Conflict and Change in the Academic Community

Sidney Hook
New York University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol2/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives (1969-1979) by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
Among the current myths that circulate about the American college and university is the view that they have been very conservative institutions, hostile to educational change and cloistered off from the tumults and troubles of the market place. On the basis of my own experience as student, teacher, and administrator, covering a time-span of more than a half-century, I can testify to the injustice and inaccuracy of such a characterization. Much of that period has been spent, together with colleagues, in prolonged and agonizing reappraisals of the objectives of higher education, particularly liberal arts education, and the refashioning of the curriculum of studies to achieve these objectives. The very diversity of our institutions with respect to methods, content, requirements and standards of instruction is weighty evidence of the experimental nature of American education, and its sensitiveness to a wide variety of educational needs. From the multi-versity to the denominational college all are in need of educational improvement. The present ferment within them may provide the occasion for accelerated change and continued improvement but only if we do not assume that every change is ipso facto an improvement. Institutions like human beings change for better or worse.

At the same time during the last half-century the governance of universities and colleges has on the whole been transformed from administrative absolutisms with respect to educational issues to academic communities in which faculties possess preponderant powers if and when they choose to exercise them. Although the structure, legal
and otherwise, of our colleges and universities is today in debate and in transition, the proper resolutions of this and allied problems seems to me to be clearly dependent upon the prior determination of what the educational function or goal of the institution should be.

The history of American higher education, then, shows no hostility to change. The all-important question today is how changes are to be effected—by coercion or the threat of coercion or by reflective discussion and debate. Unfortunately, there is a widespread tendency to introduce reforms not in the light of a considered analysis of basic issues but in terms of what will restore order and prevent further physical disruption of the campus—as if this were the primary criterion of what the best higher education for modern man should be, as if the absence of physical turbulence—the freedom from arson, bombings, violent confrontation—could be anything more than a necessary condition for the locus of a liberal educational experience.

I have been a lifelong critic of American higher education mainly on the ground of its deficiencies as an instrument of liberal education whose ideals I regard as perennially valid. (The “perennial” must not be confused with the “eternal”). In my Education for Modern Man I have offered a program of positive reconstruction of the college curriculum along the lines of John Dewey’s educational philosophy whose validity seems to me more apparent today than when it was originally published.

Before addressing myself to current challenges to the ideals of a liberal education, I wish to take sharp issue with those who confidently assert that today’s graduates are better educated than their predecessors. If the enduring quality of the liberally educated mind is the pursuit of freedom through the arts of intelligence, then by and large we must frankly recognize that liberal arts education has failed dismally. When arson, obscenity, violence, confrontations, classroom disruptions and hooliganism, and cognate activities are present, the legacy of liberal education is absent. Nonetheless, I find it significant that some apologists for radical student activism should contend that despite the means that it employs, this movement is designed to re-instate the traditional values of liberal arts education betrayed by its faithless faculty servitors. This reminds me of nothing so much as the contention of advocates of almost totalitarian philosophies that despite their dictatorial means they are “really” committed to democracy in a “higher” or “truer” sense.

By a liberal arts education I mean an education whose curriculum has been designed to help students develop those powers and resources—intellectual, emotional, cultural—that will enable them to acquire in a greater or lesser measure:

1. a perspective on the events of their time with which to meet the challenges of present and future experience
(2) a constellation of values or a set of meanings or a calling or a developing center around which to organize their lives

(3) the knowledge, ideals, and techniques necessary for them adequately to perform their duties as free citizens of a free society

(4) a cultivated sensibility and inner landscape so that they can live a rich and significant personal life in a continuous process of self-education.

These are generic ideals whose connotations embrace an indeterminable number of special and temporal goals. It should be quite clear that the commitment to a liberal arts education does not entail a single and fixed curriculum for everyone. On the contrary: just as the ideal or pursuit of health is comparable with quite different regimens of hygiene and diet for different individuals, so a liberal arts education will have not only an historically varied content as society becomes more and more complex but will be reached by varied paths reflecting the experience, capacity, needs and interests of the student.

