

Michael Poliakoff:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I am Michael Poliakoff, the president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Today, we are privileged and honored to have as our guest, Dr. Anika Prather. It would be hard to think of anybody with more heart and mind in the world of learning. Too often there's a divide between the scholar and the practitioner, and she is preeminent in both. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Howard University. She has degrees in education from New York University and Howard University, a Master's in Liberal Arts from St. John's College and a Doctorate in English, Theatre, and Literacy Education from the University of Maryland.

She was the founder of Living Wate Schools and is now directing that school. She was the head of Classical Education at the Cornerstone Schools and led the unit in Washington Classical Christian School on great books education. At a time when the liberal arts in general and classical studies in particular are under assault as elitist, irrelevant to career, sometimes even called racist, Dr. Prather has championed a discerning thoughtful embrace. With that, let me introduce my colleague, Veronica Mayer Bryant, who heads our What Will They Learn Project and our core curriculum studies to begin the conversation with Dr. Prather.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Good afternoon. We're very excited to have you on today, and I'm particularly excited to talk about classical education, a topic dear to all of our hearts, I believe. Dr. Prather, what would you say the value of classical education is today when it's so often dismissed for reasons that Michael's previously stated? Those would include lack of inclusivity or lack of relevance to a career.

Anika Prather:

Yeah, I mean that particular question, even though I've always just felt I knew the answer to that for my own self, I recently have come to really engage with that specific question, because I'm seeing an increased interest in what I'm saying across the globe now. I'm seeing a rise in people recognizing that this type of learning is still relevant and necessary and important, but not sure how to bring it into their particular community or culture, because we are going to be honest, the canon or the study of classics or the classical tradition at first doesn't look like it is inclusive or about us when you just look at who the authors are, when you look at who are the people who actually organized it and formalized it from Ancient Greece and going forward.

So, I recently had to answer that similar question when I spoke at, I think, St. Paul University in Kenya. They are considering bringing classical education into their curriculum, but they struggle with it because they can't see themselves. So, there were a lot of questions about, "How do we incorporate Kenyan culture and arts into this tradition?" When we see the authors, we don't see ourselves. I'm so glad I was prepared for that question, because I had done some research on different authors across the continent of Africa and I was able to identify various authors from the continent of Africa who were inspired by the classical tradition. One was Kenyan author named Grace Ogot. I'm going somewhere with this. It does answer your question. This is a real clear example of what I mean.

She's like the first woman published, I think, from her area in Kenya. She went on to found a writers organization in Kenya. She served under the president in different ways in politics, and her father was the first one given a Western tradition from her particular area of Kenya. So, I look at her and she used her education not to erase her culture, but to tell the story of her culture in a universal language. So, I took that story and I connected it to the story of Chinua Achebe who says the same thing. He was classically educated. His parents were classically educated. Even though people were upset with him for

not telling the story of the Igbo people in Igbo, I hope I'm saying the name right, please forgive me if I'm butchering that.

He said, "I chose a universal literacy as well so that the world would know our story." So I said, "If you always come to the classical tradition trying to find out and count up and tally up, well, how many women are there? Oh, there's not a lot. Let's add some more. Oh, how many Black people are there? Oh, there's not enough. Let's add some more Black people there. How many native people? If you keep doing that, before long, you've lost a tradition." Instead though, let's take a look at the history of people from all over the world who found inspiration in this tradition, in these very books. They did not expand the canon. They did not change the canon. They did not rename the canon. They just took this tradition and digested it into their own soul.

Then from that digestion, what was birth were stories of diversity in a language we all can understand. So, I say to people, a lot of people are afraid the classical tradition will erase diversity, but there's so much history around this tradition to prove that actually the classical tradition has been instrumental in preserving the stories of diverse people. Because take Africa, for example. Africa is made up of all these different countries. This is a little joke for those of you all who didn't realize Africa was not a country. It's made up of a lot of different countries. Don't be offended that I said that to you. Just receive that. In each of those countries, in Nigeria alone, there are hundreds of different dialects, hundreds.

So, if the story of Chinua Achebe's tribe, the Igbo people were only told in Igbo, then that would be the only people that would know it. By him choosing to tell his story in English, oftentimes modeling his story after Greek tragedy, he was able to translate his story. So, literally, every single people in the world, people group in the world knows the story of his people. It's not that I'm denying the fact that people have used the classical tradition to erase culture. I'm not denying the fact that there have even been people of color who got into classical education as a way to forget their heritage. That is real. That does exist, but that is not the story. That is a misuse of the tradition. My focus is on those who use the tradition to connect to this common humanity, to talk about the human experience, and to also tell the story of their own unique humanity.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yeah, I think I'm hearing an echo of William Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech that what's worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself, these universal struggles that all of us share expressed in different ways. Let's even try to come to a definition of what is a classic. I know that is an old, old question, but I think to be a real classic, it's got to be able to speak to all peoples in all languages in all times. Those stories of the human heart and conflict with itself are the ones that last for us.

