

“Carry Those Decisions Out:” A Political Reading of Telluridean Education

As the Purpose and Plan statement was being debated on the convention floor in 2013, Noah Zatz, whose graduation was to be celebrated that evening, raised his hand and offered a question regarding the first paragraph: “What would it mean to change the word ‘ethical’ to ‘political?’” What follows is an attempt at a response.

Telluride Association is, by its own admission, an educational institution. Despite its proud peculiarities, TA shares the basic structure of most other educational institutions: pedagogical principles, a curriculum of knowledge and skills, and a general project. It is a common fate of attempts to define the purpose of the Association to simply arrive at the peculiarities of the Association and enumerate them. The underlying assumption is that the Telluridean purpose lies in and among its eccentricities. This strikes me as a useful point of departure, except that these peculiarities are usually articulated as positive traits—i.e. things the Association *does*, rather than things the Association *does not do*.

For example, despite its rituals of individual and communal self-critique, the Association does not have a well-defined conception of assessment. In the modern field of education, *assessment* refers to the way that an educational institution evaluates the performance of students and, by extension, the pedagogical effectiveness of the program.

Among educational institutions, Telluride is notable in that it does not use the traditional means of summative assessment.ⁱ Telluridean education is *not* measured by standardized test scores, college acceptance, or GPA, and offers no degrees to certify that one has mastered a curriculum or canon of knowledge.ⁱⁱ For instance, evidence that one performed well at TASP is found in the medium of reflection, either by one’s peers,

factotum, professor, or oneself. The criteria by which one is evaluated depends ultimately upon two questions:

1. Does the participant live up to the expectations of the program?
2. Is the participant recommended for future Telluridean programs?

Telluridean education, up to the Association itself, is an integrated program: TASS prepares one for TASP,ⁱⁱⁱ TASP funnels its alumni to the Houses, and the Houses (as well as the other programs) develop candidates for the Association. As a result of this network, a program's success is judged both as an experience relative to itself (the level of academic engagement, the handling of major crises, etc.) and by its ability to attract quality participants to the next stage of Telluridean education. In other words, Telluride's measure of educational success lies not only in the experience as a good in and of itself but the degree to which the experience will help Telluridean programs reproduce themselves.^{iv}

This runs counter to most of Telluride's stated purposes for the education it provides, which are uniformly oriented toward the world *outside* of Telluridean programs. Whether "serving thoughtfully in the world" or "[assisting] in the conduct of the important affairs of the country,"^v Telluride prepares its participants to discharge the debt they have incurred through the program not only by reading TASPlications and conducting interviews, but by serving humanity at large. The programs are offered at no cost both to encourage poorer candidates to apply *and* to develop this obligation.^{vi}

In effect, education is preparatory to the degree to which it resembles what follows; accordingly, Telluridean programs prepare participants for society to the degree that the society they enter is *like* a Telluridean program. While many alumni undeniably

find their Telluridean education useful, they also must admit that the life they lead after their program is little to nothing like what they experienced during it. In fact, isolation is a major principle of Nunnian education precisely for the purpose of establishing a space unlike the spaces that surround it. Tellurideans are familiar with the generations-old narrative of the struggle to re-integrate into society after living in a Nunnian setting. Alumni often note a tragic sense of dissonance upon their return: the world they left behind has been transformed and suddenly seems bizarre, daunting and inadequate.

Aside from useful skills like reflection and deliberation, the major legacy of a successful Telluridean program is this persistent dissonance, the cognitive imprint of Telluride's eccentricity. It demands that participants either re-adapt themselves to society or struggle to make society reflect their new expectations for themselves and others. This is the point at which Nunnian education transcends ethics and becomes political.

What kind of world is Telluride preparing the participants of its programs to enter? A Telluridean world. Self-government, intellectual engagement, communal living, service, and labor are not just a blank slate onto which politics is grafted, but political principles unto themselves, in the sense that they envision a certain world: namely, one in which communities govern themselves, no assumption is spared from debate, and labor is valued to the extent that it benefits one's personal development and the community at large. Insofar as this is not the world in which most members of the Association live, Telluridean education is a silent imperative to usher that world into existence.

The Association provides a political education rendered as human education, an experiential offering that insists upon assessing itself by its own standards, and not those of the society around it. An ethical education requires not only the ability to make

thoughtful decisions with others but also the “strength of character necessary to carry those decisions out.” If there is a world that is reminiscent of a Telluridean education, it is the political realm, in which self-organization, rhetorical contestation, conflict negotiation, critical interpretation and occasionally courage are abilities in high demand. Here, “to carry out” takes on a double meaning as Tellurideans enter a world that they are prepared to challenge as much as inhabit. Understanding a Nunnian education as political might mean assessing its worth by the experience’s ability to develop in people an ethics that sparks dissonance—an ethics that “carries itself out” of the Telluridean context and throws itself upon the world.

ⁱ *Summative Assessment*, as opposed to *Formative Assessment*, refers to an assessment that occurs after an educational experience, usually in a way that is meant to judge the efficacy of the whole process. For a detailed explanation, see:

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/basics/formative-summative.html>

ⁱⁱ It is worth noting, however, that these are often required to be selected for or participate in a given Telluridean program.

ⁱⁱⁱ TASS is a notable exception in this regard in that it includes a serious effort to support its alumni in their college search, but a major part of this effort remains events like TADAS Weekend that are aimed at generating interest in the Houses.

^{iv} In this way, both Telluridean education and most public education are nearly tautological in that they are formal educations that primarily prepare students for more formal education rather than anything beyond it (though that is usually implied).

^v L.L. Nunn’s *Blue Book*, page 23.

^{vi} Nunn put it this way: “the benefit they receive will be sunk in the greater benefit they give to the country at large; that if they properly assume responsibilities and meet obligations they will make the Association their debtor rather than their creditor” (*Blue Book*, page 24).