

Author: Faculty should stick to teaching

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee at Martin back in the 1970s, I had a biology professor who had a penchant for launching into a 30-minute diatribe on Agent Orange every time a helicopter flew over the building where our class was held.

It was kind of entertaining, but it usually had absolutely nothing to do with what we were supposed to be covering in this particular course.

Similarly, when I was a graduate student at Northern Illinois University in the 1980s, I had another professor who used to venture off – for no apparent reason except that he could – into these extended sermons about how the neighborhood where you lived in DeKalb, Ill., determined your status in the institutional pecking order. Again, listening to the guy rant about how he had been overlooked for several important appointments at the university was kind of enlightening, but really had nothing to do with the course he was supposedly teaching.

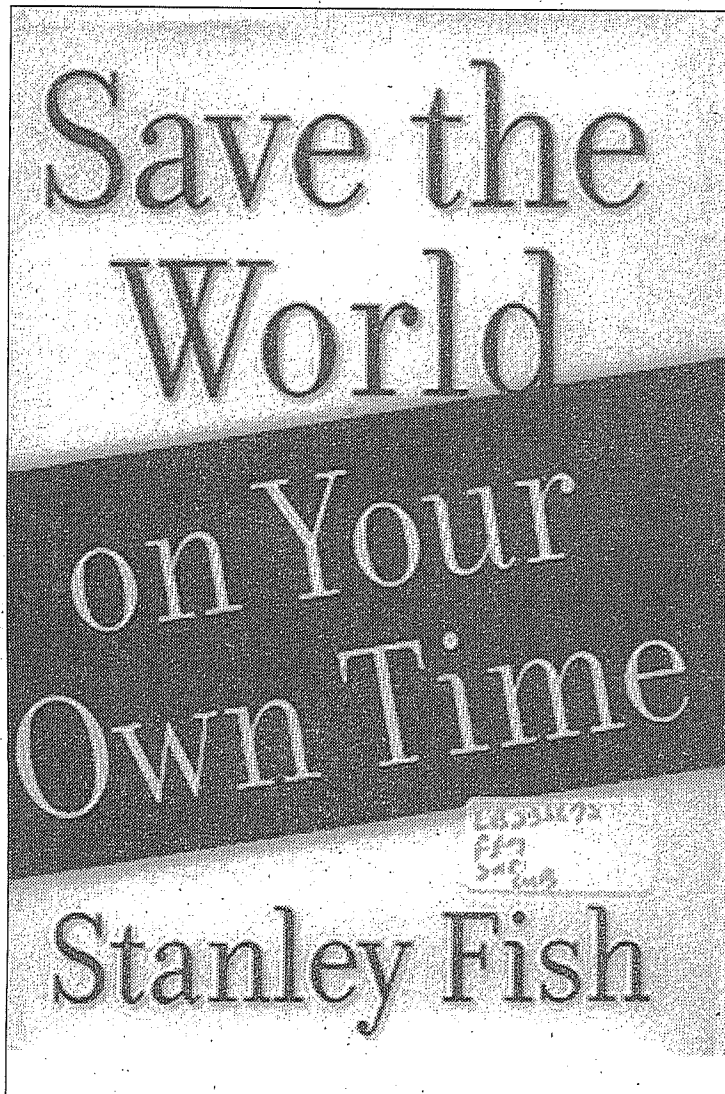
These two examples from my personal experience sort of sum up one of the biggest problems with higher education today, at least according to Stanley Fish, author of the new best-seller, "Save the World on Your Own Time."

"It is when academics either don't know or have forgotten exactly what it is they are supposed to do that trouble begins, and criticisms of the academic enterprise multiply," Fish explains. "So let us begin with a simple question. What exactly is the job of higher education and what is it that those who teach in colleges and universities are trained and paid to do?"

Fish believes that faculty (as well as administrators and other members of the campus community) at many institutions see their role in a more all-encompassing manner than should really be the case.

As citizens in a free society, we all have the right to pursue our own political, economic, moral and social agendas. At the same time, Fish feels that faculty routinely and unethically abuse their positions of influence with students when they veer off into areas that are not specifically associated with their particular academic disciplines.

If you are an English instructor, for example, your job is to teach English; your opinion about whether abortion should be legal-



"Save the World on Your Own Time" by Stanley Fish. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012. 208 pages, \$14.95.

ized or if Medicare is inherently good or bad is irrelevant to the task at hand. If it isn't mentioned in the syllabus, then don't mention it in class.

"I am urging professors to remain silent on important political issues only when they are engaged in teaching," Fish writes. "The moment a teacher tries to promote a political or social agenda, mold the character of students, produce civic virtue, or institute a regime of tolerance, he or she has stepped away from the immanent rationality of the enterprise and performed an action in relation to which there is no academic freedom protection because there's nothing academic going on. After hours, on their own time, when they write letters to the editor or speak at campus rallies, they can be as vocal as they like about anything and everything.

"A good liberal arts course is not

good because it tells you what to do when you step into the ballot box or negotiate a contract," he continues. "A good liberal arts course is good because it introduces you to questions you did not know how to ask and provides you with the skills necessary to answer them, at least provisionally."

"Save the World" is comprised of seven relatively straightforward chapters and can easily be digested in one sitting. The book is more of an extended essay than a research effort; as such, it is readily accessible to the general public as well as to those who may be more familiar with the inner workings of a contemporary college campus.

The book is also liberally populated with anecdotes and other illustrations – many culled from today's headlines – that serve to bring the subject matter to life in an interesting and even entertaining

way. It turns out Fish doesn't have to look too far to find instances of faculty abuse – as he defines it.

"A failure of judgment was also at the heart of the Larry Summers saga, which ended with his resignation as the president of Harvard," Fish observes. "Summers got into trouble when he speculated at an academic conference that the underrepresentation of women in the sciences might have a genetic basis. Summers offered serial apologies for his comments but accompanied them with a defense that took them back. I was, he said, just being provocative. But being provocative is not in the job description."

Fish is the Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor and professor of law at Florida International University in Miami as well as dean emeritus of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the author of 12 previous books, including "The Fugitive in Flight: Faith, Liberalism and Law in a Classic TV Show," "There's No Such Thing As Free Speech: And It's a Good Thing, Too," and "Unless It Moves the Human Heart: The Craft and Art of Writing."

He is also a frequent contributor to The New York Times, Harper's, The Atlantic, Esquire and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

"It is a question finally of what business we are in, and we are in the education business, not the democracy business," Fish concludes. "Democracy, we must remember, is a political not an educational project. Even though certain elements of democratic procedures and principles may prove useful in an academic setting – note that 'useful' is an administrative, not a moral, notion – democracy is not generally appropriate as a standard and benchmark in academic life."

Although I do not feel the practices he describes are as pervasive as Fish contends in "Save the World," I do think he has a valid point that should perhaps be taken to heart by some of my colleagues. There are faculty members who need to keep in mind that the first order of business on a college campus is simply to teach the subjects they were hired to teach.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.