The Challenge to Make Undergraduate Curricula Relevant to Students’ Needs

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The Challenge to Make Undergraduate Curricula Relevant to Students' Needs

The current crisis which exists in the university is, of course, only a reflection of the turmoil in the world today. But the situation is exacerbated in the university because in many ways it has stood still and let the world go by. For this reason, students and faculty must actively question anew the relationship of the university to society.

It is nothing new to tell you that we are a restless and torn generation. There is nothing novel in the assertion that we find ourselves faced with the inequities of a society which systematically discriminates against cultural minorities. Nor need I again assert the impatience of my generation with an unjust and constitutionally questionable war.

The slogans and activist movements which we embrace in increasing numbers are merely manifestations of a more fundamental phenomena which seems elusive both to critics and participants alike. And the efforts of elder statesmen to fault these symptoms serve only to underscore the failure of our leaders to comprehend the directions of young people today.

One manifestation of this unrest is criticism of the undergraduate curriculum. Two factors inform this criticism: the conflict between our technological society and an emerging subculture whose members are in the ambiguous position of both accepting the advances of our technological society, while at the same time professing a fundamental rejection of the implications of technological advance.

Of these two, certainly the latter is, for many of us, confusing,
troubling and even angering. And yet, there is a mystical and cohesive force present in this subculture which intrigues even the most adamant opponents.

It is intriguing because the movement's cry for relevance is founded on despair—something with which we are all too familiar, and perhaps, therefore, unwilling to heed. But if we probe this despair, we discover a positive and negative aspect.

It is positive because it asks us if those who teach are speaking to the condition in which so many students find themselves. The questions of the movement bespeak alienation, concern with this concept of self, and the possibility for creative expression of the self.

The existential condition of students is fraught with the implications of our technological society: increased production and increased dehumanization. Increased production carries with it the translation of human beings, who are involved in the mechanics of production into another part of the machine.

At the same time, there is devaluation of the human being who is the recipient of the product. He becomes the object of a mass operation which is gauged to create a non-existent need on the part of the consumer. As such, the consumer simply becomes still another part of a large and manipulative machine.

New products are mass produced with little regard for the well-being of the consumer. Mechanisms for greater production fill our air with pollution. The proponents of this technological advance argue that pollution is a necessary by-product of efficiency. Even the most casually educated student in the field of mechanics understands that pollution is the result of incomplete combustion—or stated in another way, gross inefficiency!

But the most frightening aspect of the technological society is its implication that man should never accept his present condition as it pertains to personal accoutrements, while at the same time damning those who actively question, particularly in the area of social improvement. The quest for relevance is born out of our society in which frustration and discontinuity are legion. That this query should address our present condition with compassion and in depth is a positive aspect of students’ despair we should not overlook.

The questions which are placed before us are not new, but in their present context, they are startling. The questions are different, however, for they are concentrated not on the “wheres” and “hows,” but rather on the “whys.” The “why” question is frightening because it raises more far-reaching and concentrated questions, which frankly are embarrassing to us. The most fundamental question today is the “why” that challenges the tacit presuppositions of the American style of life. The increased requirement which students sound for enrolling cultural minorities, for providing centers which feature Afri-
can and Afro-American culture, and for developing courses which deal with the urban and Afro-American experience is expressed in terms of a "why" question.

The underlying question which informs these requests is why our leaders do not recognize that America's and the world's greatest crisis is the failure of the world's white minority to share power and wealth with the non-white majority.

To those young students who see the war in Viet Nam and the continued systematic oppression of cultural minorities as clear projections of the American Life style, the "why question" has led to a fundamental rejection of American profession.

The preoccupation of students today with social causes leads us to the negative aspect of the cry for relevance.

The cry for relevance has meant too often the necessity for social involvement, for example, to be institutionally opposed to the war in Viet Nam. For the university to be involved in a political sense is not only to misunderstand the foundation and function of the university, but is at the same time to erect an unwarranted confinement about the entire drive for relevance. In order to preserve its freedom, the university must be a forum for all viewpoints; to adopt any corporate policy other than that assuring the complete intellectual freedom of the university community is to negate the rights of individuals to differ.

But students are still critical. Faculties perceive in their criticisms both an onerous threat and a sense of misery. By only attending that dimension which constitutes a threat, faculties are remiss, for they both obfuscate and exacerbate the acute agony of our normative institutions. The fecundity of youth which would breathe exhilaration into our enterprise we too frequently dismiss because we make their antagonism so difficult to decipher.

Clearly, then, the cry for relevance takes as its basis the need for a liberal arts education to address the existential condition of today's students. The core of this condition is found in the demise of the creative spirit. The church as the traditional forum for spiritual expression no longer stands as a meaningful option for many of my generation. But the dimension of man which is the creative spirit must have a forum on which to express itself, and a rash of new alternatives have presented themselves. Today we find that many students are involved in sensitivity training, sit-ins, experimentation with drugs, new mystical religions and various expressions of the living theater. All of these are attractive precisely because they provide a forum for spiritual expression and a sense of community.