Anika Prather:

Yes, I mean you remind me of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Zora Neale Hurston studied classics as well. She was very much connected to it. She studied it at Howard. You can see similarities between the main character, her name is Janie, and the story of the *Odyssey*. You can see it. I am trying to prove that she really did model it after that, only because it follows a very similar pattern where Janie is at home, going through her own struggles. She ends up leaving home, going off, finding love somewhere else, but ends up back at home. That's very much like Odysseus, how he found his way back home. So, we see a lot of Black authors, African authors, I've even seen some bits of the classical tradition in Brazilian thinkers.

Then I also think of Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panthers, using Plato's *Republic*, *The Allegory of the Cave* as a way to inspire him to do something to liberate his people. So, those are the

stories we want to tell, because if we only focus on tallying up, I mean we can't do it. We will end up dismissing it, because an Asian person could come and say, "Well, you've got Black people now involved and now you have Latino people, but what about us?" Now we're going to go back and say, "Okay, let's see if we can find some Asian ways to connect." But if we follow the story of humanity, we know the world is bigger than Greece. We know the world is bigger than Rome. Herodotus even proved that. He is before the color line. He wrote the histories, right?

He went from continent to continent. He studied the Ethiopians and he went all over. What he was trying to say is this is our story. So, what's beautiful about the concept of the great conversation is that we are bringing... I don't believe Mortimer Adler, I believe we are trying to complete the work of say, Mortimer Adler. I have been looking. I am sure he wasn't a perfect man and I haven't seen anything, but he may have been a person who didn't have the best perspectives on people of color. I don't know that. I haven't seen anything concerning in his writings, but I do believe that there was an intention for him, because everything I read from him says, "This is for everyone. We want to give this to everyone," especially in his Paideia Proposal.

It's a proposal for why this type of education is for everyone. I take that very seriously. I believe even though he's long gone, he would like us to continue the conversation. He's organized the books in a very scientific way. He's organized this collection of literature, and now it's there for us to partake whatever our cultural background, whatever our history is. James Baldwin, he says it like this, "I'm going to appropriate these white centuries and make them mine." I'm sure anyone listening to me right now, I don't think you're going to tell me that "Oh, well, James Baldwin was an assimilationist. He didn't really love his heritage." Surely, you know that's not true. All of his writings are about his love for his people, but he used his learning. I mean, even his own dad did not want him to read from the classical tradition.

Matter of fact, I believe his father died with them at odds about that. That was one of the things they were at odds about was his love for Shakespeare and other classical literature. So, I think what we learned from James Baldwin is we don't get angry because all of these authors may favor those who oppressed us, especially with many of those authors, especially the first half of the canon came at a time before the color line even began. But instead, what can we learn from them? This is a human story that maybe will give us wisdom. I know for me, it's given me a sense of comfort. When I read different works of the canon, I often find comfort. I come to realize I'm not alone, and whatever the struggle is, I'm going.

Michael Poliakoff:

I wonder if you would comment for us on the rather terrible position that classics have gotten into. On the one hand, Howard University, which had a storied classics department under the leadership of the extraordinary Frank Snowden, now no longer has a major, and it appears that the arguments were largely financial and arguments of relevance. Then on the other hand, elite Princeton and elite Brown, the title of one of the articles from a Brown professor was, "Classics Has To Change Or Let It Burn".

I thought of martyrs at the stake, a new kind of intolerance, and Princeton now making the charge that the whole field is so permeated with racism that it has no real authority unless it's totally overhauled. So, I want to turn that to you. I neglected to mention in the introduction that you are the author of an extremely important book, *The Black Intellectual Tradition*, that you did with Angel Parham, and we are very fortunate to have your expertise right now on that.

Anika Prather:

Yeah, it's a sad state of affairs, because I would like to say that I'm going to start with it. So, I have this idea for a cartoon like a drawn cartoon, not a video cartoon, of a book with legs and arms and a face running from an angry mob. The book looks at the people who are reading the cartoon saying, "What did I do? I'm just a book." So I am sad because those who have misused this tradition and those who continue to misrepresent it have actually created the rejection of it. That's why I talk so much about it just loudly so that sometimes I feel like I'm like John out in the wilderness by myself, but I do that hoping that someone will hear me and not get caught up in the angry tornado around it.

