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Shifting Ideals In Higher Education

By Frederick F. Ritsch

Is there a present national tendency to undermine the university and college as centers of liberal learning in a democracy? This question came to me as I was struggling with increased demands that we in the Humanities come forth with more vocational programs for our students. A part of me was rebelling, not because I oppose vocational programs, but rather because so many of the demands for vocationalism in higher education are made synonymous with "relevancy" and with short-cuts to "accountability." Usually stated or implicit in such demands is the near-command that higher education strip itself of the "dominance of science and scholarship," and face the "realities" of today's world (?) .

During the past ten years this bogey-man of "science and scholarship" has been cited so often as the source of the ills of higher education that it has taken on the aspects of a conspiracy: one has visions of dusty clerics gathered in secret places scheming to make higher education less and less accessible to the millions. The specific charges of dependence upon government and foundation grants, the absurdity of "publish or perish" rules, etc., certainly bestows some credence on the charges against science and scholarship. But then one must wonder if in any substantial sense there has been much science and scholarship taking place across the broad spectrum of higher education in recent years. I am inclined to think it more proper to say that higher education has become bogged down by the emergence of science and scholarship technicians and publicists. These technicians and publicists brought about a revolution of sorts in American higher education during the late 1950's and 1960's, overcome by compromise the student protests of the 1960's, and now apparently intend, with the as-
sistance of the general public mood, to recover lost ground and assure their final victory over the traditional role of the university as the repository of a higher culture and center of liberal learning in a democratic society.

I am coming to sense that the principal failure of the college and the university in the last decade and a half has been the failure of both faculty and administration to sustain the traditional purposes of higher education. In their eagerness to seize slices of the public financial pie, to secure “fair shares,” colleges and universities willingly sacrificed the “separateness” of higher education from the public arena, and threw higher education open to public evaluation. Thus, the one area our democratic society had permitted to remain relatively free from the whims of shifting public opinion—the one area where the real demands were integrity to the tasks of preserving, interpreting, adding to, and engaging in liberal learning—has surrendered its birthright in favor of the immediate truths of the marketplace. A major university catalogue defines the university purpose as that of a “community of scholars having as a central purpose the enrichment of the human mind by stimulating and sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to an understanding of the nature of the universe and man’s role in it.” ¹ One must wonder if this lofty purpose is today even a live option for many of our colleges and universities. Or, take a different, more action-directed statement of purpose: the university is “a liberal or even libertarian institution, that tries in some ways to go counter to the mainstream of the society in which it finds itself, by liberating men from the prejudices and ignorance that possess them when they come out of the larger society.” This statement is from Leslie Fiedler, who goes on to observe: “I think of the university as being a place that carries on a permanent cultural revolution inside of society.” He then asks, “Has that permanent cultural revolution got to the point where it has eliminated the necessity for the institution itself . . . ?” This grows out of his belief that the success of this revolution will produce “something else as unimaginable to us as the university was to people who had turned to the church for higher education in the 12th century.”² For my part, I cannot see that the university today manifests any developments capable of a permanence in the directions Fiedler suggests. His image of the cultural revolution operating inside toward the outside seems instead to be actually taking place from outside toward the inside. In other words, the university appears to be having less impact upon society in general than society is having upon the university. The politicizing of higher education, the foraging for public money to cover over-growth, the “accountabil-

¹ “The Purpose of the University,” The University of Virginia.
ity” movement, and, my own particular irritant, the vocational preparation demand, are signs of the weakened position of the fundamental learning purposes of the university. What is so discouraging is the faculty and administration willingness, even eagerness, to become accomplices in this.

Now, I realize that the observations above involve a good deal of “romanticizing” of the historical role of higher education in America. But I am less concerned with the past failures to realize ideals than with the ideals themselves. After all, the dominant ideals provide the compelling directions, the guidelines, which, whether transformed absolutely into realities or not, are the source of standards and aspirations. What concerns me now is what I perceive to be a shifting of dominant ideals in American higher education.

