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Convention Report:
FOCUSING ON GENERAL EDUCATION AT
CHICAGO AAHE

Peyton Richter

The spotlight during discussions of general education at the AAHE 1978 National Conference on Higher Education in Chicago (March 19-22) played back and forth upon Harvard’s Dean Henry Rosovsky and the Harvard Report on the Core Curriculum. A modest but confident pragmatist, Rosovsky, as a panelist at a major session of the conference, began by reminding us that welcoming college graduates each year to the company of educated men and women makes sense only if we know what an educated person is. He and his committee, after much discussion and deliberation, had decided that an educated person: (1) must be able to think, read and write clearly and effectively; (2) should have a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of ourselves, our universe and our society; (3) must have some acquaintance with other cultures and other times; (4) must have some understanding of and experience in thinking about moral and ethical problems; and (5) should have some knowledge in depth. Upon these beliefs the Harvard Faculty Committee had proceeded to design a new core to replace the old general education requirements of the mid-forties (“The Red Book”). (The new plan, which, he pointed out, would put constraints on only one year of Harvard’s four year undergraduate program, is described in the March 6, 1978 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education.) In Rosovsky’s opinion, the core proposal would represent at least “a small step forward,” although he stressed that it might have limited applicability. Neither he nor his colleagues were trying to tell anyone else what they ought to do in the unique contexts of their own institutions. To the contrary, he made it clear that he favored diversity of programs and a plurality of goals rather than some kind of nationally defined norms, standardized curricula, and bureaucratic controls for colleges.
Up on the stage sharing the linear “round table” with Dean Rosovsky were two other panelists, one of whom, Sister Joel Read, president of Alverno College and past president of AAHE, later spoke enthusiastically in support of goals similar if not identical to those set forth by Rosovsky. Her own view was that liberal/general education must emphasize two facets of human achievement: heritage and invention. Like Rosovsky, Sister Read proceeded upon the assumption that an ideal of an educated person could be formulated and ought to guide efforts in curriculum building and teaching. Also like Rosovsky she did not attempt to pontificate or proselytize. Neither she nor he was suggesting revolutionary forms or even taking positions that would provoke controversy.

But fortunately for the inner life of controversy (for, alas, there was little enough real controversy or authentic dialogue around that rectangular round table), there was another panelist who spoke between Rosovsky and Reed. This was Dr. Jesse Hiraoka, who is director of the Human Services Program and Ethnic Studies at Western Washington University. Hiraoka, in his quiet, dry (but never dull) manner succeeded, in my opinion, in cutting the ground from under the Rosovsky/Reed basically essentialist position, although it seemed that few in the audience (and no one on the stage) realized the devastating implications of his presentation.

If I understood Hiraoka correctly, he was arguing that general/liberal education, as it is usually defined, rests upon a mistake. Further, it has not yet faced up to its greatest challenge: that of trying to embrace the wider human condition with all of its disjunctions, discontinuities, irrationalities, diversities, and complexities. Its philosophy has usually been based on the concept of a coherent reality, but what if reality is not coherent? Its practitioners have usually focused on Humanity or on “the educated person” but such categories are too “vague and exclusive, almost arrogant;” they are too narrow and constraining to have existential immediacy and relevance to alienated minority groups such as blacks, women, and the aged. These groups, more often than not, are preoccupied with defining private rather than public space, with developing shared sentiments rather than understanding abstract ideas, and with re-entry and survival in an increasingly complex and disruptive society. If general/liberal education is to have significance and relevance today it must be viewed as apprenticeship, not in the career sense, but as apprenticeship in the development of sentiments, attitudes, thought and perception. It must be more concerned with stabilizing fields rather than unifying them. It must take into account the collective as well as the individual, the facts and experiences that fall outside of its disciplines along with those that can be included within them. In brief, general/liberal education, to be truly general and liberal, must broaden its discourse.