Of primary importance in this positive aspect of relevance is the function of these activities: they constitute a fundamental criticism of the university. The university has failed to address in all dimensions the concrete situation of man today.
At the same time, this form of relevance is negative because it fails to comprehend the relation between the spirit of man and his ability to articulate. The forms to which many students turn today for creative expression promise a form of fulfillment which can never be delivered. And the result is an exacerbation of the condition, and a fundamental sense of rejection resulting in stoic indifference.

Nietzsche suggested that the creative fount in the make-up of man (The Dionysian) could find expression only when in relation to the powers of articulation (The Apollonian). To divorce the spiritual expression of man from its concrete articulation delivers the sense of anti-intellectualism which pervades so many of our campuses today.

But the power of such a movement is the ability to point out that teaching faculty have divorced themselves from the power of the depth and wonder of existence, and have driven themselves into isolation with the intellectualisms which no longer speak to the creative spirit of man. And this is precisely the issue in the call for relevance. The culture of which we are a part speaks to just this separation of creative spirit and intellectual articulation.

The challenge for the liberal arts curriculum rests in the willingness of its leaders and teachers to again address the existential condition of which we are a part. We must be far more willing to probe the symbolic nature of men, and society, to unearth the dimensions of man for which students crave. We must address ourselves to the presupposition of a culture which is in many ways different from our own. Liberal arts education must take as its fundamental task the reunion of the creative dimension of man with his powers of articulation; to unveil the assumption that fear, anxiety, love and hope are not new, and thereby reveal the eternal, suffering nature of the human condition. To examine man's relation to himself and society is the task of good teaching, for it cultivates awareness. This is the awareness for which students hope.

This development speaks with intriguing sophistication, however, for it is not the programmed, calculating hope with which our elders are so familiar because it is an implication of our technological society. Rather, it is the hope that man will once again resign himself to being man, and not a dynastic manipulator; that the creative impulse through the alchemy of commitment will shape new direction; and that somehow in spite of ourselves, there will be a tomorrow—for no educated man can survey the horizon with any surplus of optimism.

Are we prepared as educators to attune ourselves to that noble spirit of man, which in eloquent simplicity gives order to events, seeks meaning in life and gives creation to new hope? Or, indeed, will we no longer hold out hope for hope?

David S. Pacini
THE NEED FOR A RECONSTRUCTION OF
UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN THE HUMANITIES
AND ARTS

Whatever else education may be about, it should be about the conditions and possibilities of human life. If this proposition is true, then one would expect that in a college for young adults the humanities would display a commanding vigor. One might expect a keen responsiveness to the present and the future, a direct and lively concern with human life in the time ahead, as well as in the past. One might expect to find questions of meaning and value asked about the lives we lead, and about the needs, hazards, and opportunities in man’s future. One might even expect the humanities to be concerned directly with the quality and conditions of human life in the sprawl of urbanism, in the imagery of mass communication, in modern politics and war, in market places and factories, in popular as well as high culture.

But it is in these things that liberal undergraduate education has faltered. The collegiate enterprise, ground between the SAT’s of the secondary school and the GRE’s of the graduate school, is not a significant vehicle for helping young adults consider man’s situation and prospects. As college has become more and more a corridor between high school and graduate school and an anteroom to the latter, its program has become preoccupied with the development of expertise for its own sake. College teachers, in the humanities or elsewhere, do not have much to say about the larger assumptions and implications of the particular disciplines they advocate and practice.

The liberal arts college itself is in something of the same posture, dedicated, no matter what the catalog says, to a kind of higher vocationalism. And it is too much preoccupied by questions of institutional survival, the hierarchical relationships of faculty to each other, organizational and procedural arrangements. Students know these things. Radical disaffection or noncommittal conformity or rebellious contempt are not all there is to know about students in our colleges today. But they suggest that the undergraduate college in America needs re-examination if we want a more productive relationship between education and questions of man’s survival and fulfillment.

Such a relationship cannot be realized by constraining the college to the functions of a preparatory school for graduate institutions. Nor can it be accomplished by constraining the humanities to polite learning in grammar, rhetoric, and poetry, or neo-Alexandrian scholarship in the humanities and arts. For the college—and the humanities within it—to achieve such a relationship two principal needs must be faced.

The first is for a commitment of liberal education to serve, not
as a tourist's view of life from the cruise ship, but as an encounter with contemporary man's condition. There is a need for the humanities and arts to be reborn as a central part of undergraduate education, with conscious relevance to the actual and potential circumstances of man's emerging culture and environment. This is a need for a philosophy of more than day-to-day pragmatic response on the part of the college, and more than fragmented commitments to the ends and means of the separate disciplines. Today neither the high school nor the graduate school, because of their intense preoccupation with special skills and bodies of knowledge at their respective levels, function to enable students to consider themselves and their world in human terms. There is the possibility, then, that the undergraduate college might usefully discover a new place and meaning for the humanities, helping undergraduate students to see the whole reach of the human condition as well as they can, to ask what it means to be human, to ask what our knowledge adds up to, to learn to reach normative judgments about individual and social life, and to consider what moral response and action it will take to shape man's future in ways worthy of man. If the college is not to be liquidated by its own inanition, it needs to say—by its actual program of education rather than by catalog rhetoric—that it is concerned with helping young men and women learn to be people before they are professional specialists or functionaries.