Historically, it would appear that the higher education, in the short period between the early 1950’s and the early 1960’s, shifted emphasis from liberal learning as a central concern to the public arena. Students who, in the mid- and late 1960’s, charged the university with dehumanism were thus quite correct in that the university was certainly placing low priority on the concept of the university as a center for mutual teacher-student engagement in liberal learning. Higher Education was becoming “establishment”; the teacher had become distant. Students were left to define for themselves the fundamental purpose of the university: if the university were—and all evidence suggested it was—an institution directed to the immediate concerns and problems of society, why was it not directing itself to the revolutionary needs of society? Students quite naturally interpreted the university’s true function as that of critic and leader in revolutionizing society. Where the “relevant” function of the university was once clear in liberal learning terms, the university, in thrusting itself into and onto society, had opened itself to charges of irrelevancy for not becoming the leader in a cultural revolution. A clue to the confusion that prevailed in the 1960’s is seen in the inability of anyone in the 1960’s to define the dimensions of a “cultural revolution”: it took on a marketplace faddishness—now civil rights, now sexual freedom, now ecology, etc. In other words, “relevancy,” without a grounding in liberal learning, became immediacy; irrelevancy was a refusal to speak to the most recently discovered social evil.

It is nothing new to note that the parents of the middle-class students who entered colleges and universities in the 1960’s generally held strong directed work values, perhaps stemming from their experiences with the Depression and war years. These were parents who appreciated the value of hard work in a specific vocation or job as the source of all other desirable values. While money might be listed as a value related to security, the main emphasis should be on directed job orientation; after all, parents were ready and willing to share their income
with their children and even to sacrifice their own financial security in order to assure the children freedom from material wants. In most ways these middle-class youths had been protected from the "harsh realities" of having to "go it on their own" and "earn their own ways" as long as possible. At the same time parents were determined their children should eventually enter the job market with as many credits as possible. For most, this meant a college or university education. Parents most likely held no clear conceptions regarding the specific relationship of the undergraduate education to jobs. In general they exhibited the rather ambiguous faith that college education did lead to better jobs, and professional areas as law, medicine, etc., naturally demanded post-graduate training. At the same time the actual job market reinforced these views: the better jobs were reserved for college graduates (although they were not necessarily directly related to the particular undergraduate emphasis), and it became difficult for non-college trained youths to locate satisfying jobs. Until the mid-1960's everything seemed in order.

Undoubtedly the youth were the element overlooked in this apparently balanced picture. Brought up without the ingrained fears of financial and job insecurity that concerned their parents, protected throughout childhood by well-meaning parents with memories of childhood scarcities, these youths had not learned the job-directed work values to anywhere near the degree that parents anticipated. While these naturally assumed a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood of children holding parents' values, the fact was that both childhood and then college became long reprieves from job-related values. The values these youths were actually assuming related, thanks largely to the satisfaction of their material needs and to the communications media of our society, to the social problems of the day. Arriving at the college or university and finding these institutions engaged in no on-going revolution, social or cultural, the youths attempted to explode higher education.

At the present time, the colleges and universities appear to have reached at least a stalemate with the students. Indications of this depend upon the particular "solution" to the "student revolution" one is observing: Black Studies, mixed dorms, "peace" programs, re-cycling centers, etc. But each solution must be only temporary. Essentially standards are in suspension in higher education; either higher education should re-adopt an idealism with academic standards and re-emphasize its role as imparter of traditional humanistic values and slow-change agent in a democratic society, or submerge both the student idealism and liberal learning through an emphasis on higher education as the supplier of the job market in a technological society, thus suspending the "reprieve" from job-directed values. The former direction involves the sustaining of subjective values of the "spirit of inquiry," while the latter
would emphasize under the heading of higher education the objective standards and values of the immediate marketplace.

