1964

Essay Contest Results

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**Recommended Citation**

Goodman, Paul (1964) "Essay Contest Results," *Calliope (1954-2001)*: Vol. 11 , Article 9. Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol11/iss1/9

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Essay Contest Results

In October, 1963, the Communications staff announced an essay contest (with a $150 first prize) open to all students at Western. Any topic could be chosen. The prize-winning essay was to be published in Calliope and Channels, the magazine of the Communications staff.

Mr. Paul Goodman was invited to judge the essays. Mr. Goodman is the author of several books, including Growing Up Absurd, Social Nature, and The Structure of Literature. He received his Ph.D. in humanities from the University of Chicago and has taught there as well as New York University and Black Mountain College. He is an active member of, and instructor at, the New York and Cleveland Institutes for Gestalt therapy.

These are his comments about the nine essays which were submitted from a student body of 12,000:

This isn't a very spirited group of essays, and I cannot award a prize to any. Nothing sends me—neither original idea, acute observation, accurate analysis, unique attitude, warm feeling, or vivid expression. There is no sense in making a comparative judgment among the pieces, like giving academic grades of A, B, and C, since an original work is either excellent of its kind or it is nothing at all.

My impression is that the young people have been so brainwashed by their social background and their so-called education that even their dissent is stereotyped, griping rather than radical, snobbish rather than indignant, do-goodish rather than compassionate. There is little sign of careful, painful perception, personal suffering, or felt loyalty and disgust. On the other hand, the couple of positive estimates of university experiences are not ideal, or loving, enough to be moving . . .

Perhaps most discouraging of all: Reading these pieces, I learned nothing at all of how Western Michigan is different in any way from any other school in the United States, or indeed from any other place in the United States. Maybe this is the grim truth of it; but if so, I might as well entertain myself by watching TV—to which I won't give a prize either.

Paul Goodman