program. TA programs like TASS and TASP should rhetorically equip students to have the kinds of conversations necessary to develop strong ethical positions, whatever that will mean when those students come of age. But for TA members, who have been each somehow steeped in Nunnian education, the expectation should be that decisions will be made and carried out. Thus the education that is offered by TA membership is not gained by merely executing the traditional array of programs, but in the praxis of making purposeful decisions and evaluating and responding to their consequences. To say that this education requires members to coordinate some upheaval or revolution would be baseless and an insult to Association's current successes. But as long as meaningful change is on the table—and it must remain so—we need to be able to critically assess the success or failure of our current programs. And that requires that we come to understand the Association in terms of the problems it addresses in the context of the problems with higher education that are within its scope.

Accordingly, the Association's offerings should not be thought of as institutions but as solutions to problems in American higher education. Only by stating those somewhat implicit problems can we understand what our particular solutions—I mean TASS, TASP, the Branch Houses, and TA membership—mean. It is sometimes suggested, always with a flourish, that the Telluride association should be dramatically restructured and regearred.

These proposals succeed in exciting the association to self-scrutiny and raising the question of the highest good—but if we are to take the impulse to change the Plan to better reflect the Purpose as an honest one, and not as a rhetorical teaching moment, we need to ask the kinds of questions that are suited to be answered by a democratic body. The “highest good”, the stated intent of the association’s efforts as per the 2013 Purpose and Plan Statement, is not the right phrase to interrogate. Instead, we should begin by asking the question of which is the greatest problem with American higher education.

The corporatization of higher education, or the rebranding of education as a product experience and of students as consumers, is, in very broad strokes, the phenomenon that the Telluride Association is set up to combat. Our current programs address an array of problems that stem from this phenomenon.

TASS and TASP both seem to say that promising students are poorly prepared for how college can fail to educate students to lead ethical lives of service and leadership. These programs help students to navigate college by teaching them how to question deeply, discuss generously, and act responsibly— which are all necessary to an ethical life, but fall outside the scope of professional academic specialties. An early intervention, so these programs say, will assist a student in taking responsibility for his or her education and the personal growth that should be its product, in a system that is corrupted by money-mindedness and pre-professionalism.

The branch houses are different programs, and have different goals and effects. They say that the worst aspect of the corporatization of higher education is the way these institutions isolate students in functionally insisting on a distinction between the social and

the academic. In response, the branch houses bridge that distinction by ensuring that house members share in some aspect of each other's academic lives and work together to maintain the intentions of their space. And by providing a scholarship for room and board, the branch houses ensure that these opportunities are distributed fairly, that intellectual community is not the sole privilege of the wealthy.

The Telluride Association itself would say that the problem with corporatized higher education is essentially administrative. As corporations, universities are encouraged by money-mindedness to invest and act in a conservative manner. In response, Telluride puts impassioned and idealistic young people in a position to take action by endowing them with capital and the authority to direct its use toward addressing the blindnesses of our corporate educational institutions.

The Association's mission is not revolutionary but ameliorative. It does not seek to replace or supplant current systems of higher education, but to address their deficiencies. As I have laid out above, the association is addressing three deficiencies simultaneously— the lack of adequate college preparation, an absence of intellectual community, and materialist administrative practices. If it is the purpose of the Telluride Association to promote the highest good in higher education, we must have a conversation about what the greatest problem with higher education is, whether we are addressing that problem, and how we could do better. A more diffuse approach that addresses multiple problems simultaneously might be the outcome of such a conversation— but if the Association is to take seriously its mission to understand and promote the highest good, it must contemplate remaking itself to better address the problems that its membership sees as most grave. Not by acting, but by acting

purposefully, will Telluride make itself effective at both generating meaningful change and serving as an education to its membership. And the way to begin the conversation of the purpose of the Telluride Association is to first ask the question, not of the highest good, but of which is the gravest problem with our current system of higher education.