Today this conception of a liberal arts education, which I regard as a basis and sometimes an accompaniment of all higher professional education, is under attack from many different quarters. I wish to consider some of them.

The first of the many threats to liberal education is the popular view that the curriculum of our colleges should be oriented to meeting the crises that periodically arise in society, that threaten to set the world afame or to imperil our national survival or health of the economy. This crisis-oriented approach to education assumes that the course of liberal study can and should be so organized that we can win a war or end it, prevent recessions or inflations, extend civil rights, rebuild our ghettos, stop the population explosion, prevent pollution—whatever may be the "good cause" which we as citizens rightfully deem to have overwhelming priority at the moment.

In view of the extent to which the colleges and universities of the country have responded to appeals to gear their curricular offerings to special situations and emergencies, the complaint that institutions of higher education have been academic cloisters and ivory towers, uninvolved and unconcerned with the troubled fate of man and society, borders on the grotesque. It is typical of the looseness and irresponsibility of much of the writing about the state of American higher education today. If anything there is a greater need of ivory towers for competent persons who wish to live in them, especially when we recall the great benefits to mankind from those who have inhabited them in the past. Even practical effects are best achieved by indirection. On any but the most philistine conception of human culture, the larger community has an ever present need for its seers, prophets and lonely men of vision who sometimes seem maddeningly
irrelevant to the intellectual and social fashions of the moment. We cannot breed such men but we should not prevent them from functioning by denigrating them or depriving them of a hospitable environment. They are all too rare under the best of conditions.

It is one thing to aim to develop through curricular means the attitudes and capacities necessary to think and act intelligently in periods of crisis. It is quite another thing to believe that the special knowledge and skills required for the mastery of specific crises can be acquired in advance of their appearance. It is one thing to plan a curriculum of studies with an awareness of the social trends and problems that are shaping the future and that are certain to affect the lives of generations to come. It is simply Utopian in the bad sense of the term, i.e. unrealistic and self-defeating, to imagine that a curriculum must necessarily keep up with all the specific trends and changes that are cried up as important in the great news media, that often emerge into and fade out of public consciousness with bewildering suddenness. It is one thing to develop a readiness of response, an ability to move promptly and intelligently in grappling with successive problems. It is quite something else to become petrified in a specific posture, however excellent it may have been with respect to some previous complex of problems.

This particular myth that colleges and universities can anticipate through curricular panaceas, the specific crises of the future and help master them, not to speak of crises of the present, overlooks the most patent truths about the history of past crises and of the kind of social action necessary to resolve them. It is a myth which has been attributed with some justification to modernists who have invoked Dewey’s name but have either not read or not properly understood him. The opposite of a myth, however, can be just as mythical. Some traditionalists argue, in contradistinction to the above, that the best preparation for social change is the immersion in a fixed curriculum or program of studies. For example, Robert Hutchins writes: “if one neglects history in favor of current affairs, first he will never know history, and second he will not understand current affairs.” (Oscar Wilde put this more felicitously a long time ago when he wrote: “He to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives.”) We should applaud this recognition of the value of knowledge of history and the plea for its intelligent study. But then Hutchins goes on to add: “The part of the schools is not to expedite current affairs but to initiate students into timeless affairs.” One cannot help asking: How can the study of timeless affairs help us to understand historical affairs which by definition are not timeless? Surely there is a distinction between the enduring which is part of historical existence, and the timeless!

An intelligent modernity does not require that we redraw the
maps of learning each year or decade or even generation at every level. The past, even interpretations of the past, do not change that much. Intelligent revisions and adaptations of the curriculum are always in order, and if better methods and techniques of learning and teaching are available, let us employ them as soon as possible. But not all knowledge becomes obsolescent at once!