But there are things that are happening now that continue to show people, people of color are not welcome here. This is not for you. Angel and I both, we speak a lot on The Black Intellectual Tradition. We speak a lot about how it's not even just about the Black intellectual tradition. That's only one of the many stories you could tell. It's about how it has connected to so many different human traditions. Even with as much as we've written about it, talked about it, even now today, we still see classical or classics organizations having conferences, workshops, all types of efforts where they don't include voices of color in it.

That's a little disheartening, because if we want to prove to the world that this tradition belongs to everyone, then we have to be intentional about inviting the different scholars of color who also value this tradition into conferences, into workshops, into the work that you're doing. Sadly though, there's been like this line drawn in the sand, the stake in the ground where people are not willing to do that. What it is doing is just creating a misunderstanding about the tradition. I think the only way that we can temper the frustration about the tradition is to be more intentional about inviting us, inviting diversity into the tradition and being sure that we're honest about the diversity within the tradition itself, that we tell those stories. I told someone one time that I taught a lesson.

When I was teaching in the classics department at Howard, I did a lesson on Herodotus, and we focused a lot, I think, on book five of the histories where he talks a lot about the Ethiopian people. I was sharing this lesson with my students. I literally had students crying. They could not believe that a Greek was speaking so highly about Black people. It was really shocking that people would cry about that. It reveals definitely a deep-seated pain. Someone would say to me and say, "Well, why would they cry? They should just be proud of who they are." But these are young people just coming out of their freshman. A lot of them are coming from private schools where what was drilled to them in their AP courses is this Greek and Roman tradition that does not reflect them.

You've got to learn this stuff and appreciate this stuff and see this as the most wise place in the world and your people don't matter. So, coming to Howard and learning about how the Greeks felt about Ethiopia, it tore down a lot of lies and fallacies there, which brought about a lot of emotion. So, not only do we have to be intentional about inviting scholars of color who value this tradition to every conference, sometimes we'll do it at Black History Month. Sometimes they'll ask someone to speak on the diversity there at Martin Luther King Day, during Kwanzaa season, but it should be all year round that scholars of color are invited. The other thing is don't just invite the scholars of color to only talk about Africa.

There are classicists who just love classics, just they're scholars in classics. They love it. It's not because about Blacks or anything. It's about they love the human story, but oftentimes we are not, and I'm not even a classicist. I always say I'm the hype man for classics, but we aren't often invited to have these conversations. So, I think that we're going to have to really change how we present it, how we rally around it, how we segregate people from it, so that it is very welcoming to everyone.

Michael Poliakoff:

I want to make sure that we get onto the whole topic of core curriculum and religious education to areas where you have made real contributions, but could you talk a little bit about Frank Snowden? I think you had the opportunity to get to know him. I only knew him briefly, but I had enormous admiration for him.

Anika Prather:

I never met him. I was introduced to him or his work by Eva Braun, who was a very dear friend of mine when I first started this journey. I spoke at St. John's years ago about the history of classical education in the Black community, and that's where I met her. She came to hear my talk and we've been friends ever since. She calls me one day and she says, "Anika, you've got to learn about Frank Snowden." I had me get all of his books, and I began to really study his work and that he was at Howard University. I've spent a great deal of time reading his work because of the time he took to actually go on archeological digs to show...

This is why I talk a lot about showing Africa or diversity in the classics, because not just Africa has talked about, even the Middle East has talked about as well in a lot of classic literature. He went on these archeological digs to show specifically the Black... The book is called Blacks in Antiquity. I love him because he has these artifacts that show our presence in the classical world. He did that as a scholar at Howard University. One thing that he did that I thought was very courageous, which is the stance that I've taken, is there were some who wanted him to take his work and make it about Afrocentrism. He resisted that, and he didn't resist that because he doesn't love his heritage. I don't know him very well, so people may know more about him than I do.

I'm sure they do. But he resisted it being labeled by any one thing. His whole purpose was to show this tradition is for all of us, and I just want to give this gift to my own community to show, "Hey, come on. We're all welcome to the table. Come partake of this. Look what I've discovered for us." When I read his work, I get a sense of pride, but I'm also very connected to it. This is extremely important. When I was about six years old, my mom and dad founded a camp that ran every summer from the time I was six to in my late twenties. I started out as a camper and I was eventually a counselor. They would take a whole bunch of African-American children away to a retreat center and teach them about ancient African civilization.

