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What Are We Going To Do About The Current Threat To The Idea Of A University?

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The scene is a lecture by a Distinguished Visiting Scholar.

Professor (in Audience): Do you mean it is naive to think of the university as a community of scholars and an institution of higher learning?

Distinguished Lecturer (A University President): Yes.

Professor: Can you elaborate?

Lecturer: The university has become too many things to too many people. As we moved away from the elite model we took on large numbers of non-students who found their rewards in non-scholarly activities such as social and political issues, action groups, and living in communes.

The university never has been a “strong” social institution, but it has seen better days as a bastion of learning. Since it is one of the few havens for the creative minority, it is obvious that continued neglect of this institution will be detrimental to the development of “high” culture. The point is that it is the creative minority — artists, philosophers, scientists — who provide the new awarenesses, values, and sensitivities which are necessary for the dynamics of a complex, modern culture.
Prior to the 20th century lack of financial support had been a major problem for the university. At all but the richest institutions, there was a spartanism in both professorial income and the availability of facilities and equipment. (This is still true in most universities outside of North America.) In fact, the picture of the prestigious, but impecunious, Herr Professor of the continental university has become a stereotype.

All this was changed in the U.S. in the early fifties when the Ford Foundation initiated a campaign to raise university salaries. This was followed by the mass education of the late fifties and sixties. Thus, we now have many campuses with 30,000 to 40,000 students. In Europe most universities are not housed on campuses — they are typically spread out all over town in a variety of standard city buildings. Furthermore, many of the large urban universities, such as Paris and Rome, have over a hundred thousand students. It is obvious that there aren’t enough seats in the typical lecture hall at institutions such as these. It is also a well-known fact that there is little direct contact between students and faculty at such places. In Rome an oral examination is required at the end of the year. But the average professor at this institution has the responsibility to orally examine around 1,000 students. A standard procedure is to hire an army of unqualified assistants who conduct a 10-minute oral on behalf of the professor.

At many of the state universities in North America it is not unusual for introductory courses to enroll 500 to 1,000 students. Lecturing to masses of this kind is not conducive to “involved” learning. Several years ago I was walking across the Minnesota campus at noon, a time when a particularly large number of classes terminated. I was inundated by a mass of humanity, a crunch as bad as any I had experienced in New York subways or in downtown Manhattan during the rush hour.

All these are surface manifestations. What about the inner workings of the university? They are even worse. If you ask the typical student about his 15 hours of class time he’ll tell you he’s bored by most of it. What is perhaps even more revealing is that many professors will confess to a similar attitude concerning the courses they are required to teach. The typical American cafeteria-fed curriculum is a manifestation of a course-happy university sub-culture. The point is that both students and faculty are in agreement that they both spend too much time in the classroom. Well, then, why does it continue? Because it’s locked into the system. Because staff loads are based on number of courses offered, and because student credits cumulate toward a degree and result in what is called an “education.”

Both students and faculty are also in agreement regarding the evils of grades. Here, again, they are retained because of the system. Un fortunately, the issue of grading has been confused with the legitimate demand that students be evaluated — that a doctor, or a lawyer, for example, must be qualified. Nobody will quarrel with the need to maintain standards, but this issue shouldn’t be confused with the problem of how to educate.

That, of course, is the essence of the problem. We don’t seem to have a convincing theory of education. My guess is that part of the difficulty is that we don’t have an adequate theory of man. There is, of course, nothing more practical than good theory. A profound theory of man’s nature, for example, would make it easier to decide how to make the most of human resources.
For example, it seems to be well-established that the hunger for learning is a very natural demand of the young child, even though the potential level of achievement varies enormously. However, within a very few years of formal schooling, we manage to kill off much of the natural human zest for learning. On the other hand, we have also gone too far in encouraging non-students to attend college because “it’s the thing to do,” or “it’s a way to get a good income,” or because of an “athletic scholarship.”

The bastardization of higher education via the professionalization of sports has been carried to its penultimate in the United States. There is nothing like it in universities in other parts of the world. It constitutes an outstanding example of the remarks at the beginning of this essay to the effect that the university has become too many things to too many people. The alumni pressure on State Universities for the best football team or the best basketball team is enormous. Furthermore, the gate receipts are also impressive. Big Ten and Big Eight football games are massive, impressive spectacles, but what do they have to do with higher education? And how much impact did the University of Chicago’s audacious act have on sports in the American university when it so courageously dropped football in the late thirties? None.

I was the professor who put the question to the lecturer alluded to at the beginning of this essay. And I didn’t like what I heard, but it had the ring of truth to it, and it resulted in my writing this piece. And I’m writing this piece because I’ve committed my life to the university, and I’ve always cherished the idea of a university, the idea of a community of scholars, the idea of a citadel of learning. What’s more, most of the professors I’ve known have shared that dream — at least at the beginning of their careers.

I’ve been on about 10 university campuses either as a student or a professor. Only two or three of these had a thick intellectual atmosphere, the most obvious one being the University of Chicago. Other American colleges and universities have it, but they are rare. They include such places as Swarthmore, Antioch, and Harvard. What have these places got that most of the 1800 American colleges and universities lack? Essentially they have a total intellectual atmosphere, and further, they have a student body which is highly select. And they treat the student as a full-grown, independent, adult, human being. They assume he’s a student. And if he’s not, it’s understood that he’ll take his lumps and get out. Institutions of this type have seminars, tutorials, and senior projects. Attendance at classes is not required. It is assumed that students will attend classes because they want to, not because they have to. All of these procedures have to do with cultivating a sense of independence in the development of the student, and a feel for his coming to grips with deep and significant ideas. The developing student finds himself probing deeply into certain areas of knowledge because his intellectual hunger has not been satisfied, because ideas that are really understood open up new dimensions of life, because the student has been, in effect, intellectually liberated.