There are more serious threats to the future of liberal arts education, as I have conceived it, allied to this ill-conceived notion that the university be crisis-oriented. They are more serious in that they challenge the supremacy of the authority of reason, or better, the authority of intelligence, which gradually has emerged as the ideal of the secular university however much it has been breached by different pressure groups who in behalf of some private faiths or vested interests have struggled against its recognition. This ideal is intimately related to the conception of the university in the words of Karl Jaspers, "as the place where truth is sought unconditionally in all its forms." It is an ideal which like the value of intelligence in reflective moral experience is the only valid absolute because it is self-critical, aware of its own limitations. The view that American institutions of higher learning stress intelligence and the rational process too much is another bizarre notion of the educational underworld for which no rational evidence is advanced. A much more formidable case can be made for the opposite view.

Today the challenge to intelligence takes the form of the renewed cult of raw experience, of glorification of action, passion and sensual absorption as if they were immediate avenues not only to excitement but to truth and wisdom. Hoary errors in the history of thought have been revived to undergird this view when those immersed in its cult deign to defend it. "We learn by experience," it is said. "We learn by doing. We learn by going into the fields, streets and factories—by marching, demonstrating, fighting, etc." One might just as well say we learn by living, and that the longer we live the more educated we are.

This is absurd on its face. But even if it were not, it is apparent that one does not need a university to acquire this kind of education—if one calls it an education. Life is not a school except as a dubious metaphor. There are many ways by which reality may be experienced or encountered, all legitimate in their context, but the knowing which gives us understanding and truth is a distinctive mode of experience. It is not true that we learn by experience. We learn through experience, and only when we have the capacity to learn. And what we learn through experience is more likely to be valid when we confront experience with a prepared mind. It is the cultivation and development of the prepared mind and its attendant functions of trained observation and disciplined imagination which is or should
be the objective of all schooling, and especially schooling on the college and university level.

It is true that ultimately we learn by doing. But it is not true that all doing is a form of learning. Here, too, the role of ideas or hypotheses is central. Their presence is what distinguishes the intelligently learned man from the learned ass, from the dogmatic autodidact, and from those long on experience but short in wisdom.

Lest you think I exaggerate the extents to which the cult and glorification of raw experience is cried up today by those who pander to popular life-styles among students, I quote from a college reader, *Starting Over*, hot off the press by two professors at the University of California at Berkeley. “We don’t rule out the possibility,” they tell us in their preface, “that Lenny Bruce may have more to teach us than Alfred North Whitehead . . .” With characteristic lack of precision, they fail to tell us about what, aside from obscenity, Lenny Bruce can teach us more than Alfred North Whitehead—one of the profoundest minds of the Twentieth Century. To learn about obscenity one hardly needs to attend a university!

Effective schooling of the prepared mind requires clinical experience that may take the student out of the classroom to amplify the meaning and test the validity of what he has learned within it. But it must be intelligently planned, supervised, and carefully assessed. Emphasis on clinical experience, where appropriate, cannot be overstressed. It is analogous to the experimental approach. It is a far cry, however, from current demands that uncontrolled, divers, helter-skelter forays into “life” and “experience” be recognized as integral and valid elements of university education. The demand that “action Ph.D.’s” be awarded, that graduate students receive credit for leading rent strikes, organizing the unemployed, fighting pollution, and that undergraduates be granted academic recognition merely for the experience of traveling or living abroad is a *reductio ad absurdum* of this view. One may as well give them academic awards for sex and marriage!

Another challenge to liberal arts education is implicit in the demand that the research, teaching, scholarship—in short its total curricular activity in whole and part, be “relevant.” What nonsense is covered by that term! The cry for relevance extends from the simple demand that the teacher talk sense to the demand that what he teaches, regardless of his subject matter, help achieve the classless society. Strictly speaking, the term “relevant” is relational. We must always ask: “Relevant to what?” Normally in the life of mind what is taught, if the teaching is good, is relevant to a *problem*. Problems themselves are relevant to domains of experience. The problem of *who* first propounded the theory of organic evolution or the labor theory of value is irrelevant to the problem of its validity. One man’s problem may
be irrelevant to another man's purposes or interests without affecting its significance in its own field. In a well ordered university, where the scholarly faculty decides the existence of certain fields of study in a university is *prima facie* evidence that the field is deemed to have educational significance in the light of the objectives of liberal arts study, any attempt to control the relevance of studies except on educational grounds is an intolerable interference with academic freedom.