The name of the camp was Camp Kush. That camp was so important, because a lot of times Black people are really guilty of this. Everyone is guilty of this, where we think Black history begins in slavery, but the time period between 1619 and 1865 is a long time, but it's really a dot in the timeline of African history. I mean, for thousands of years where the civilizations of Africa literally ruled the world. Even though they had their home base on the continent of Africa, people from Greece, Rome, everywhere would come to Africa for help fighting wars or for trade or for business, education. Pythagoras talks about spending 21 years studying with the Egyptians, and this is before Alexander the Great even got there.

So, my point that I'm trying to make is I'm not trying to make it seem like, "Oh, Black people are more important or more powerful." I always like to say, I'm just trying to say everybody's great. I believe that when people got upset with Frank Snowden for not making his discoveries about Afrocentrism, he believed the same thing. No, all of the human civilizations have contributed something to humanity. I'm just trying to make sure everyone knows that Africa was a part of that. The countries and civilizations of Africa were a part of that.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

I did want to ask a question, Anika, I guess a little more of a pedagogical question on that note of the particular and the universal. As an instructor, you do want to address questions and concerns that are universal to all students that you might have, but you of course also want to address the particular problems or history that a certain people or a culture might encounter or have encountered. So, pedagogically, as a teacher, how have you found it most effective to do both of those things? I guess also in your experience, do you think that classical education has been effective at bridging those two?

Anika Prather:

Basically, it sounds like your question is what are the strategies used in a K-12 classroom even especially so that students recognize how diverse people are welcome to the tradition and diversity is in the tradition, especially when you have a K-12 school with a set curriculum. Right now, I know Angel Parham is working on a curriculum that has more diversity, but right now, there really are no publishers that incorporate diversity into classical curriculum. So, most classical schools, if not all, whether you're using Core Knowledge or Memorial Press or Classical Academic Press or anyone else... Well, Classical Academic Press is a lot. They do a much better job, but a lot of times these publishers don't do that work for us.

So, I have a simple process, because again, and this is what I told the university in Kenya, is I do not teach classics for Black people. I do not teach classics for any one people group. I believe in making classics human-centric. The way we do that, whether you're teaching K-12 or at the university level is when you're teaching a lesson, and even if your curricula or whatever textbook you're using doesn't have it, as you are preparing your lessons, you should be preparing your lessons. Whenever you're preparing your lesson, ask yourself this question, "Who else was here?"

Say for example, if you're teaching a history lesson, if you're teaching an ELA or an English and language arts lesson and maybe you're working through a piece of literature, ask yourself, "Who else wrote a story that's similar to this but maybe doesn't look like me?" So instead of us making it about Black people, because if you do the way I'm saying, it will be about whatever community you're serving or whoever is welcomed into your space. So, when you ask yourself the question, "Well, who else is here?", then that forces you to look at the narrative that not just for example, the pilgrims may have had, but you're looking at the narrative of the native people too.

When we talk about American history and we ask ourselves the question, "Who else is here?" and we know that say for example, the Constitution is a part of the great books collection or tradition, we can ask ourselves, "Who else was here?" Well, we can find out, we know that the Iroquois Nation was present at that first Congress. We know that the parts of, I think, the Bill of Rights, part of it are inspired by the Great Law of Peace. You can put the two documents side by side and see these parallels. That's not to diminish what the founders did in starting America, and that's the thing we have to get away from in our teaching. It's almost like we're afraid to answer that question, "Who else is here?" for fear of well, if we do that, then people may not worship George Washington as much.

We don't want to do that because we're all human beings. So, to tell the story of how others who might be present at the story, it welcomes all of us into the story of America. We don't feel so separated from the process. So, that's my strategy is I go around. When I do teacher trainings on this topic, a lot of them are nervous when I come. I think they think I'm going to come in and make them redo their whole

curricula. I was a teacher in K-12 education for a long time, and I always know how irritated I got when I was asked to learn a whole new curriculum after I just finally mastered the one I was given last year.

I always start off the conversation saying, "Don't be afraid. I'm not about to make you throw out your curriculum. I want to show you how to work with what you have." The pedagogy is open up your mind to see these curricula in a way that says, "I'm going to teach this, but I'm going to always ask the question, who else is here?" You are going to do that Google search. You're going to go to that library and pull in your resources. As you're teaching the curricula, you're going to pull in those diverse stories that may intersect there no matter who they are.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Thank you. I think that the classical tradition, and we probably want to define that a little more clearly in a moment, the classical tradition of education, the classical education model, really good for this, because it does emphasize so much dialogue. Like you said, you articulated that great conversation among texts and authors and frankly, there are readers who themselves become authors in many cases throughout history. That's a particular strength of traditional liberal education, which I think we all know. The focus on a very narrow by contrast disciplinary education that you find in more modern or contemporary academia is not quite as given to.

