

Needed: A College of the Human Environment

G. LOUIS HEATH *

AMERICA'S problem-solving mechanisms seriously need repair. In particular, the academic structures designed to remedy specific ecological ills have proved inadequate or obsolete. Colleges such as those for agriculture and public health have actually created new problems as they have resolved some old ones. We have reached an impasse precipitated by a society grown so complex that we can no longer rely on the classical single-track and sequential problem-solving methods.

Negative environmental feedbacks, such as pollution, crowding, and mental illness, constitute symptoms too horrendous to gloss over easily with the rhetoric of eternal progress. We must gather together the compartments of knowledge into a unified, problem-focused, institutional equation for ecological salvation. It is imperative that we establish a new intellectual institution to educate professionals and generate knowledge in order to continue to cure, preferably to prevent, infections stemming from the imbalance among all forms of life. The new institution should be a College of the Human Environment.

The United States has historically produced many social inventions to solve urgent problems. Among its inventions are the land-

grant college, the county agent, antitrust legislation, the Federal Reserve System, and Social Security. A College of the Human Environment qualifies in no sense as a radical innovation; it is integral to the American tradition of social reconstructionism. It shares with the land-grant college a commitment to training, research, and programs for healing society's festering abscesses. In fact, a College of the Human Environment should be founded and funded much as were the land-grant colleges.

The original land-grant colleges arose from a national need and the popular demand for a democratized and relevant system of higher education.¹ The elitist academics of the day regarded the new institutions cavalierly; the land-grant colleges dared to apply knowledge, an inexcusable violation of the separation of thought and action. The elitists argued that practical, professional education did not merit recognition in the university. Most disciplinary

¹ James Lewis Morrill. *The Ongoing State University*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1960. pp. 24-37.

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scholars still look askance at anyone who would use knowledge in the real world. Yet today it is absolutely crucial that we extend the curriculum even further into reality in order to erase the question mark, hung like the sword of Damocles, over man's very survival.

A Unity of Knowledge

We have broadened the curriculum thus far to attend problems in agriculture, defense, space exploration, poverty, and public health. We must now extend the university's involvement to include ecology. The College of the Human Environment should provide—as do the schools of agriculture, social work, and public health—professional, problem-focused education and research directed toward people's need and aspiration for a satisfying life in pleasant surroundings; but it should differ very substantially, of course, in its interdisciplinary organization. An interdisciplinary form is necessary to mobilize an effective response to the deteriorating web of life in this era.

The development of esoteric specializations has proved injurious to the interdependence of all life. A College of the Human Environment can forge a unity of knowledge so that humanistic, ecologically-salubrious public policy is possible. Only an emergency mobilization of intellectual resources can re-equilibrate sufficiently soon our dire ecological imbalance at this late hour in intellectual history. We must mobilize resources on a magnitude comparable to that of the Manhattan Project during World War II, but our purpose must be to harmonize and integrate the numerous contributions of the specialists under the tutelage of wise artist-engineers such as R. Buckminster Fuller and Lewis Mumford. In this way, we can develop and implement nonviolent solutions to the biospherical crisis.

We must ensure that the science of man genuinely serves human progress, structuring all our sciences so their *raison d'être* becomes the actualization of human well-being. This high-minded purpose requires, given our late stage of decline, an emergency synthesis of knowledge, a nonviolent Manhattan Project,

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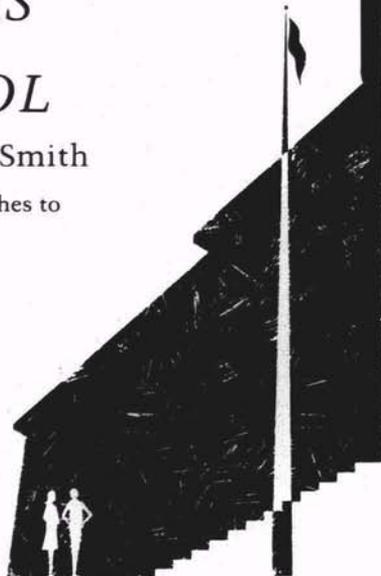
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within the College of the Human Environment, in the service of our most laudable and sacred values. We can no longer afford the luxury of stark knowledge unimbued by ideals. The College of the Human Environment must span the abyss between fact and value. In such bridge-building rests the salvation of the human race.

The College of the Human Environment must embody the spirit of Charles Reich's "Consciousness III"² in order to manufacture an educational antidote for the ecological crisis. Consciousness III, as differentiated from the frontier cowboy and New Deal mentalities at levels I and II, reflects a Luddite mind that rejects technology as the substance of progress. Consciousness III exponents stress that the inveterate use of machines and man's tenuous reliance on the natural world must be balanced so as to maximize the human community's happiness. The results of this calculus would command a very judicious use, often eschewal, of technology that inflicts pernicious injury, psychic or physical, on the commonweal. The infusion of Consciousness III into public policy and the social order would obviate what Alvin Toffler terms "future shock,"³ or the disorienting effect of anachronistic institutions on men who become incompetent to deal with an environment that eventually overwhelms them. Toffler advocates "a council of the future" to inquire into and plan for a livable environment. This council would be subsumed most valuably and legitimately as a department of planning under the rubric of the College of the Human Environment.

