Only in Our Learning-The Purpose of An Academic Community

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Only in Our Learning—The Purpose of An Academic Community

By HARRIS L. WOFFORD, JR.

In this era of the withering of consent, when—as the statement convening this conference says—“conflict and change have challenged the very foundation of our institutions,” let me start on an unusual note—of agreement. “The major threat,” I agree, “has been to the basic idea of . . . a community of scholars committed to the search for truth through exploration, experimentation and dialogue.” The search for truth is indeed the highest purpose of an academic community; it is truth as a question that can make man free. This is the vision without which people perish. Without it, we in our universities may win the world but lose our souls. Yet it is this basic idea of a community of scholars that is in clear and present danger.

Those are old words which for most people have run dry. But I suggest that we are entering a period when more and more people will be ready for them, and even ready for that plain Puritan thing necessary to give them meaning—hard work. At least that is one possibility, which in putting the question of purpose first in this conference, you are helping to realize.

You are not alone, for students before you have been given the same priority to this same fundamental question. What is the central purpose of an academic community, and what has caused the present confusion of purpose? Despite their disconcerting and disappointing actions and reactions, they have awakened academia from its pragmatic slumbers. Their answers may be appalling, but their main questions are right. Seeing quantity expand, they ask questions of quality; seeing means increase, they ask questions of ends; seeing the
technological society take over more and more of life, they ask questions of freedom and purpose.

If we do believe in dialogue, this is the time to take account of the events of this last decade of student awakening, constructive action, discontent and disruption, and see whether they or we have learned anything. "The Fire Next Time" at least on campus may be more bravado than prophecy, but there has been something of a fire in academia these last years. We know some of the casualties, but do we recognize any benefits of the fire last time? Do we understand what caused the threat in the first place?

If the fire had simply been put out and business as usual resumed, then everything from the Peace Corps through Berkeley to the beserk violence of last year could blur in our memory as a rise and fall that reflected the larger tragedies of the sixties. But though the inadequacy of the student platform for academic reform or revolution is now self-evident, the discontent with the old system is more widespread than ever; and though the wild disruptions are diminishing, students continue to question everything. Perhaps this state of permanent discontent is in fact the chief thing we have gained.

With the crisis of universal higher education at hand, with the number of students in colleges and universities doubling in one decade, with the expansion of knowledge outdistancing academia's ability to assimilate and teach it, with the increasing complexity of society requiring a much higher intellectual level among a much larger proportion of the people, with the big buzzing confusion of the world reaching almost everyone through the mass media and almost no one seeing the world steady and whole, if there were no discontent it would be an educator's duty to create some. But none need be invented now, for student disillusion is spreading and once-revolutionary hopes are tasting ashen in their mouths. With this may come new wisdom, which it should be an educator's duty to discern and promote.

Easy Rider's epitaph for the hip and psychedelic scene, "We blew it," appears to be accurate also for the student uprisings on campus—and, it should be added, for most of our efforts at academic reform in response to those up-risings, as well as for all the green and golden hopes of the early Sixties. Reading the Yale Daily News for distance (and to keep up with a freshman daughter), I was struck by the articles celebrating the change of editorial staffs and the beginning of the new decade. "We were the brightest kids they ever saw," reminisced an outgoing editor who summarized the academic revolution his class—1966-70—had sought and wrought:

"We got rid of the coat and tie rule as soon as we arrived at Yale. It went out one door as we came in the other."
Parietals followed a year later. We have always been proponents of change, but how much have we done?"

The new politics they were ushering in was to be "exciting and classy and under control." It was not to be "assassinations, or Song My, or students cursing administrators or total confusion." "So now," this Yale senior concluded, "we listen to records and read history and go to church and try to learn right from wrong all over again. Next time we get a crack at changing things, maybe we won't blow it." 1

The report that students were turning to history or to church was as surprising as the long lead editorial by the new staff entitled "For a Rational University." For "the New Year, the New Decade, and the New News," the editors resolved, "in the spirit of the season," that "faith in reason must be our basic premise." To indicate that they took this old-fashioned linear proposition seriously, they added:

"If the world around us chooses to adopt another standard, we must try to hold our ground. We believe that reason, no matter how faulty it can sometimes be, is the only vehicle for creating a valid community at this university and in this society."