Anika Prather:

It's almost like we're stuck sometimes with just a certain body of knowledge. I was reviewing some curricula. Just to prove your point. I was reviewing some curricula not too long ago, and I'm reviewing K-8. Every single year, every grade level, the main person in Black history they studied was Martin Luther King. There was hardly any other people.

Now, I'm obsessed with Martin Luther King, so I'm not saying this because I could ever be tired of him, and I don't think he should ever be removed from curricula. He's a very important person, but he and Ruby Bridges and Harriet Tubman are not the only people in Black history. There are so many people that have contributed to the progress of America. That resonates with me when you say that, how we limit ourselves to that certain body of knowledge and understanding.

Anika Prather:

I love what you said a moment ago about how classical education does free us from this very rigid, limited way of learning history, literature, everything else. It opens our minds up. It should open our minds up to other ways of thinking and other human stories. As we were talking through that, I thought of a professor named Dr. Sheena Mason. She has developed something called Theory of Racelessness. When I read her work, and it's the first entry post on my blog, I'm really drawn to her because she's not talking about colorblindness, but she's really explaining how the concept of race or the color line has disrupted our ability to connect with each other based on our shared human experiences. So, I have started to really read through her stuff and incorporate it.

I've really started to read through her work and incorporate it in my writing and in my speaking, because I feel like the classical tradition has the potential because I've seen it happen to bring us to a place of embracing something like Theory of Racelessness. Because the focus is not the color of skin, it's on our shared humanity. To prove my point, my passion for classical learning didn't really just start when my parents founded a classical school. It started probably the year after when I started going to St. John's College, I only went to learn more about great books. So, I had to be the great books teacher. So, I went

to St. John's to learn how to do it. My first semester, I'm the only chocolate one in the room around that Johnny table.

I can't remember who we were discussing, we were discussing a piece of literature. I was there for the whole summer. In that moment, I felt a healing process take place in me. It had nothing to do with because people were celebrating my Blackness or my culture. It wasn't because I denied my heritage to fit in, but there was a forgiveness that was birthed in me as I began to talk to others about this one book that was really addressing some really important human question. When I read Sheena Mason's work recently, and I wrote her this too, when I read her work recently, it took me back to that moment and why I felt so free, because I feel like race, the concept of race has really oppressed all of us. It should not be Blacks against whites or anyone against whites.

If we think about it, it should really be all of us against the concept of race, which is birth racism. I hope I'm saying that right. So, what happens is when we start reading literature that really seems to illuminate the common human experiences, you do begin to feel that you're rising above the color line. That is exactly what Du Bois was saying when he said, "Above the veil." When he says, "I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. I summon Aristotle and what soul I will, and they all come graciously with no scorn nor condescension." Then he goes on to say, "I rise above the veil." To me, that's theory of racelessness. I'm up here with these people, not up here meaning I'm better than anyone else, but I'm above this horrible concept of race.

If you're this color, you're over here. If you're in this class, you're over here. But no, we're family. Maya Angelou wrote a beautiful poem called Human Family, and to me, that's theory of racelessness. That is the embodiment of theory of racelessness, because we've come to this place of recognizing our shared humanity. When we engage in these great conversations with this literature that has stood a test of time and inspired so many people from every continent, it provides a tool for us to enter into that realm of racelessness.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

That was inspiring. Thank you. So, you alluded to and I think all of us have mentioned some key terms related to classical education as well as the term itself, classical education in this conversation. Before we discuss classical education or liberal education's role in higher ed space, I'd really like to go back and make clear what we mean when we say classical education. Is it the same thing as a great books education? You mentioned and I think Michael also mentioned what defines a great work, but I think even defining what a great book means for us here would be useful if you think it's relevant.

Anika Prather:

Yes. So, we have three terms. We have great books, classical or classical education, classics. Even liberal arts is in there as well. Humanities, I will take a brief moment to try to explain all of them. Some of them are the same, some of them are synonymous. Classics are the seed where everything begins. All the other terms grew out of classics. All right. So, what is classics? Classics is the study of Ancient Greece and Rome, language, culture, art, literature, just all of that. Sometimes you will have other ancient civilizations that intersect there, but you're looking at them in the context of the relationship to Ancient Greece and Rome. That is classics. Okay. So, that's classics. Birth out of classics came the great books education or classical education. They're synonymous.

Great books education, classical education are synonymous. They're synonymous because they both mean a K-12 education or any education that is rooted in the great books of Western civilization. The great books of Western civilization, I'm going to use the definition of Mortimer Adler, that's usually my

foundation, because he did this in such a scientific way. I chose him because he doesn't come from a perspective of just saying, "Well, because these authors are white, these are why we should read them."

