Environmental Components of Liberal Education

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Environmental Components of Liberal Education

In the last 10 years a great deal has been learned about college environments. We know that five basic patterns have evolved in American higher education, each constituting an ecological niche for its own distinctive student types. The psychological characteristics of the most productive college environments—those Jacob called the high-impact arts colleges—have been described now in considerable detail. Furthermore, the same properties of these environments that have been found to be so peculiarly facilitative of personal growth and self-actualization have also been discovered to be associated with organizational effectiveness in other types of settings: secondary schools, industrial sites, and Peace Corps training programs. I would refer you here to my book: *People in Context*, New York: Wiley, 1969.

But it is my feeling now that there is a far more serious problem in higher education today that makes any discussion of environmental factors appear almost frivolous by comparison. Despite the great differences between the five college cultures, in the basic organization of their curricula they are all much alike. And it is that curriculum, the final flowering of the new American university, that embodies the major contradictions of contemporary society.

Almost without exception *all* undergraduate schools are organized into departments representing the disciplines to be found in the graduate schools. The undergraduate program for the junior and senior years consists of course offerings designed by each department for its majors, the student pool from which graduate school material is drawn. All students, majors and non-majors alike, are given lecture-discussion guidance through a literature considered essential by way
of preparation for subsequent graduate training. Universities so unfortunate as to have substantial numbers of undergraduates unable to handle such courses successfully do not develop an alternative curriculum but run everyone through the same content anyway, watered down to the level of the “regular” majors and stiffened by more rigorous special sections, courses or requirements for the so-called “professionals” who are the only ones considered seriously in the graduate school track.

In the first two years of the university the student credit-hour crop on which each departmental economy depends is grown. Area and distribution requirements divide the 60 hours of the lower division among baronial manors, assuring each department its share and protecting one another against predatory barbarians grabbing land for enterprises that lack graduate school ties. Once the home of courses in general education, the freshman and sophomore years at the university are now given over entirely to introductory courses intended to provide an overview of all of the options for later specialization (courses which few of the senior faculty have the breadth to teach!), supplemented by the few general tools like English or math which it is agreed everyone must have regardless of whose vineyard in which he may later labor. The lower division courses are taught by departmental expendables—graduate students and junior faculty—whose real preoccupations are elsewhere and who may actually damage their own careers if they become too seriously involved with undergraduate teaching.

Graduate school faculty represent an elite, highly select population of faculty PhD’s. They are recruited in a marketplace that is extremely sensitive to the academic rank of the schools and departments in which they received their training, and critically judgmental of a candidate’s potential for research, publication, and program building. Having been weighed repeatedly for these same qualities from the time of their initial admission to graduate school as students, the culls either discouraged from entering the university marketplace or barred from it entirely with a terminal MA, those PhD’s who become faculty in graduate programs are unquestionably the most aggressive, ambitious, energetic, counteractive, articulate, pragmatic, and intellectually facile of all graduate school products, and committed both vocationally and by personal conviction to the development of others like themselves.

It is in this respect that the graduate disciplines in the arts and sciences have come to be the determining force in education, reaching down through the colleges and high schools to the elementary grades to channel the brightest and the most successfully motivated into the tracks that lead on specifically to the graduate schools. The second-best fall out to other careers; the best are encouraged to work toward PhD’s, and the very best to join in training others. The entire school
system has become academia's way of reproducing itself.

The original model for the university was entirely functional in a developing country struggling to achieve universal secondary education and needful of every scientist and technician it could produce. A program which ensures a little knowledge in many fields and a lot of it in one is an efficient way of producing technologists who are specialized yet capable of understanding related areas of interest. The pattern for the American university was laid down in the late 19th century, at a time when industrialization was just beginning to take firm hold and the traditional church-affiliated colleges were no longer adequate to train the new types of men who were needed. Americans who had gone abroad to learn science in the German universities brought back a curriculum model on which to build here at home.

In 1870 however, only two in 100 American 18-year-olds graduated from high school and both were likely to get a terminal BA degree as well. The diversified university curriculum was a rational way to maximize institutional resources for the purpose of educating the whole of this small and homogeneous community of men. Today 80 in 100 18-year-olds graduate from high school, of whom 44 will enter college and 24 will finish. Only one of these will get a PhD, the purpose for which almost every element in the present undergraduate university curriculum has been developed. The program is now designed for only two per cent of those who are admitted to it, a singularly inefficient and dysfunctional way of educating people.

As long as participation in higher education was voluntary, access to it a privilege rather than a right, and graduation from it a seeming requirement for achievement in a competitive society, the universities continued to evolve towards their present state largely unquestioned. But the success of the same technology for which the universities were created has brought them to their present crisis. The labor force, once predominantly agrarian, is now divided almost equally between blue and white-collar workers. The blues are decreasing relative to the whites furthermore, and the percentage of professionals has risen from 3 per cent of the labor force in 1870 to 14 per cent in 1968.