They noted that the student tactics of 1969 had dangerously polarized the university:

"Some faculty members now appear markedly less receptive to continuing to break down the master-pupil barriers of the past in order to restructure Yale into a practicing community of scholars. For their part, many students seem acutely insensitive to a legitimate faculty concern over academic freedom, a concern which in many cases stems from personal exposure to the university disruptions presaging Hitler's Germany, to the McCarthy attacks on the academic community during the 1950's, and to the contemporary student and police violence at Berkeley, Columbia, Harvard and elsewhere."

The new Yale directors then call for an end to unreasonable attacks on the University. "Destroying this best of society's institutions will never save us from its worst," they write. After proposing several reforms, they warn: "Yet our expectations from the university cannot be unlimited."

"As students, we are here to exchange ideas, to learn, to acquaint ourselves with academic method, not to create

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or administer an ideal social organism. While we should rightly participate in decision-making in our community, neither by background, nor expertise, nor interest are we equipped to oversee its day-to-day governance. While we should use Yale’s resources to construct models for social reform and must attack racism, repression, and reaction when they appear here, we cannot assume that the university is responsible for or representative of all the ills of the rest of the society...

“We must, finally, accept the fact that only in our learning can we expect to approach truth because only in our learning can we come closest to operating free of the society around us. And to defend and protect our academic freedom we must learn to accept some of the inhumane aspects of our life here because our intellectual pursuits hold out the best promise of a better future. Yale offers us an opportunity to reflect, to examine ourselves, to ask ourselves what we can do to overcome the wrongs we see around us. That is our obligation and privilege here—to pursue truth where we are now most free so that tomorrow we can work to liberate ourselves and our society where we are not.”

That is quite a case for liberal education. It has been a long time since student leaders have been heard calling intellectual pursuits “our obligation and privilege” and saying that “only in our learning” can we hope to free ourselves or our society. At least in the college I know best, our student planners kept crossing out the phrase “liberal education” every time one of the over-40 staff put it in our draft catalog. A student from Antioch finally wrote, “What in the world is it?” And a Long Island girl said, “It is not a liberal education I want. I hate liberals. I want an education to be a radical.” That was in 1967, 1968 and 1969, when students were intoxicated with short-cuts to enlightenment or liberation, when they were confidently substituting “a community of friends committed to the enjoyment of immediate happiness through drugs, sex and sensitivity groups”—or “a community of revolutionaries committed to fighting the system by attacking pigs and by other forms of blowing people’s minds”—in place of “a community of scholars committed to the search for truth through exploration, experimentation and dialogue.”

That is not quite fair. They, too, saw themselves in search for truth, and this does not do justice to the varieties of approach along the spectrum from hippie to activist. But most of the student reformers

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and revolutionaries would share the sentiments of one of Old Westbury’s most articulate student planners who wrote of his generation:

“The thought that there is some abstract body of knowledge, some residue of learning, some classical ideas essential to an educated man is in basic conflict with their increasing sense of the subjective, the profoundly personal nature of all perceived reality. The over-intellectuality and verbality of a fierce quest of ideas *in vacuo* rubs against their grain. Pre-college training today is so rigorous, television so broadening and drugs so mind-expanding that contemporary college students are scornful of mind-body separation. They’ve sampled sex, trained their sensitivity, grooved with light shows and are not about to be told that growth occurs best by slithering an idea around a table.”3

The man who wrote that would not, I suspect, write so confidently today, though he still suspects the amoral intellect that slithers an idea around a table. Rigorous pre-college training of the current student generation has not been very manifest at Old Westbury, although the first 230 students were chosen from out of nearly 2000 applicants. Nor is there any evidence that television, drugs, sex, sensitivity, or light shows all added together provide a good foundation for higher education. Nor has that student planner’s prediction come true. Old Westbury would succeed despite itself, he wrote, for its leaders’ “instincts are better than their words . . . . Call it softness or call it decency: Old Westbury will end up allowing their students to do their thing.”

When it became apparent to many of us that the students’ thing was anything but a liberal education, as interdisciplinary programs tended to lack discipline, independent study amounted to very little study, and those who engaged in off-campus action came back not thirsty for theories to understand their experience but thirsty for more action, most of the over-40 faculty and staff drew the line and held their ground. Rejecting student demands for 50 percent of the seats on all decision-making bodies, or the more radical demand for “Power to the People” on a one-man-one-vote basis, and maintaining the faculty’s primary responsibility over teaching and curriculum, we suffered a small sit-in, and are still experiencing a smoldering civil war around the issue of Student Power.