He actually enlisted scholars in the higher ed and they spent thousands of hours reading and gathering all of this literature and cataloging all of the common themes to the point where he created basically this collection of literature where every author is citing the author who came before them or authors that came before them. So, you get the sense of a great conversation that extended through times and continents and through time periods and generations. Then he created a catalog too, a book that outlined, okay, Shakespeare is citing the Bible, he's citing Herodotus, he's citing so on and so forth. His rule for being included in the great books canon is the authors must be citing someone that roots themselves back to classics.

So, we got classics. We have a great books education. Then the great books or classical education teaches you how to engage in that rhetorical conversation in the great books or in the great conversation. Every subject is taught with that in mind. I mean you can't be creative math. Math is math, but geometry and even discussing math concepts, we'll go through a Socratic dialogue process. So, we've got classics. Great books and classical education are the same. Then you have liberal arts and humanities sometimes can be synonymous, but a lot of us are now leaning towards using the word liberal arts to also be synonymous with classical education and great books education.

But we're leaning towards liberal arts, because when we study the history of the classical tradition through diverse communities, often oppressed communities, we see that they are liberating. So, we see a history of this tradition liberating people, being used or being foundational to a lot of liberation or empowerment movement. Then humanities, sometimes people mix it up, is a looser form of all of those things that I talked about, but sometimes it's more inclusive of other literature outside of that tradition. I hope that was helpful.

Michael Poliakoff:

Wonderful.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Yes, these are very slippery concepts for many people. So, it's always worth defining.

Anika Prather:

You can almost imagine it if you have classics as the seed and then maybe the classical tradition is like the trunk and then you have the branches and the fruit and the leaves are some of these other things like liberal arts or humanities and all these other studies are loosely connected.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Very helpful metaphor. Thank you. So, we talked about liberal arts. Often when here's the term liberal education as synonymous, I think too with liberal arts education for the college, at the college level. Well, I'd like to enter into a conversation about higher education and your experience with K-12 classical education transitioning into that higher education space.

So, first of all, again, experientially as an educator, how have you found the classical learning that your students or students that you're familiar with have received, how have you found that that learning has been valuable for those students as they transition to college? So that's the student's perspective. How

have you seen colleges valuing that preparation that those students have received if you have seen it? Maybe you haven't seen enough.

Anika Prather:

Yeah, it depends on what college it is. Some colleges don't quite see it. Sometimes there's a fear that it's a more of a whitewashed education the student has had. But then there's quite a few liberal art institutions, of course, that are really excited to see a student that's been educated classically. I think the common understanding is that those students are able to really engage in a great conversation. They understand how to do that, and they also have this ability to read and figure things out. When I did my dissertation, and you can buy my dissertation also online, called *Living in the Constellation of the Canon*, and I re-put it together with Eva Braun did a foreword for it now.

But one of the things that was said in there is I researched students that I had taught great books years ago at my parents' school who were now in college when I did the study. They said classical education helped them to read and understand their college level classes easier, where they could make a distinction. They could see that their classmates struggled and they didn't. I think that makes sense. Now, somebody may say, "Well, anybody could do that with any book," but there's something complex about the literature of the canon that really causes you to exercise that brain. Susan Wise Bauer says, "It is rhetoric in action."

So when you read the books of the canon, your brain starts learning how to think rhetorically and critically, and if you're constantly reading that, you're constantly doing that. So, that skill translates into, as one of my students said, he was in a computer engineering course and he was the only one in his class who could just read the textbook and understand. In my dissertation, he said he feels like it's because I made him read things like Aristotle. So, he was able to read. It builds a literacy. It's an exercise and understanding and being able to figure out details as opposed to the traditional way of teaching reading is read this and answer these questions to see you understand the text. It's a little bit different than that.

Also, finally, I have found that students who obtain this type of education desire more for themselves, and that is really huge for me. I mean, that is my goal. So, at the Living Water School, we always have a small graduating class, because sometimes our students leave us for the big life of high school. They want to go to a big high school. We are a very small school, but we always have three to five graduates. This year, we have three. All three of them have been accepted to several colleges with academic scholarships already. They had that before Christmas break. I looked at how they were able to read their college applications, fill out their own applications, write their essays, and just did that process.

They're not perfect students, but definitely more equipped than the average college student as opposed to teaching at the college level. There's been times where I've taught freshman courses and I've had students that had no idea how to write a paragraph. They did not know how to organize a college-level essay into at least five paragraphs. That makes me sad that they're not given these tools, because a big part of classical education, we talk a lot about the great books in the canon, but the other aspect of classical education that is missing from a lot of schools and that higher ed is struggling with is grammar, the building blocks of education, phonics, English grammar and composition, the writing skills that are needed.