Most claims that higher education be "relevant" are either politically motivated or inspired by narrow utilitarian considerations. I shall discuss the political motivations below. The others are open to the easy retort that narrow utilitarian considerations are irrelevant not only to the ideals and delights of liberal arts education but to the multiple, indirect and enlarged social usefulness of what is not immediately useful. Einstein's special theory of relativity had no earthly use when it was first propounded. But it was highly relevant to a genuine problem—the negative findings of the Michelson-Morley experiment. The current demands for relevance would have driven Einstein and many others out of the university. Whitehead used to celebrate the perpetual uselessness of the theory of numbers and symbolic logic. Although they have now found a use, they have always had a sufficient justification to those who enjoy the games and beauty of abstraction.

Related to these challenges is the critical challenge to liberal arts education which stresses the importance of immediacy—the demands that the curriculum offer solutions to complex problems that can only lead to early if not overnight transformations of our society, economy, law and culture. Radical activist students are properly aware of the distance between the goals of the American dream and our current achievement—something which they have learned in large part through the despised curricular offerings of the present. They are not properly aware—indeed, they aggressively ignore—the fact that American society has again and again raised its sights and periodically redefined the goals of the American dream. They have, therefore, systematically ignored the distance covered in removing the obstacles to political and social equality, and despite the great problems and injustices still remaining, the magnitude of the social gains. Disregarding the fact that American colleges and universities have been the great centers of outspoken criticism and dissent in American life, they have pictured them as an exploitive institution of the Establishment caricaturing the whole notion of the Establishment—a vulgarized Marxist view of "the ruling class"—with their charge that the organized working class is part of it. In consequence, they have demanded not only that their instruction be relevant in relation to their purposes but that it be oriented to reformist even revolutionary objectives vaguely de-
fined but completely and explicitly critical of every aspect of American
history and culture.

The truth tends to be the first casualty of every war and crusade. One-sided criticism can distort the truth every whit as much as apologetic accolades. On several campuses the classes of professors who have not taken a sufficiently critical stance to one or another aspect of American culture—in the eyes of enraged students—have been disrupted. There is no record of interference (which would have been just as deplorable!) with the instruction of teachers openly sympathetic to the Viet Cong or to the totalitarian despotisms of Castro, Mao-tse-tung or the Kremlin with their holocaust of victims. It is not surprising, therefore, that these radical activists and their faculty allies have denounced the ideal of “objectivity” as a bourgeois myth. To challenge the ideal of objectivity, difficult as it may be to reach, as a chimera is to renounce the ideal of the truth which is the raison d'être of the liberal university. To deny that the concept of objectivity is intelligible is incoherent and self-contradictory, for it would prevent us from distinguishing between historical fiction and historical fact, and make groundless and arbitrary even the radical activist's litany of alleged American crimes.

An unexpectedly formidable challenge to liberal arts education has been nurtured by some liberals so acutely aware of the failures of the liberal tradition to achieve its promise, that they have betrayed its perennially valid ideals—sometimes out of simple confusion and sometimes out of cowardice—moral and physical. I refer to the failure to recognize the human experience or the human condition as the basic source and orientation of the curriculum, and the resulting and growing fragmentation of the curriculum into isolated blocks of study, into “Black Studies,” “Afro-American Studies,” “Third World Studies.” The Black experience, the African experience, the Third World experience, the Jewish experience, the Irish experience, etc., are all part of the human experience and as such worthy of inclusion in those areas and subject matter whose understanding is required to achieve a proper liberal education. The revision of the traditional liberal arts courses in history, literature, art and the social sciences to do justice to the various ethnic expansions of human experience has long been overdue and is currently being undertaken. That is one thing. The organization of special blocks of study often open in effect only to members of minority groups, controlled and organized by these students and their representatives, breaches important assumptions of liberal education as well as the principles of academic freedom. Here I stress only the educational aspect of the question. There are no class truths, national truths or racial truths as distinct from truths, objective truths about classes, nations and ethnic groupings. The Black experience is neither necessary nor suf-
cient to understand the truth about slavery any more than the experience of white Southerners is necessary or sufficient to understand the truth about the Reconstruction Period, or experience in Fascist or Communist countries is necessary or sufficient to learn or teach the truths about their terroristic regimes. I find it highly significant that the powerful criticisms of the proposals for separate courses of study for black students, made by distinguished Negro educators like Kenneth Clark, Sir Arthur Lewis, Bayard Rustin and others, have provoked no considered replies but only derisive epithets. Many administrators who have supported the demand for autonomous Black Studies programs have done so not on supportable educational grounds but out of fear that their campuses would be torn apart. Professor Henry Rosovsky who did pioneering work as Chairman of the Harvard Committee on African and Afro-American studies in devising an undergraduate major in Afro-American studies with the same standards of academic excellence that obtained for other majors flatly charges that the action of the Harvard faculty reversing the report of his committee and in effect giving black undergraduate students "powers hitherto held only by Harvard senior faculty and denied to junior faculty, graduate students and non-black undergraduates" was adopted in the face of threats and violence.