Productivity can be maintained on an ever-declining base of laborers and machine operators, but the conversion of these displaced workers from the bottom of the labor pyramid to white-collar employment is more than a problem of retraining. Education continually brings the average level of intelligence up, but productive economic utilization of people from the lower half of the IQ distribution is being eroded more rapidly than new occupational categories can appear to absorb them.

A successful technology that no longer requires and indeed cannot employ a large labor force has turned the concept of the leisure class on its head. We have begun the transition to a consummatory,
leisure society, but it is being realized first by those who are too poorly equipped to be employable and who must therefore be subsidized.

These are surplus people in a scarcity economy, for whom the graded educational system designed to fit men to the needs of a competitive society must necessarily be both custodial and irrelevant. But there are no surplus people in a leisure economy, only surplus goods and time, and the function of education under those circumstances will be to equip every one to use both creatively. The new curriculum must be designed not for society but for man himself. It must be based on those invariant biological properties which so characterize man that to maximize the opportunities for their development is to optimize the opportunity for each individual to approach the utmost expression of humankind of which he is capable.

The elements of such a curriculum for man can be derived from the evidence of early childhood. Manual dexterity, social interaction, esthetic response, and linguistic capacity constitute four sources of spontaneous gratification in early life. If the student were taken as the integrating center of a curriculum composed of successively more complex forms of these four elements, permitting his own inductive capacities to lead him on from one level to the next, a form of education would emerge which might be said to be uniquely human. What is envisaged here is the spontaneous generation of activities facilitating the ultimate growth of which man is capable, rather than the continued fitting of humans to the limited categories of their predecessors. This is the form which education must take in the new social era that lies ahead.

George G. Stern

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A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Our analysis of the environmental components of a liberal education will of necessity reflect a student viewpoint. We feel that the student's college experiences should facilitate his removal of obstacles to self actualization.

The receipt of an A.B. degree means not only a ticket to financial success, the leaping of a hurdle before entering a social elite, or a step toward enrollment in a professional discipline. The college experience should encompass some broader areas of basic human concern, and be unified around a theme of defining what man can know and do, not
a construction of preconceived notions defining the composition of an educated man. And ultimately the student must arrive at his own definition.

Such an education should involve the student in a total-immersion situation with no compartmentalization into artificial disciplines or restrictions to the classroom. Curricula must become tools to serve student needs, rather than restrictive pre-professional guides and academic exercises. The strangling influence of present grading procedures inhibits intellectual curiosity and perpetuates antagonism between instructor and student. We feel that grades and liberal education are hardly compatible.

The professor would be the key element in the institution's interaction with the student. With his students, he would develop courses to suit their needs and his own. We feel a small personalized structure with close faculty-student relationships offers the most opportunities for individuals to maximize their learning. Students' varied needs can be met adequately by individualized modifications in the overall educative process.

The campus-centered activities would be designed to integrate a student's off-campus life experiences with his other studies. Travel and work experience would definitely be a part of the curriculum, alternating with on-campus seminars and projects to evaluate and assimilate recent knowledge. Developing individual techniques of problem solving would characterize the course of study.

The final characteristics of our ideal would be small size and a teaching oriented reward system. While it is conceivable that large schools can implement true liberal education, they would have to function as sub-units within the larger system, for the rich contact between participants germane to the success of the liberal education is found most often in the context of smallness. It appears to the student that teaching is merely an undesirable task of the faculty. The university should reward superior teachers on at least the same scale as competent researchers. Students realize that a system which consistently drives qualified men away from them does not meet their needs.

THE COMPONENTS

Though in the following analysis we will develop the components of a liberal education separately, we understand that in operation each element exerts influence on all the other components, and is itself influenced.

1. The Student

The first component of a student's education, then, is the student

himself. The interaction of a student with a college begins during the selection process and research has shown that different identifiable environmental pressures attract equally varied types of students.\textsuperscript{2} Students pick schools that they think will reinforce their belief systems.\textsuperscript{3}

The obvious importance of the needs and aspirations of the freshman class to the composition of the college is often overlooked due to the assumption that the new student will fit in.

The student should not be unquestioningly submerged in the prevailing normative system.

The student body is seen too often as a passive recipient of education, rather than as an active participant in the educational process.

The student culture has four identifiable sub-groups according to Trow.\textsuperscript{4}

The liberal arts college, while seeking to stimulate the other sub-cultures, must reinforce the academic sub-culture and increase the potential of a valuable liberal arts experience.

Due to the efforts of vocational and collegiate sub-cultures to prostitute the liberal education into a pre-professional training ground, increased emphasis on the real purposes of liberal education is requisite.