Even with math, we have students who struggle with math because they haven't learned the building blocks of math to be able to do high-level math. Again, as a representative of the African-American community and I live in a predominantly African-American community. I'm looking at the school systems here, and I often get students from this community. They struggle with those building blocks, the grammar. So, I have a very traditional perspective on classical education where you have the grammar

phase where in K-6, they're just learning these basic building blocks. So, they can really engage in a great conversation in all the major concepts.

Then as they go into 7th through 12th grade, they transition into a phase of engagement in more critical thinking and rhetorical conversations, but those building blocks are key. So, we have students graduating from high school, not we, not me, not the Living Water School, but there are students all over the United States graduating from high school without a proper handle on just the grammar of education. That is heartbreaking. I always tell people, I'll tease my students, "Do you know where to put a period? It's not a guessing game. It's not Russian roulette." Oh, I think it'll go over here. They don't know what a subject and a predicate is. That's also a part of classical education. \

I know public schools oftentimes don't teach that because there's not enough time, but if you don't teach that, they won't really be able to write anything. If they don't know what a subject and a predicate is, they will never know how to write. I want us to sit with that for a minute. I don't care how beautiful their writing is and how many wonderful ideas they have. If they don't understand where to put a period, where a sentence begins and ends, they will always struggle to know how to write. So, that's another piece of classical education. So, how is that affecting higher ed? You're getting students coming into higher ed that have to go to the writing center. They have to do remedial math before they can even start college algebra.

Years ago, I interviewed to teach at a community college and I was offered the job, but the lady who hired wanted to hire me, and I didn't take the job, said, "I need to have a realistic conversation with you." She said, "Our community college is literally 13th grade. Our college, most of our students who come in are remedial." So that means she's telling me that these students are graduating from high school on barely an elementary level in reading, writing, and math. So, they can't get into college like that. So, they go to community college and community college becomes an extension of high school.

To me, I feel like looking at something like classical education, which is tried and true, we can read the stories of Martin Luther King, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, the founders of America, everyone and even Abraham Lincoln who barely had a third grade education, fourth grade education, but he taught himself classically and became this phenomenal writer. Whether you have it formally taught or you got it in another way, we can see the common thread is this type of education is tried and true through the centuries, giving students the tools they need to progress forward. So, that's why I use it, because it always works.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Yes. Particularly at ACTA, knowing the unfortunate reality that the vast majority of college bound students don't get that robust education in K-12, we really try to advocate for core curriculum even more so than what's typically called general education. We tend to use that term because of the inherent interconnectedness and cohesiveness that comes along with a designed core curriculum in which each student should be guaranteed a base college level knowledge of key and essential subject areas, including composition, like you mentioned, math, literature, foreign language at the intermediate level, and not just intro. You need to be able to articulate what you want to say.

As you were indicating in the foreign language, of course, natural science and maybe in some ways most important in today's world, in today's America, US government or history, we think those subjects, all of them are absolutely essential. Others like Western civ and world history are very important as well, but not absolutely essential in the same way to all college educated students. I need to mention that, because it is truly sad but true that we don't get that guarantee for most students going into college. You mentioned a community college experience, but the unfortunate reality is that even students entering schools such as Harvard are not getting what they should.

Anika Prather:

I'm not going to name names because I don't like to shout out people. I had a student who at another pretty good traditional university could not write, had no idea how to take her thoughts and put it on paper. I was sending her workbooks from my elementary students to practice, and she was in my freshman writing class. She could not write at all. She was brilliant though, but she could not put her thoughts to paper. I remember writing to some of the leadership, how do we help a student like this? I remember talking to her, asking her, "What happened?" She's a first generation and her parents were immigrants. She said, "Well, I spent most of my time in Esau." I said, "Well, did they teach you how to write?" She said, "I was never ever taught how to even just write a sentence."

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

I don't understand what English is being taught, if it's not at least partially.

Anika Prather:

I think it's because people have a misunderstanding of what English is, especially this day and time. It's just the language of the land. There's a whole order and this is again... See, this is a whole another rabbit trail we're about to go on. ... why I like Latin. See, I can talk about that, but that's the other part of classical education that's really essential is learning Latin. So, because you learn the root of how the written language was organized and formalized. So, when you give that to students, they gain that literacy to be able to put it on paper. So, for her, Esau was just being able to speak English and understand it through her ears, but the time was not taken for her to translate that to the paper.

Michael Poliakoff:

I want to just interrupt for a moment. I know we have at least one really important question that Veronica and I want to ask you about, which is the way that you have integrated religion and faith into education and character development. This is something that we don't always see in education, and it's been a signature of your work.