To make exceptions to principles of equity as well as valid educational policy in order to compensate for historical injustices is an inverse form of racism just as objectionable to sensitive and intelligent members of minority groups as traditional forms of racism. To lower standards of judgement and excellence, to dilute content and subject matter as a form of intellectual reparations is to restore and compound the infamies of the double standard. The student is just as much a second class academic citizen if an institution discriminates in his favor on the basis of his skin color as he is when it discriminates against him on the same basis.

There are dangerous tendencies in the admission policies of some institutions which mistakenly believe that democracy in education requires that all groups in the population be represented proportionally among the student body and faculty. A case may be made for the view that in American democratic society everyone has a human right to the kind and degree of schooling from which he can profit and which will facilitate the growth of his intellectual and cultural powers to their fullest. But a right to an education no more carries with it the right to a specific kind of education or to the same degree of education for everyone than the right to medical treatment entails the right to the same kind of medical treatment no matter what one is ailing from. Here as elsewhere individual need, interest, capacity should be the determining considerations. Democracy is not a belief in the moral equality of those who are the same or alike but
in the moral equality of difference—whether they are physically different, racially different or intellectually different.

The liberal arts conception of higher education is based upon a belief in the community of educational interest among teacher-scholars and learners and administrators. This conception is being threatened by something analogous to a “class struggle” view according to which the university is a factory in which students are processed and exploited by their teachers and administrators. But knowledge is not a commodity of which one can say that the more one has of it the less remains for others. It belongs to the family of values of which it is true to say that they are not diminished but enhanced by being shared. Education is not in the first instance a quest for power, whether student power or faculty power but a quest for truth, a means for growth, spiritual enlargement and maturation. Where a community of educational interest prevails in the university this does not preclude difference, sometimes sharp differences about a multitude of things. But so long as the class struggle conception of education does not enter to disrupt rational exchange of views, all of these differences are negotiable in the same way by which we seek to resolve scientific differences. This is why the university can be both a conservator of values and attitudes as well as an innovator. It cannot legislate for the community, certainly not for the democratic community. It serves that community without being either a servant or master of it.

All the challenges to liberal education I have considered come to a head in frank espousals for the politicalization of the university. By the politicalization of the university is meant that direct involvement of the university as a corporate institution in the controversial political and social problems of the day. The radical activists of our time speak out of both sides of their mouths on this question, sometimes condemning the university for allegedly already being politically involved, and as guilty of betraying the ideal of non-involvement, and sometimes—the real burden of their song—condemning the university for being involved on the wrong political side. Not content with having won the right for individual faculty members to espouse any political cause they wish without prejudicing their position in the university community, they seek to draw the university as such officially into the endorsement, teaching and organization of programs for social reform and/or revolution of the society on whose largesse and support the university ultimately depends. Since these activists assert that no program of social reform or commitment can dispense with an ideology, they are proposing that universities cease making a fetish of objectivity and neutrality and become ideological institutions.