Many of the best students are cynical about the capacity of traditional disciplinary training to prepare them to solve critical ecological problems. They are not enthusiastic about the conventional careers toward which the university educates them; they believe the standard careers are "cop outs" from the real issues, that the study of academic subject matter will not allow them to actualize their sense of social responsibility.

Consequently, an increasing percentage of students drop out or become very dissatisfied with their education. A College of the Human Environment would provide channels for our most idealistic, concerned (and, the research indicates, intelligent) students to grapple constructively with the lethal threats to our planet's thin layer of life. A collegiate structure focused especially on the environment would convert the voluminous student alienation and dissent into positive action and genuine reform; it would divert the extravagant energy of youth into the renewal of society rather than its negation. We can afford to establish Colleges of the Human Environment to educate our most sensitive, zealous, and talented youth for socially-relevant careers simply because we cannot afford to squander the younger generation, the nation's most valuable resource.

All Facets of Ecology

The College of the Human Environment will train environmental professionals much as the public health and agriculture schools prepare experts. The professional ecologists will be able to perform roles that contribute to the preservation and enhancement of ecological systems. They will be informed in all facets of ecology, but will command operational expertise in at least one area in order to contribute toward a particular environmental solution. They must be cognizant of all the ramifications of their applied expertise so they do not naïvely disrupt delicate natural interdependencies in attempting to remedy a biospherical ill. The College will graduate ecologists in such areas as air and water quality control, automobile pollution management, air travel ecology, noise pollution abatement, and population and birth control policy. Cross-disciplinary departments will be the norm within the College; for example: the Department of Resource Management, integrating economics, forestry, recreation, and estuarine studies; the Department of Environmental Sanitation, compounding chemistry, microbiology, radiation biology, applied physics, and insect control; and the Department of Environ-

² Charles A. Reich. *The Greening Of America*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970.

³ Alvin Toffler. *Future Shock*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970.

mental Design, incorporating architecture, soil and plant science, and engineering.

Yet the most important and controversial departments will be those that converge upon the relationship between an inequitable social structure and the despoliation of the environment. These departments will include the Department of Resource Planning and Administration, the Department of Social Ecology, and the Department of Human Resources. The graduates of these departments will focus upon the destructive impact of pernicious human values and behavior upon the environment. They will serve as the protectors of the public interest, criticizing such maladaptive values as the social definition of the good life in terms of the consumption of goods, and inquiring into corporate and government profligacy. The explorers of the power structure will be the ombudsmen and consumer advocates who must adeptly operate within behemoth public and private bureaucracies. (Only federal legal reform will open every closed corporation to them.) Their controversial inquiries will extend, *ipso facto*, into politics and public policy.

Yet the ecological crisis will only ultimately be resolved in the realm of politics and policy. And should the graduates be unable to penetrate employer prejudice to secure jobs, their study will not have been sacrificed; they will have realized a highly relevant, multidisciplinary, liberal arts education. They will be the avant-garde for the new ecologically-sane citizenship we must attain if we are to survive.

The College of the Human Environment cannot endure as an appendage of preexisting structures. It must enjoy autonomy in matters of curriculum, budget, and faculty recruitment and reward.⁴ Complete independence is absolutely essential if the College is creatively to train ecology professionals and achieve significant solutions for environmental abuses. Only in this fashion will

⁴ John S. Steinhart and Stacie Cherniack. *The Universities and Environmental Quality: Commitment to Problem Focused Education*. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969. pp. 44-45.

synoptic wisdom transcend the parochial, disciplinary mentality.

Given autonomy, the College of the Human Environment can direct the energy that is routinely dissipated in the friction among disciplines into efficient inquiry devoted to the purgation of a cankered ecosystem. For example, the College of the Human Environment scholars can draw upon the germane disciplines to unravel the Gordian knot of water pollution. If they had dared this relevance as faculty members within traditional academic departments, they would have reaped their colleagues' self-conscious and intimidating acrimony for slighting the discipline's theoretical infrastructure.

In short, by innovatively responding to very critical problems within the conventional academic departments, they would have automatically defined themselves as failures by the prevailing meritocratic criteria. The students, also, who are genuinely concerned about environmental quality would find in the College of the Human Environment a receptive place to major. They would not be compelled to cheat on an archaic curriculum, by majoring in sociology or political science, taking what they consider insipid, mechanical, required courses, and filling in the electives with ecologically-relevant courses that a young, radical professor (whom the student contrives to get as adviser) will approve. This nonplussing anarchy obliges the student to fashion thoughtful, humane curricula for the biospherical crisis on an *ad hoc* basis within the anachronistic academy.⁵

A sovereign College of the Human Environment would enlarge the student's freedom to clarify and inform his experience in a formal curriculum that expresses biospherical concerns and responds institutionally to society's ecological ills. From this new form of educational freedom, both teacher and learner could leap from tomorrow into today, authenticating their ecological ideals and reconstructing a dilapidated environment. □

⁵ See G. Louis Heath's review of three ecology publications, *Harvard Educational Review* 40 (3): 498-504; August 1970. The review discusses in detail several of the students' ecology activities.

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