Anika Prather:

Yeah. My school is really different in that we are a Christian school. So, I started a Christian school that I wanted to be the antithesis of Christian schools I attended as a child and not political, okay. Every Christian school I attended as a child, I went to Christian schools from pre-K through 12th grade, every single one taught us we were sinning if we didn't vote for Bush or Reagan, every single one. Literally, we were taught in chapel that we are sinning. My father, who was a pastor at the time, was a staunch Democrat, so I was very offended. So, I definitely didn't want to be a Democrat school. I wanted to just be a school where whether no matter who your parents vote for, you feel welcomed. That was one.

I really wanted a school that was disconnected from politics, that knows about how the government runs but was disconnected from politics. Teachers, students, parents would not feel ostracized for their political leanings. That was my first thing. The other thing is I wanted to make sure it wasn't a school that forced indoctrination, but just basically gave the information of our faith but also allowed students to explore other faiths. That has not hurt faith at all. Sometimes we think that if we expose children to other religions, they will somehow forget their faith, but it actually helps them understand the faith of their family more and it helps them decide what they want their faith to be. I feel that children should be allowed to choose their faith path.

Now, we are a Christian school, but it's not an indoctrinating Christian school. If you want to go deeper in study of Christianity, you have to sign up for a Bible study that happens after school hours at 4:30. During the day, the devotional, what we do, the morning chapel, I'll call it, is very inspirational. It is a time for kids to ask questions, to engage when they don't believe. We've had students who struggled with going to chapel because it really contradicted what they believe. So, we created a separate group for them to still have a morning time of faith building, but was respectful. Somebody may hear that and think I am somehow watering down my faith, which I'm not, because at the same time of me doing this, we've had children come to believe in the faith that we have.

We've had parents come to believe, but at the bottom line, they feel loved unconditionally. Then the final concept about faith is it is historical. So, a lot of faith-based literature, whether it be the Holy Bible, the Torah, the Quran, or even the writings of Confucius, they all somehow connect to history. They do fill in some holes of history. So, we look at studying faith as a part of the classical tradition, studying it as a piece of literature as well.

Veronica Mayer Bryant:

Anika, I know that both you and Michael are involved with the classic learning test on the Board of Academic Advisors. I think that initiative is one that's very interesting. It might be interesting to our audience. If you could speak to a little bit about what the classic learning test is, what it does, and what value you think it brings in supporting, encouraging classical education, and if there's any other initiative you'd like to mention you think is valuable in supporting and encouraging classical education, academic excellence for students K-12 through higher ed, but we'd love to hear about it.

Anika Prather:

Yeah. We use the classic learning texts for our senior exit exams. So, every graduate has to take it, and we do that so that we can just gauge what learning has happened or do we see a change. It's also a little bit of research I'm doing. I put every score in a spreadsheet just to see. We don't teach to the test, so we're not a testing type school, but we know that tests are important. So, they do things like the classic learning tests. We have some other diagnostic tests we give lower grade level students.

One thing we've identified is that students who've been at our school, say if a student came just from a local public school right into our school and maybe has been with us for part of the year, their score is usually very low. If the student has been with us for a full year, their scores go up by 10 points. If they're with us for two or more years, their scores are consistently 30 points higher. One of the things the classic learning test has provided me is a way... Because of especially the literature selections on the verbal parts, it's not just random selections. These are writings from various authors of the canon that has been also infused with other diverse authors such as Frederick Douglass or James Baldwin or Du Bois.

My students who take it say the same thing, that because of this, it feels familiar to them. So, there's an emotional part of it that makes them feel less anxious about taking the test. So, there's that piece, and then there's an enjoyment that they have in engaging with the literature and the assessment. So, also, finally, the CLT exam has been very helpful in helping our students select colleges to go to. It's created a community that supports their educational journey. Whereas usually when you go to a college board, it's just a number. You go in and take the test at the local testing center and they don't know who you are, but our students feel seen.

So, usually, when our students take the CLT exam, if they got a decent score, colleges are contacting them. But also the members of the classic learning test have been to visit students, have engaged with

students, and it's created a sense of community for them, which for my population of students, they need that support. They need to feel that type of support. Many of them are first generation college students, so it is good for them to have that feeling.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, all I can say is thank you not only for this really wonderful podcast that we're so looking forward to sharing with our higher ed audience, but for everything you've been doing, the Living Water School, Cornerstone, the scholarship, The Black Intellectual Tradition, your heart and your mind. I look forward to working with you on many projects in the coming months and years.

Anika Prather:

Thank you so much. Me too. I was really looking forward to today, so I'm glad we were here together.