This is a recommendation which if acted upon can result only in educational disaster. If the universities attempt to politicize them-
selves, and instead of studying, proposing and critically analyzing programs of social action, seek to implement these programs as part of an agenda of social action, the unconverted larger community will not only withdraw its support but purge or suppress them. The universities will lose their hard won relative autonomy and be politicalized with a vengeance but from an ideological quarter hardly congenial to the radical activists who will be swept away together with their liberal allies. Although I am convinced that the consequences of politicalizing the university will be suicidal, I do not wish to base my criticisms of the proposal on these grounds but in terms of the values of the liberal arts traditions.

The attempt to line up the university as such behind some particular program of reform or revolution testifies to a failure to establish a consensus or win agreement to positions on the basis of argument and evidence. There is very little that a university can do as such that a faculty of persuaded individuals cannot do as well. Where a university takes a stand on capitalism or socialism, or war and peace or methods of urban reconstruction, in the nature of the case the position of the minorities which cannot accept that stand becomes precarious. They appear as malcontents and troublemakers sabotaging the larger commitments of the university.

Once the university becomes politicalized, the students, too, become politically polarized if they have not already reached that state. Students and faculty then join forces in ways already familiar to us not only in the universities of some foreign countries but on some of our own campuses. Factionalization among extremists leads to a kind of competition among them to implement the corporate policies more vigorously and to push the university into the forefront of the struggle to radicalize society. The effect of ideological commitment on departments—on the appointment and promotion of faculty personnel can easily be imagined. The normal frictions and conflicts that operate even when the university is uncommitted and permits all the winds of doctrine to blow freely on the campus become exacerbated to a point where professional competence, which should be the first and main criterion in matters of this kind, is subordinated, under all sorts of pretexts and rationalizations, to ideological considerations. The canons of professional ethics and integrity are celebrated in the holiday rhetoric on convocations and commencements but are abandoned in practice.

That politicalization of the university constitutes an obvious threat to academic freedom is acknowledged. Sometimes in an effort to minimize the danger, advocates of politicalization narrow the scope of the “political” to grave issues or to periods of crisis. But the definition of grave issues depends on how intensely human beings feel about them, and the world is always in crisis. More often, and
especially among students and junior faculty, academic freedom is regarded as a kind of class privilege of professors that can readily be sacrificed or compromised to further larger ideological goals or purposes.

It may sound harsh but there is convincing evidence that it is true: Academic freedom in the United States today is threatened not so much by fundamentalist churchmen, reactionary businessmen, and political demagogues, as much as it is by ideological fanatics among students and faculty. It is ironical that they owe their presence in the university and the fact that they are given an opportunity to proclaim their ideological wares to the very principles of academic freedom which they violate and undermine by their disruptive activities. They ignore the truth that genuine tolerance does not require tolerance of the actively intolerant.

No one can reasonably defend the status quo in American higher education. For one thing there is no such thing as the status quo. For another, the growth of American universities in the past has not always been guided by a critical and self-conscious philosophy of education. Many activities and enterprises could more appropriately be housed elsewhere. The university cannot be all things to all men, an instrument of every purpose, without losing its intellectual dignity and authority and ultimately its honesty. Everything depends upon the methods of change and the direction of change. I take it for granted for the moment that the methods will be through the rational and autonomous decisions of its faculties uncoerced by political groups from within or without. If I am mistaken about this and the fate of the university is a function of which political groups triumph in American life, academic freedom both of Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit will be eclipsed.

The direction of change which holds the greatest promise for deepening, enriching and developing the great humanistic and scientific legacies of university education is by liberalizing the curriculum and processes of teaching and learning in the light of the ideals of the liberal arts tradition. These legacies may stem from the contributions of socially privileged and elite groups of the past. Today our technology makes it possible for all men and women who are willing and able, to partake of them, to contribute to them, and to find meaning and enjoyment in them. The liberal arts tradition is strengthened by the principles of academic freedom and in turn draws support from them. For both keep open the pathways to new truths and new visions of excellence in man’s unending quest better to understand himself, society and the environing world.