\ldots liberal education in its true sense is not an education which you get over with in order to go on to an adult pre-occupation with professional academic studies. It is the source of the ideas and attitudes which infuse the professional studies with their meaning for society and mankind.\textsuperscript{5}

2. The Faculty

The second basic element in any education is the teacher. We feel that liberal education is most often thwarted at this level. The distance students sense between themselves and faculty detracts from the value of student experience.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} J. L. Holland, "Determinants of College Choice," \textit{College and University}, Fall 1959.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} B. R. Clark, \textit{College Image and Student Selection in Selection and Educational Differentiation, Field Service Center and Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, California}, 1959, pp. 158-168.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} J. M. Richards, Jr., and J. L. Holland, a factor analysis of student "Explanations" of their choice of a college. ACT research reports, No. 8, Iowa City, Iowa, American College Testing Program, 1965.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Martin Trow, "Student Culture and Administrative Action," in Sutherland and Others, \textit{Personality Factors on College Campus}, 1962.
\end{itemize}
Researchers have found increased faculty involvement in teaching undergraduates an important component to quality education.\textsuperscript{6}

The professor involved only in a discipline, no matter how extensive his knowledge or valuable his research, is a poor teacher. Faculty in liberal education should re-examine their commitment to teaching in light of the fact that a liberal education is student-centered rather than discipline-centered.

3. \textit{Curriculum}

The curriculum of the institution manifests one of the important aspects of faculty influence on students. Systems of required courses based on classical conceptions of required knowledge restrict students' freedoms to investigate new areas of interest. Even the most deceptively liberal curricula do not meet student needs, since operational goals remain unchanged.

Katz and Sanford\textsuperscript{7} find that students neither acquire nor utilize the knowledge from most of their required general education courses. In the twentieth century, standardized definitions of an educated man have become anachronisms. Individuals are forced to extract minute bits of relevant information from their pervasively irrelevant coursework.

The overriding influence of study in a major field dilutes the experience of the liberal education while the pressure of professional studies in the liberal arts program is philosophically inconsistent.

The curriculum must be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of any student in the university so that adequate provision exists for a student to exercise his intellectual freedom to define what, why, how, when, and where he wants to learn. In this fashion the artificial distinction between academic curriculum and the life of the student can be partially surmounted, as “curriculum” will designate the broadest possible spectrum of student activity. A truly educational environment will support many apparently antagonistic elements within it because its various components will be unified around the student.

4. \textit{Physical Setting}

We define the physical setting of the college to include all buildings, facilities and financial resources the college may possess. Since we are aware of the economic necessity of maintaining existing structures we will turn our efforts to vital considerations for future construction. These decisions cannot be based solely on the economics of utility. Increased utility would be obtained by creating multi-purpose facili-


ties. There should be no more classrooms! Lounges, living rooms, dining rooms—anywhere people meet—will serve as classroom space. Structures incorporating living and learning centers serve to unify the educational components.

In our definition education is a living experience and we must therefore consider living quarters to be of paramount importance. There cannot be any one style of university housing. The student's residence will serve as the focal point for most of his activities; its importance in education cannot be overemphasized. The continued stress by institutions on formal learning centers sustains our present abortive liberal education system which inhibits curriculum flexibility.

Freedom in the learning experience requires access to the sources of knowledge. Library collections and functions must be expanded. Use of computers and other compact fact storage systems should be implemented. Sharing of facilities by means of advanced technology will be commonplace. The concept of flexibility in constructing a physical plant remains of utmost importance. The buildings and facilities can reflect the philosophical commitment of the institution to individualism in learning.8

We can usually identify the philosophical position of the administration as the institutional posture. As primary interpreters of existing philosophy, upper level administrators are extremely influential in establishing an education environment9 (Farnsworth 1962). College presidents, provosts and deans for the most part are not primarily concerned with the education of their students, but rather with the reputation of the institution, keeping their trustees pacified and maintaining finances in the black. From the student viewpoint only two aspects of administrative philosophy are consistent: their lack of awareness of students as people and their drive to improve institutional stature. It becomes apparent that a greater concern for the stature of individual students is necessary.

One cause of administrative misdirection lies with faculty. The selfish vested interests of faculty often obstruct meaningful curricular change. Inaction such as this perpetuates the classical, irrelevant hierarchy that impedes student development. There seems then, to be a need for extensive revision in the faculty interpretation of the philosophy of liberal education before professors can meaningfully participate in the experience desired.

All environmental components derive their vitality from the philosophy held by the institution. We have no argument with the goals expressed in many college catalogues. We do take issue with

9. Dana Fransworth, "Who Really Helps Our Students?" in Personality Factors on the College Campus, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 1962.
the current methods of implementation. The environmental components requisite for a liberal education have been structured to deny the "search for truth," rule out "fresh insights" and stifle the "developing creativity of the individual."

If institutions feel their performance is educationally sound, we ask them to tell us what they are really doing and eliminate the noble but hollow phrases from their literature.

In conclusion, we feel that the components of a liberal education are students interacting with faculty, within a curriculum at a physical locale. The underlying foundation of such an education rests on individual responsibility and a definition of liberal education as an exploration into what man can know and do. Administrators and faculty must concern themselves with these environmental components in order to increase potential for participants to carry on their own education.

"Unless these liberal values in education occupy the central place within the university and in the lives of the undergradients, and from these move into the stream of life and of the full university community, what is left is something a good deal worse than what now exists—an institution for producing clever young professionals."10


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