Whatever the shape of present compromises with the students, the latter direction appears to be dominant today. The concept of liberal learning as a highly personal engagement between student and teacher receives only lip service in most instances; studies abound to demonstrate that as much or more content can be acquired by the student in mass sections as in direct contact with the teacher; the textbook has both replaced discussion and placed objective limitations on the students’ freedom of seeking answers and new directions; technology has been applied to develop computerized courses, not to free both instructor and student from the memory exercises of necessary objective frameworks, but to free the instructor from having to deal directly with the student (one can now “graduate” by merely acquiring x amount of objective data without the necessity of engaging in the university experience—a sign that the university and society in general are becoming fully integrated). The teacher is freed, not to become an authority or to find creative modes of working with students, but rather to fulfill his new role as an expert in society. Further there are significant indications that the public, through local and state agencies (notably the “community college” and the university branch) and through direct participation (in gift patterns) has adopted a marketplace definition of higher education, emphasizing that the higher education experience must no longer involve a reprieve from job preparation (it is commonplace to overhear parents chastizing their children for not adopting an immediately applicable job program as their major course of studies—and the traditional areas of liberal learning, the humanities especially, are suffering). In addition, technology, having dominated our society, is demanding academic legitimacy for skills; tasks that in the past were trade school or on-the-job learned but now require a new sort of complexity demand higher education certification—notwithstanding the fact that the rate of technological change often means eventual on-the-job re-training (in fact, the re-training is sustaining many institutions now). Finally, the national government efforts to meet the public demands in areas of unemployment and financial accountability, and to keep the campuses “cool,” work both to reinforce the direction of job-preparation and de-emphasize the areas of liberal learning in higher education.

Undoubtedly the fundamental national distrust of intellectualism was rekindled in the 1960’s, and the vision of academics of the 1950’s that higher education be endorsed as a great national asset worthy of public support has back-fired; what is left is a national conviction that higher education, without public controls, can be a national danger, but with controls can be a major supplier of trained personnel for the technological society. The vision of the college and university as a
“community of scholars having as a central purpose the enrichment of the human mind by stimulating and sustaining a spirit of free inquiry,” is no more acceptable than Fiedler's view of the university as a libertarian institution engaged in permanent cultural revolution.

Forty years ago, New Humanist Irving Babbitt quoted the following paragraph from a report of Committee G of the American Association of University Professors:

American education has suffered from the domination, conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect, of political and sentimental, as well as educational, theories that are demonstrably false. If the views of some men are to prevail the intellectual life of the country is doomed; everybody except the sheer idiot is to go to college and pursue chiefly sociology, nature study, child study, and community service—and we shall have a society unique only in its mediocrity, ignorance and vulgarity. It will not do to dismiss lightly even so extreme a view as this; it is too indicative. Such influences are very strong, their pressure is constant; and if education has largely failed in America it has been due primarily to them.

Babbitt feared the “encroachments of an equalitarian democracy,” and charged that already the standards of higher education were suffering “first, as regards the quality of students; second, as regards the qualities of the studies these students pursue.” More recently, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation cited a survey of academic leaders which “reveals a clear and present danger of burgeoning mediocrity.” Foundation President, Hans Rosenhaupt, observed that “Fair-minded Americans sincerely believe in an extension of educational opportunity to all citizens; they also fear the deterioration of standards,” but “given the present mood of America, we cannot assume that massive public measures will soon be taken to protect and enhance the quality of education.” (Italics mine.)

While Babbitt is explicit and Hans Rosenhaupt only suggestive that the demand for mass higher education is destroying standards, I submit that the experience of the past forty years indicates that higher education can be made available to the public without destroying academic standards. The problem, and here Rosenhaupt with his insight into the “present mood of America” sees the issue, is in the definition of “standards.” Babbitt and Rosenhaupt both stand firmly with standards of intellectual integrity and diversity of ideas, with the “spirit of free inquiry.” Yet are not the present pressures on higher

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education directed toward substituting free inquiry and diversity of ideas for the objective standards of job training and immediately accountable preparations? If so, does this not suggest that higher education had until recently so successfully responded in its own proper way to the "encroachments of equalitarian democracy" to produce a diversity of ideas and a broad-based creative skepticism among large elements of youth, that society at large has determined that it prefers a controlled equalitarian democracy as regards higher education?

If a controlled equalitarian democracy is a real or even a present danger in higher education, then those in the academic professions should move now to at least clarify the meaning of a higher education. This could mean a much greater vigilance with regard to what is included under the heading of a university degree; it should certainly mean reconsideration of some areas which now receive higher education validation. It would mean our classrooms be less concerned with reinforcing the immediate than with the identification and elaboration of new and more productive modes of living. It would demand that higher education assert an exclusiveness in a democratic society—the exclusiveness of not having to conform blindly to "officially" recognized or prevailing social and political views. No doubt this would lead to charges of elitism, but the essence of higher education in a democracy must be adherence to the standards of free inquiry, and to an open-door policy for all who would devote themselves to meeting these standards in order that our democratic society not root itself in the present but be a constantly transcending entity.