Enriching General Education: Seeds and Plowshares

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In the years during which debate over the purpose and content of general education has raged, every conceivable bit of curricular gimmickry has been proposed and often tried. With few exceptions most of these efforts were possessed of at least one common feature—they were conventional or quasi-conventional academic, classroom or laboratory experiences. Until recently little attention was paid to the possibility of employing a broad range of non-academic experiences in the total general education component of the college program of study. What follows is a suggestion of experiences or activities of a non-academic type which could be adapted to general education programs on many campuses. Most of these now exist on our campuses but we tend to be reluctant to build them into formal programs for reasons which also will be identified. If these ideas can serve as seed and if the inertia can be identified and plowed under, possibly a harvest of healthy reform may result. This paper is directed to that end.

There exists on any college or university campus built-in opportunities for the expansion and enrichment of general education which await only their recognition and proper utilization for them to bear fruit. Musical performances, whether Bach or rock, lectures, art exhibits, and other activities commonly thought of as valuable but "extracurricular" could well become a part of the general education program for which credit might be earned. There is little doubt that these functions already contribute to the total education of the student but all too often the exposure to them is left to chance. What is,
needed is a planned and controlled involvement, not simply an exposure. The full extent and nature of this planning and control will not be considered here—that is the business of a more detailed study in cooperation with the expert in the various disciplines. Hopefully, it will be sufficient to suggest that the printed program for the concert might be an inspirational and instructional aid and not merely a list of what is to be performed and by whom. In like manner, there is considerable room for improvement in the educational character of most art exhibits which are, or appear to be, an accumulation of works devoid of any significant relationship to one or another and lacking in anything to assist the non-artist to achieve a meaningful response. Even if some activities are, by their nature, more educationally valuable without such modifications or appurtenances, they often suffer for want of being related to a series of such activities. Commonly on our campuses many of these activities compete for attendance and attention with countless others of greater or lesser note. The lecture by a noted expert on problems of urban living may lose its impact in a week dominated by a scholarship fund drive, a rock concert, the presentation of King Lear, and the “big” football game of the season. Conversely, the same lecture in the context of a well coordinated and timed program could enrich and be enriched by that program of related activities.

Campus life is another major dimension of the totality of general education. Most thoughtful educators would, of course, recognize that this is the case, but to what extent does this educational function become an important part of planning life in the campus community? All too frequently the dominating considerations here are the economics of food service and housing (retire the bonds), community relations (keep the students and the landlords happy), and the student control dimensions of a worn out in loco parentis concept.

The atmosphere which surrounds the partaking of one’s daily bread is an opportunity for contributing to or detracting from the general education of the student. It might be significant that the term “food service” rather than “dining service” is the most common. Indeed there tends to be much more consuming of food than dining in our campuses. There are those who would contend that teaching or encouraging “table manners” is extraneous to or beneath the dignity of our colleges and universities and even if attention is to be paid to such mundane affairs they should not be attached to a formal credit earning program. Considering the total living atmosphere of the campus, there is very little to “liberate” the individual, to enculturate him, to broaden him, or to educate him for life as a person if that campus is a community of disorder, ugliness, chaos, and mass living on a low level of refinement such as we all too frequently encounter in the larger community.

In addition to the extracurriculum and daily living facets of cam-
pus life, there are a number of other activities having to do with making that community work. The campus government, its voice through publications, its planning, its relationship to the outside world are all opportunities for student involvement. Only to a limited extent are such activities included in the academic programs of the college. Frequently students earn credit for their work on the staff of the campus newspaper or radio station. Laudable as this may be it is too frequently focused on the students of journalism or broadcasting and the experience is directed toward building the appropriate skill, talent, or understanding needed by professionals in these fields. It would appear that direct involvement in these operations would provide an excellent opportunity for the general education student to become acquainted with such operations as communication media which carry great weight in a civilized society.

Participation in one or more of the governmental functions of a campus could, if properly conceived, be valuable to the student and the college as well. If the objective of the study of political science is only to learn the workings of one or more existing governmental systems and principles, per se, then certainly campus governance should be included and what better way to learn than by directed participation.

Involvement in campus government leads to the idea of becoming involved or immersed in local government as well. One could take a typical course in local government and gain an understanding of the ideal or the typical mechanism of the city’s government. On the other hand, a more clear picture of how a city is run might be achieved by witnessing the real people at work. Regular attendance at meetings of the city council, the school board, the planning commission, and the like, coupled with some related readings could produce a far greater sensitivity to the problems of governing a city than might the typical college course. There may, in fact, be great value in visitations to service club luncheons, coffee counters, and golf courses as ways of gaining insight into the real decision making processes pertaining to urban life.

These are but a few approaches to renewing, revitalizing, and revamping general education. Certainly there is nothing remarkably new in any of these and, similarly, the value of most of them has long been recognized. Why then have they not been included as part of the total program? Why have we struggled to design formal means of educating students in these ways when parallel educative processes were already functioning? The answer to this question is fourfold. First, we do not completely trust the content of the experience. We harbour fears that while the student might learn a great deal of value from the experience, he might also learn some things we would prefer he not. We would not have the opportunity to cleanse the educational experience which is made available to the student and which is given
a mark of institutional approval by inclusion on the transcript and a
grade designation. After all, if a student acquires a "questionable"
attitude, or makes a social or legal mistake, we can explain this as
something that often happens to a college student. On the other hand,
if he has received a grade for this experience the institution has some­
how assumed a different role in this drama of college life.

A second reason why we have not fully accepted these experiences
as part of the official program is our willingness to release the edu­
cational apron strings. Many of the activities listed above and many
more not mentioned would be partly or totally under the control of
persons who are not members of the academic profession. For many, it
would be unthinkable to grant credit for work not done under the
direction of an academician.

The homage paid to clock and calendar stands as the third deter­
rent to general education reform in the suggested direction. Although
we know better, we tend to take great comfort in X-number-of­
minutes-per-credit-hour as both a measure and a guarantee of educa­
tional respectability. To deprive ourselves of this assurance is to make
unreasonable demands for other means of evaluating our academic
efforts. Many of the suggested sources of general education credit
might have to encompass units of time much shorter or longer than
the conventional quarter or semester. Many would not be scheduled
in ordinary ways and many would require means of motivation and
evaluation other than physical presence at the determined place and
time.

The fourth and final reason for rejecting these experiences is the
difficulty encountered in measuring student achievement. Conventional
or unconventional testing procedures or grades given for the term
paper or project may be appropriate in many cases but in others none
of these will really work. Spurious attempts have been made to use
attendance at concerts or lectures, for example, as a part of the grade
in a related formal course. All too frequently these attempts are rec­
ognized by students as artificial and the justifiable disrespect for them
often reflects on the formal class itself. What is really under attack
here is the basic concept of grading in all of general education. Is it
really necessary, in all cases, to demand from the student some proof
of accomplishment? Are we really so sophisticated in our measure­
ment to be certain that satisfactory test performance represents ac­
complishment of the goals of general education? Will the ivy on the
walls really wilt if we concentrate on motivating the student and then
trust to his judgement of whether or not he has accomplished the im­
mediate goal? One might even argue that if we cannot trust in that
judgement we are failing in general education anyway.

The above stands less as a set of new ideas and a clear formula
for their implementation than it does as a stimulus for further thought.
Each campus provides a somewhat different setting for the specific
of program expansion in this direction. Some schools may accept departures from the familiar and others may not. One important plus mark for innovation is the widespread and growing climate of change one finds in all of higher education. Such a climate can be the strong ally needed to plow under the inertia. It is for us to sharpen the plow.