Underneath the question of governance is the central student demand for the liberty of everyone (except the president) to do his thing (and get a Bachelor of Arts degree for it). All this political


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struggle within the College collided constantly with serious efforts at curriculum planning, educational search, or scholarship. It was not just that the trouble with participatory democracy is, as H. G. Wells said of socialism, that it takes too many evenings; the trouble is also that those interested in scholarship, educational search and curriculum planning do not want to spend their evenings in politics.

Yet our non-success in building a college with students as full partners and with a curriculum addressed in part to pressing contemporary problems such as race and poverty, marks an ironic kind of success for an experimental college. The purpose of an experimental college of liberal arts is to learn by trial and error how to provide better liberal education. An experiment by definition is an effort that may not work. It is in facing, analyzing, and learning from a failure, as much as from a success, that an experimental college justifies itself.

Wrestling with an intense form of the spirit of our time, we have learned a lot at Old Westbury, and it is encouraging to see that some of the same lessons were also being learned by the 1970 editors at Yale. On the matter of student power, for example, the *Yale Daily News* says just what I would say from our experience with full student partnership: while students should rightly participate in decision-making in the academic community, neither by background, nor expertise, nor interest are they equipped to oversee its day-to-day governance. The forms of participation will require careful constitution-making that takes into account the primary teaching authority of the faculty and recognizes that students are there primarily, as the Yale editorial puts it, to acquaint themselves with academic method, to exchange ideas, to learn.

But what have we learned about the underlying educational issue? If, as the Yale editorial suggests, the opportunity for students to reflect, to examine themselves, to ask what they can do to overcome the wrongs they see around them, in short to pursue truth and to learn has all along been offered at Yale—or at Harvard or Columbia or San Francisco or Berkeley—then what has all the shouting and shoving been about? Are we just coming full circle?

The opportunity for a liberal education has been there and is there, no doubt, in the library if nowhere else, but students have claimed that great obstacles stood in the way of the education they needed. Fortunately their negative insights went beyond such impediments as coats and ties and parietals, and their several more significant complaints have been widely registered: lectures are too large and too frequent and should not be the main form of learning; too little good teaching takes place and too little attention is paid to the quality of teaching; too much attention is paid to exams, grades and credits with not enough joy in learning or adventure in ideas; students are too often treated as subjects not citizens, with neither their consent sought
nor dissent heard; the body of knowledge is cut up in too many
compartments and the lines between them are too rigid; the structure
of special departments leaves too little room in the curriculum for
the study of critical general problems such as racial injustice, urban
chaos and war, or perennial personal problems of sex, politics and
religion.

Yet even when all these complaints have been met, and we tried to
meet them all at Old Westbury, there is still something missing. The
scaffolding of liberal education may be there, but the substance and
the soul of it are most elusive. The liberal arts appropriate to an age,
the arts by which the people can learn to be free in a particular time
and place, have always been elusive, but never more so than now.

In the early days of the academy through the Middle Ages and
into the 19th century it was assumed that there was a common thing
called liberal education that enabled a person to become his own
teacher, to do his own thing, and to serve the larger common thing—
the republic—to which he belonged. Language and mathematics,
the trivium and quadrivium, were considered to be as essential for the
mind of man as bread and water and wine are for the body; and the
major works of literature were the materials on which students tried
to master these liberal arts. Teachers advanced their own ideas and
pursued their own research, but they also helped students meet other
probably greater teachers, like Plato and Aristotle and the authors
of the Bible. The list of great books has grown, like a continuing con-
versation, and they argue with each other right up to Marx, Freud
and Einstein, but the Western world's common list can still fit on
two small shelves, in one Encyclopaedia Britannica set, and can be
read in less than a lifetime. In fact, at St. John's College students read
most of them in four years.

At Old Westbury we tried to combine a modified form of a great
books curriculum with a work-study program of education-in-action
focused on the urban condition. With the present attitudes of our
students and faculty the combination proved unstable, like oil and
water, and students reverted to their platform of letting everyone do
his thing. This is still the general student drive everywhere, as even
the Yale Daily News editorial demonstrates. In its appeal "For a
Rational University," the editors' curricular program called for "the
development of as many new courses as possible," especially around
contemporary problems, with greater emphasis on the creative arts
and freedom from departmental structure for "individual courses of
study to fit individual needs and desires." This conventional student
wisdom is where we came in at Old Westbury. If there is a common
thing called liberal education that everyone should be offered, then
"as many courses as possible" is hardly the prescription for a rational
university. If we settle for such an unlimited version of the elective
system, their grades, requirements and academic disciplines may all be abolished or loosened, and with them some unnecessary rigidities and divisions; but through the holes most of what now goes by the name of liberal education will run out.