The second need is for reconstruction of the collegiate program in terms of such a commitment. In order to bring the student's education closer to his own experience, we would like to teach him to respect his perceptions and desires and aversions as the stuff out of which intelligence is made, to lead him to candid expression and also to the acts of discrimination and discipline necessary to inform expression, to convince him that the past is alive in his present and that the future can be shaped by his intent. We must devise ways to draw the student's private and public worlds nearer to each other, to the end that he may realize self in society. In curriculum, the need is to find radically creative ways to bring into relationship feeling, thought, and action about human experience, to move beyond the humanities defined principally as scholarly criticism or *explication de texte*. The curriculum should make possible a productive interplay between study and performance, inquiry and expression, sense and sensibility, relating these to the quality and conditions of life in post-industrial society. The humanities curriculum should have the intent suggested by Daniel Bell: "to heighten sensibility (that fusion of intellect and feeling) and to impart a sense of coherence about human experience—heroism, pride, love, loneliness, tragedy, confrontation with death." The new humanities should be founded on the passionate desire to know oneself, and in the knowing to know something of all men. If its curriculum
is to speak to students, it must, as John Silber puts it, “combine relevance and rationality; instead of striving to be impersonally objective, we must strive to be objectively personal.” There is little of this in today's undergraduate curriculum. The humanities tend toward ossification and the lively arts toward chaos. What is needed are new curricular patterns that will claim a central position for humane studies and artistic experience in the education of undergraduates.

A PRINCIPLE FOR RECONSTRUCTION

The two-fold principle that will guide Hampshire's program in humanities and the arts is (a) that the ends of education should be as concerned with the quality of the human environment as with the fullest self-realization of students, and (b) that we can find radically more effective means than now are customary for educating sensibility and helping students to apprehend reality (and affect it) in coherent and value-informed ways, through combining direct experience with art and life and intellectual inquiry.

At least three concerns of humane education and individual development may be accessible through such a proposition. These concerns are rooted in the recognition that experience and inquiry are inseparable, and that the education of humane intellect requires Arrowsmith's "normative judgment" as well as Bruner's "action, imagery, notation." These concerns are integrity, vocation, and play.

Integrity has the manifest meaning of wholeness. Its service in the college and the humanities means the admission—into the work of critical inquiry as well as the work of art—of sensibility and feeling as well as intellect. It means also a recognition by the student of the need to accommodate and synthesize the many, often contradictory elements of his own nature.

If integrity implies an achieved harmony, both together imply the discovery of vocation. Vocation is intended in its most basic sense, not to symbolize the antithesis of liberality in education. To seek after vocation is simply to seek the voice of the inner man, to seek to identify oneself and one's calling. The college should offer something more than a fare of alternative styles and the opportunity to explore them without the demand of premature commitment. The undergraduate college should offer, too, an education in which the search for vocation, in this root sense, is articulated and valued as a primary concern.

Play in many ways is what is most disregarded in the humanities programs of undergraduate colleges. To seek and express the processes of consciousness, to explore that which we value in ourselves, to admit the practice of the arts to an honored and integral place in the liberal college curriculum, is to recognize the neglected importance of play—of imagination or image-making—in human culture and individual growth. The attitudes and moods of play, understood in this sense,
range from frivolity to ecstasy and terror, its practices from the most mundane mimicry of immediate surroundings to the poetic rituals by which the highest realms of the human spirit are reached. The elements of play, in the words of Huizinga, constitute at once an aesthetic and a profoundly natural vocabulary: "order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, rapture."

The concerns sketched above can be properly served only if study about the humanities and arts is complemented by active engagement with their special vocabularies, their materials and methods—only if experience and expression are in active interplay with inquiry. The arts, in the creative and performing sense, are commonly not thought of as fully legitimate and operational components of the humanities curriculum. The arts within the humanities are treated most frequently as objects of analytical and verbal study, not as experiences for one to enter into as a deeply engaged witness or as a human being striving to create or perform.

It is unproductive to view inquiry, experience, and expression in the humanities as naturally separable modes capable of confrontation but not integration. A more fully productive view, scarcely attempted in colleges, is to conceive integration in terms of collaborative projects or courses developed by practicing artists and academic scholars, to encourage individual teachers to attempt to relate experience in practice of the arts with art history and criticism, to cast the critic’s role as embracing sensibility as well as intellect, to be actively inventive about ways in which the life of learning can fuse experiencing and knowing.

It should be added that integrity implies an unwillingness to substitute indiscriminate or merely intense experience for art. In encouraging and making provision for practice of the lively arts, freedom of experience and expression must be critically and imaginatively sought, or the uses of art in liberal education are a meaningless charade. But this liberating potential turns on the realization of art as an act (or object) of transformation: emerged from the chaos of living, possessed of its vitality, yet transmuted, endowed with order, form, judgment.

Francis D. Smith