

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson

This We Believe—But!

LITERATURE is rich with descriptions of the ideal university, and most of these make pretty exciting reading. Newman's *Idea of a University*, now a century old, is still standard fare in most college English programs, and Robert Hutchins' latest adventure in metaphysics, *University of Utopia*, certainly ought to be, take it or leave it. Probably the funniest, though available only by word of mouth, is J. B. Edmonson's *Collegium Hotairiensis*, which describes a college the whilom Dean proposed to establish on the thesis that both administrative and instructional policies of the ideal college ought to be the exact reverse of those now in operation.

Professional advancement in Edmonson's college, for example, depends upon the attainment of true ignorance. To move from instructor to professor, a faculty member must demonstrate steady growth through the years toward total academic stupidity. Trustees, for another thing, are appointed from among those rural service station attendants who consistently over-inflate tires. Again, dormitories are circular, and rotate within a sleeve-like structure filled with lecturing professors so that students can secure four years of liberal arts without stirring from their beds. For a college motto, Edmonson never decided between *In Stupido Veritas* and *Digitus In Oculo*.

This stuff is farce comedy, but it bears concealed barbs, and gives pause to

anyone concerned with the problems of higher education. The threat of ballooning enrolments which will aggravate problems of administration, housing and finance, is forcing educational leaders to take a new and, we hope, a more critical look at the future of the college and university both here and abroad. We hope that while the more immediate and practical problems are investigated, renewed attention will be given, as well, to the more fundamental questions of function and method.

Whatever we now believe to be the purpose of a college education, a great many people seem to be unhappy with what our colleges are doing, and how they are doing it. Douglas Bush, for one, in *The Educational Record*, wonders ". . . what it is in our educational process or in our culture at large that so often causes a liberal education to end on commencement day." Bush sees a very great monster in the professional educator (and is so transfixed by sight of the beast that he overlooks the asp in his bosom), but his concern is a real one.

Despite the efforts of some dedicated but justifiably frustrated souls, many aspects of modern higher education are certainly paradoxical. We believe, for one thing, that knowledge by itself does not bring wisdom or the desirable changes of behavior that wisdom dictates. Yet we continue to set up Knowledge as king, and insist that if students

do nothing else, they dance at his court. How they are to perform afterwards is left pretty much to chance. So we cling to the lecture; we base courses and major programs of study on textbooks alone; we test for the "facts"; we publish dean's lists of exceptional students (best memorizers); we carefully nourish academic honor societies which dignify memories; we select valedictorians whose names and achievements rarely rise above the college filing cabinets; and we still, after 800 years, parade on solemn occasions the trappings and the suits of learning, provided in the twentieth century at modest cost by Messrs. Cottrell and Leonard (please indicate university colors and head size).

For another thing, while most of us believe firmly that learning is an active process, the classroom is still the center of collegiate education. Town is kept at a safe, if disrespectful distance from Gown, and by wrought-iron fences where finances permit. Economics, sociology, and all the rest are ladled in adequate doses from definitive volumes, while real, live financial wizards and street hawkers, pale slum dwellers and glittering denizens of the Gold Coast, parade by beyond the walls. We listen to visiting poets, but we do not write poems. We applaud touring lutenists, but we do not play the lute. We do not *do*; we appreciate.

For another thing, we believe that the desire to learn ought to be a natural, unforced one. That is, motivation ought to be intrinsic, for this is the kind of drive that results in real growth. Yet we rarely encourage students to be self-winding, to examine the tenor of their own lives, to try to see what relationships do exist, or ought to exist, between a college program and the life being led and to be led. We almost never say,

"Here I am to help you become educated. When you want what I have to give, ask!" Rather, we assume indifference, and proceed to case-harden it by threatening with attendance slips, grades, pop quizzes, compulsory study hours, credits, residence, and by dropping delinquents from participation in "extracurricular" activities which constitute the only real-life experiences most students ever get. And worst of all, we set up subtle police states in the form of honor systems which inevitably convince most students that you really can get a college education by stealing it.

Finally, most of us are genuinely bothered, regardless of which side of the academic fence we are on, by the fragmentation of the college curriculum. Common sense, let alone mountainous evidence, tells us that life is of a piece, that data and ideas and experiences do not exist independently, but are all related and therefore interdependent. So a major function of education, it would seem, ought to be to help students see relationships, to sense the unity of data and of life. And it would therefore seem that this integrative function might be more effectively fulfilled by a program of related studies, by a curriculum organized in such a way that relationships among the several disciplines could be more easily seen and understood.

Yet most college programs are kinds of educational smorgasbords from which students, according to professorial pressures or the tastes of the moment, pick and choose courses which only by chance bear any relationship to each other; a sort of potluck supper which may excite the taste but which is quite likely to jade the brain. Long ago the public elementary school began trying to interrelate the disciplines, and even the less flexible high school has, in recent

years, begun making serious motions toward integration, if only by way of fused courses. But dispensers of higher education continue doggedly in the name of liberal scholarship to build higher and thicker walls around their specialties, and the process bids fair to continue indefinitely.

There are doubtless other paradoxes. These appear sufficient to take most of the starch of learning out of most of the students early enough in the game to make most of their college life thoroughly ineffective. These suffice to cause a liberal education to end on commencement day, to make "college bred" a four years' loaf. They suffice, in short, to convince students that education amounts to taking the proper catalog sequences, reading and memorizing the right books, committing professorial lists of facts and principles to memory, avoiding controversies in class or on

campus (except in the safety of the smoking-room), completing faithfully all residence and credit requirements, and always carefully concealing their real selves from the right people.

This conception of an education, nourished by too many academic authorities, and occasionally attacked by professional educators and (shall we say) other assorted crackpots, generally remains with students throughout their lives. Its persistence among graduates led Hutchins to remark once that the people who most threaten the growth of a university toward greatness are the alumni. Having had what they thought was a liberal education, they resist fiercely either attack upon its value or changes within the program. A liberal education, truly, ends on commencement day. Unless it has courage and vision, so does the university.

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man. If he is long on talk, he is equally long on action.

This man probably won't in the long run save the university from the gray sickness of mediocrity. There aren't enough like him. But those who are lucky enough to share his life during their college years will have, at the very least, some idea of what it means to be educated.

—RICHARD L. HENDERSON, *professor of education, Agnes Scott College and Emory University, Decatur, Georgia.*

Editor's Note: What is the role of a continuing column in the journal as compared with that of an article? For a useful distinction, read the "Letters to the Editor" on page 133.

Readers who may wish to contribute to "The Importance of People" column should communicate with Dr. Henderson in care of this journal.

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