Hiraoka’s brilliant iconoclastic critique — was it positivistic or existentialist in its genesis? — seemed to fall for the most part on deaf ears. Apparently the other panelists heard (or comprehended) nothing to object to in his remarks. Hiraoka, for his part, did not seem interested in waking anybody up, a la Zarathustra, by shouting in a crowded hall: “The God of General Education is Dead!” Instead of disagreeing, everyone complimented everyone else, and after a few second remarks (“As an empirical scientist,” Rosovsky quipped, “I reached one conclusion — that I’m the only one that observed the time limit”) and a few tame questions from the audience (I never got a chance to ask a wild one), the chair, as he was referred to on the program, the chair, who turned out to be another gracious essentialist, the Reverend Ernest Bartell, director of the
Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of HEW, pronounced
the benediction and everyone sauntered out to nearby bars and restaurants. Those who went outside soon got a proper Chicago drenching.

But the Rosovsky Report later came in for critical commentary at the Conference in a small meeting called by two young educators, both deans, Thomas Maher (Siena Heights) and John Stephenson (University of Kentucky). These men, who have organized and held two previous Shakertown conversations on general education at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky (the second of which I attended) had been trying to organize a new “voice for General Education” but so far seemed to have been singing a duet. Although the Harvard Report was no bete noire to them (at most only a bete rouge) and they said that “Harvard’s model has much to be said for it”, they wanted to know why Harvard should always be determining the direction in which general education ought to go? Why should a few of the Harvard faculty always be firing the shot heard round the quad? (Incidentally, Fred M. Hechinger gave the answer in “Retreat from Anarchy” in the Saturday Review of April 1, 1978 (p. 18): “When no less a figure than Harvard’s dean Henry Rosovsky says bluntly, ‘At Harvard, there has been no formal review of undergraduate education since 1945,’ it is clear that general education, the heart and soul of undergraduate education, is in trouble — not only at this college but throughout the country. Harvard, the nation’s first university, is, after all, higher education’s weather vane.”)

Maher and Stephenson felt the need for “a national independent association” or “invisible college” of persons “concerned about the future of a common learning.” They hoped to see formed an “ongoing network of people” who could speak out with authority on the concerns of general education. Whether anything will be proclaimed by the proposed new voice remains to be seen, and of course several AGLS members wondered why the new voice couldn’t join the already formed chorus. Before the conference was over the two deans seemed ready to encourage dialogue if not collaboration between the two groups, and their call for an alternative and more highly amplified voice for general education had in fact begun to stimulate new ideas beyond the Harvard Report.

If there was no new voice for general education heard at the Conference there were certainly plenty of old voices. The Core curriculum in four different campus settings — community college, four year college, independent university, and state university — was the topic of a panel sponsored by the Association of American Colleges, but as I was on a panel which had unfortunately been scheduled concurrently, I was unable to hear it. A faculty team from Boston University College of Basic Studies had been invited by AGLS to describe a team taught interdisciplinary program. The panelists who described their various interrelated domains were Robert Hayes (Psychology and Counseling), Frederick Koss (Social Science), George Estey (Rhetoric), Charles Fogg (Science), and Peyton Richter (Humanities). As the Dean of the College, Brendan Gilbane, pointed out in introducing the panel, the team was not trying to prove a case for general education as much as to explain how one program over a period of twenty-five years had been able to meet the challenges presented to a general education core curriculum, thus avoiding becoming another segment of the disaster area which supposedly general education had become. The presentation related team methodology and curriculum design to four central values which together constitute the philosophy of general education at the College of Basic Studies: (1) Personalism — the belief that persons are supreme values in the world; (2) Self-development — the belief that a college must aim at helping
every person develop more fully the resources with which he or she is en-
dowed; (3) Cooperative effort — the joint team effort which is used in teaching
and guiding students toward their maximum self-development; and (4) Wholistic approach — “We attempt,” as one panelist remarked, “not only to
relate and to integrate different fields of knowledge but also to help students to
develop a frame of orientation and devotion (a budding Weltanschauung)
within which they can continue to learn, relate, and grow.”

No one may have come away from the Chicago discussions a “born-again
general educator” but many must have felt afterwards, as I did, a sense of relief
that the rumors of the death of general education had (as usual) been greatly
exaggerated and a sense of determination to find new means of revitalizing and
defending the only kind of education that can lay firmly the foundations of a
“unified knowledge unifying life.”

Boston University
College of Basic Studies

REMEMBER

The 18th Annual Meeting
Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa
October 26, 27, 28, 1978

Information: Dr. Carol J. Guardo