At this point the embryonic scholar is on the threshold of one of the most significant aspects of life: he is ready for creativity in thought. He may write a paper for a seminar, or serve as an apprentice in a research project, or derive a mathematical equation. Now he has had a taste of what it means to pursue knowledge — not out of a book, not rehashing it for a test, not rote memorization, but out of his own head. He has had a hand in creating knowledge. No matter how small the contribution, it was original.
in whole or in part. There is no other experience in the sphere of education which can motivate one to learn more than the experience of creating new knowledge. For now the individual is an active searcher, and his thirst for knowledge can never be quenched for the simple reason that the realm of the unknown is literally limitless, and the desire to know all there is to know about at least a limited domain of knowledge is the disease of the latent "expert." This seeking attitude of the serious student has deep implications, for the person who is truly perceptive has a vitality of existence which gives meaning to life. And this meaning becomes so much a part of the motivated student that he is now self-propelled to learn more. In other words, the student is independent. He will learn on his own. He does not need a classroom, a professor, or a college campus, although the mature student will certainly make the most of intellectual interactions at a great university.

Let me now describe my university utopia — my conception of a community of scholars which would maximize the kind of existential involvement described above. It must be understood that my remarks are addressed to the idea of a university — not colleges, junior colleges, or community colleges. There is a place for institutions of the latter kind, and they might well flourish via the present system — I don't know. But the implication of what follows is that most of today's so-called "university" population should probably be housed in "colleges." Universities should be elite places for real students. Universities should be the only institutions of higher learning which grant graduate degrees, and all of the active participants there, whether professional, graduate level, or undergraduate level, are assumed to be serious scholars. Thus, we begin with the idea, then, that at least 50% of the scholars will be professorial and graduate level students. We also begin with the idea that, since the current model of formal classes, grades, etc., is inappropriate, such "kid stuff" will be eliminated. Since we begin with the presumption that we actually have a community of scholars we no longer have a motivational problem to contend with. The natural hunger to know gets reinforced in this utopia, and each student is surrounded by equally voracious searchers for truth. Thus, the problem now is to keep these voracious truth seekers from interfering with each other's personal development. Since we've eliminated most of the formal classes, each student (i.e., undergraduate, graduate, and professorial) is now functioning as the independent scholar that he is. The professor, for example, is not harassed into teaching several classes which involve covering material he's not really interested in. Instead, he's at work, in the laboratory or/and his study, on his latest intellectual passion. After some time, perhaps 3 to 6 months, or on several occasions during the year, he might announce that he's got something to say. He might wish to present this in the form of a series of lectures or/and seminars, and there might be some colleagues — i.e., fellow faculty members and students — who might be interested. If so, they would attend and interact with the professor.

Similarly, a group of students might decide they are particularly interested in existentialism or nuclear physics, or certain contemporary poets or playwrights, and they might petition Professor X, an expert on that particular subject, to lead a series of seminars or/and lectures in that domain. The point is that the "formal" or "social" learning situations would only come about on demand — they would occur either because a group of scholars share a common desire to spend several sessions on that
topic, or because Professor X has something to say — the point being that what he has to say comes, in fact, out of his intellectual guts, not out of the forced feeding of today’s typical class. Furthermore, whatever audience he has, whether it be an N of 1 or 100, will be a real audience — again, because they’ll be there only because they want to be there. They’ll not be there for grades or credits, or any reason other than the desire to learn about the subject in question.

It should be noted that most of the current massive classroom space would not be required. Some of it would be retained, of course, because traditional introductory courses would probably be in sufficient general demand that they’d be needed. On the other hand, many more small seminar rooms and “seminars-in-the-round” * would be required, along with a significant increase in departmental libraries. And, of course, the usual offices and laboratories would still be provided. In short, the physical plant would be a reflection of the “community of scholars” concept rather than the current “teaching mill” concept.

What about evaluation? Surely we can evolve viable alternatives to the current system of course grades. Psychological testing, for example, has evolved to the point where either the Educational Testing Service or regional Test Bureaus could provide the technical know-how for assessing what a given student knows. Such a procedure could provide “external” checks on who knows what. Since the university utopia I described above would involve a relatively small coterie of “apprentices” who are in close contact with each professor, I should think the “internal” evaluation procedures would simply follow the old-fashioned procedure of having the “master” determine when the “apprentice” is ready. But presumably such an evaluation would now be based on true scholarly activity, such as assisting in ongoing research programs, writing up research results, leading seminar discussions, or producing an original theory or work of art.

What do you think? And what can be done to move in the direction we all want? Frankly, I’ve been struck by how quiet the faculty has been during the past decade. I’m not talking about their noise level in regard to social and political issues, but rather their “information” level concerning how to educate and what to do about improving the scholarly life of their own academic community. Are you convinced that scholarship in academia is alive and doing well?

* A seminar-in-the-round involves the usual seminar situation, but it has an audience listening in instead of the usual four walls. Thus, it came about via a wedding of the standard seminar and theatre-in-the-round as a way of making the content of the typical seminar situation available to a large audience without completely sacrificing the advantages of intimate and penetrating intellectual exchanges among informed and well-prepared seminar participants.