Merely holding the dike is no answer. For most of what goes by the name of liberal education is not good enough. Neither introductory survey courses nor a potpourri of general education requirements contribute much to anyone's liberal education. The one option very few colleges or universities offer a student is a coherent curriculum of liberal arts. It is easy to ridicule the students, for though they can smell sophistry, hypocrisy and irrelevance, especially in others, it is clear that with their resistance or hostility to required courses, teachers, books, history, rules, laws, and hard work, and with their fear of failure and tendency to play always to their strengths, they are not likely to get much of a liberal education on their own. But can't we see that consciously or unconsciously the students are ridiculing us. The principle of letting everyone do his thing is already the prevailing practice in most academic communities: let every department, every professor, do his thing. In asking to apply this to themselves, students are compounding the educational anarchy that already divides the university—and they are holding an awful mirror to us. Can't we see the caricature of our incoherent curriculums?

Thirsty people grasp for dirty water when there is no clean water around, and if they have never tasted clean water they do not know the difference. Students press for academia's dirtiest water, the ultimate irrelevance of an undisciplined and unintellectual curriculum, because that is all most of them have known.

If this analysis is correct, then the highest priority of colleges and universities should be the search for coherent curriculums of liberal education appropriate for the late 20th century—and the maintenance of any pockets of such education that do exist.

If this recent round of student protest and academic reform has not taken us very far, the recognition of that failure may be the beginning of the wisdom we need. It takes no great skill for us to puncture the pretensions of the students' platform, any more than it took great skill on the students' part to expose the most glaring faults of conventional academia. But this negative round will be worthwhile if we have discovered our ignorance, if we take what we do not know as a statement of what we need to know, if we join together for the next stage of the search, knowing that never has the search for liberal education been more important or more urgent or more difficult. If there is this thing, liberal education, then the search for it, however elusive, should be the primary purpose of an academic community. And the main thing an institution of higher education should say to a student, through its curriculum and the words of its
faculty and administration, is its best collective judgment on what the student most needs to know and is least likely to know—the ingredients of an education that will enable him to "search for truth through exploration, experimentation and dialogue."

If all this is true, then the chief duty of academic administrators is just what Rosemary Park prescribed when she left the presidency of Barnard College. Our job is to be as Socratic as we can—to go around the academic community asking the central upsetting questions of purpose. In doing this seriously and gaily, and following the questions where they lead, even into controversy in the larger community, we may be able to give an example of something other than the amoral intellect that students rightly abhor. At least we will be doing our part to end the "total confusion" that students feel around them.

If by such questioning colleges and universities renew the search and scholarship comes alive with exploration, experimentation and dialogue, then our academic communities can be, what they ought to be, an example for the whole of society. For it is questions of purpose that must be asked in all our arts and sciences, in our personal lives, our politics, our technology, and our environment—asked of our nation and of the world, and asked with unusual persistence and wisdom.

Let me end with a story of how the students' prophet of revolution, Professor Herbert Marcuse, came to Old Westbury and took our students by surprise.

"What do we protest in a college where there is no ROTC and no military research, where we engage in off-campus action as part of the curriculum and we are on all the committees?" a student asked. "Be happy." Marcuse suggested. When told this was a weak answer in a world where people were being killed every day, he suggested: "Then get educated." But how could they get properly educated in a university of the Establishment, by the Establishment and for the Establishment? "You can," he said, noting that he had got the foundation for everything he has thought and done in the Imperial Gymnasium of the Kaiser's Berlin. They could do it if they read the major books and took the hard subjects. Just to cope with the modern world, he said, people needed to be more educated, more intellectual than most people have ever been, and to be agents of change, or revolution, they would have to be ten times as educated and intellectual. When our students still resisted him, especially on the importance of reading books, he said, "I sense in you the same deep-rooted intellectual inferiority complex, the same intellectual masochism and fear of things of the mind that I find in young Americans generally. But deep-rooted though it be, it must be uprooted, by love if possible and by force if necessary."

That is one definition of a curriculum. In one way or another this is the point which must now be made. If we mean it, we will
take not only our students but ourselves by surprise, and that should always be one of the purposes of an academic community.