The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson

A Case Reopened

ONCE UPON A TIME (in November 1956) this column was drawn out of a bagful of umbrage and labeled "This We Believe—But!" It posed four paradoxes which seem to me to characterize the higher education in America, and which in my judgment render ineffective most of our programs at that level.

Monumental disregard by readers of this blast from my prophetic soul was shattered last month by William Weichert of the Oakland Public Schools. In a "Letter to the Editor" of this magazine (see page 393) Mr. Weichert asked, in essence, "Granting the paradoxes, what do you propose be done about the sad state of higher education?" This is a request that the case be reopened. Reopened it is. Let the ordnance peal.

By way of refreshing memories, let me repeat my four charges:

1. Although knowledge is necessary, it is hardly the sufficient condition for the desirable changes which education must bring about. Yet colleges continue to regard the mere dispensing of information as their major function.

2. Although learning is an active process, most students still "learn" from lectures and textbooks in classes far removed from the Town, which is the only thing that can give meaning to the data being studied.

3. Effective learning occurs when learners want to learn, yet colleges make little effort to organize instruction which capitalizes on intrinsic motivation. Rather, they resort to motivational frauds like grade averages, pop quizzes, dean's lists, honor systems, deficiency lists, and the like.

4. Life is of a piece. Data and ideas and experiences are interrelated and interdependent. Yet college programs are educational smorgasbords from which students pick courses which only by chance bear any relationship to each other or to the real goal of liberal education.

Now I think that Mr. Weichert is really asking for something more than a page of directions for correcting four evils which essentially arise from outmoded pedagogy. There are available such pages of directions; books about teacher-education and group dynamics bulge with them. I think that Mr. Weichert is pushing for an answer to the prior question of the function of higher education, which is probably what I ought to have dealt with in the first place, and with which I must deal now. Certainly one can hardly talk about method unless goals are clearly in view.

However, lest I appear to duck the issue, let me first say that the quickest way to cure bad methods is to substitute good methods. And good methods result from simply getting some understanding of how human beings learn, and then acting on the basis of this understanding. How college authorities help their faculties to secure this understanding is a matter for the college authorities. They can organize faculty seminars devoted to problems of human learning; they can

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ask faculty members to read and discuss the U. S. Office of Education pamphlet, "Toward Better College Teaching"; they can begin with students' reactions to professorial classroom techniques; or they can simply fire people. The important thing is to want to lick the problem of wretched methodology, and to set about it promptly.

Returning now to the function of liberal higher education in America, I say that the function of the liberal arts college is to liberally educate. Simply put, this means that higher education ought to develop in students the desire and the capacity to become active participants in life's eternal struggle for liberty, equality and fraternity. But, if one takes seriously the prophecies of many informed critics of American life, one cannot but view with profound alarm the failure of higher education to help young people come to grip with the vital issues in our national and international lives. In the face of a desperate need for a "public philosophy," which one analyst says can alone prevent the decline and fall of Western democracy, our colleges blithely continue to "give" an education only remotely related to the terrifying realities of our times.

In fact, the liberal arts colleges are not really discharging their liberal arts function at all. Despite the liberal arts label, these colleges have been and still are vocational schools. They are "class" vocational schools, but vocational schools nonetheless. "By and large," says James Conant, "the general education which our conventional four-year liberal arts colleges provide . . . is given as a background for two vocations—the learned professions and the managerial positions in business. This type of education . . . has no over-all validity for it cannot be considered apart from the clientele for

which it has been developed over the years."

Because these colleges are in essence vocational schools, they cannot really spend time helping students to develop a really liberal education of the kind citizens of a struggling democratic social order must possess if the social order is to survive. Consequently college students select those subjects which will presumably equip them for success in their careers. "There is no such thing as a general order of knowledge and a public philosophy, which (they need) to possess."

In short, our colleges, as well as our high schools, are simply failing to provide students with the skills, understandings and desires necessary for facing, examining and solving the really basic and vital social problems of our times. Citizens of as dynamic a social order as ours need desperately to understand its complexities and to develop methods for resolving social, economic, religious and political conflicts. Such methods are not developed by vocational skills passively acquired through mastering vast bodies of data in educational monasteries. Vast bodies of data and vocational skills, as useful as they are, do not constitute a liberal education.

In the face of this critical need, so recent an analysis of higher education as the First Interim Report of the President's Committee on Education Beyond the High School devoted only one sentence to the idea that "an understanding of our own and other cultures and of the physical and social world in which we live is essential for the members of a self-governing society." The balance of the 12-page report deals almost exclusively with issues raised by increasing enrolments and decreasing facilities, financial support, and numbers of teachers. Of

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course these are problems real and pressing. But they are nevertheless of secondary importance. Repairing a car means little if one has nowhere to go.

And at this point, we return to Inquisitor Weichert's question: What are you going to do about it? When asked such a question, I have a prompt reply; to wit: I don't know. Americans, like humans everywhere, have a marvelous predilection for things as they are. We enjoy putting on our Liberal buttons at conferences and debating the Big Issues, but faced with the people and things of daily living, we find making important changes not only distasteful but positively threatening. We seem to be moved only by crises. This phenomenon is, of course, observable throughout history. Institutions ultimately disintegrate because of their failure to "keep up with the times," to reflect and carry out those values held important by the society they serve. So the opposition stages a revolution, which gets things changed, but at rather a price.

Now discovering a way of lengthening the life of institutions is a responsibility no one has yet charged me with. And I propose to avoid such a charge as long as I can. But not having an answer does not excuse one, or us, from facing at least the educational aspects of the problem and trying to get at least some alternatives to disaster. As educators, we ought all the more keenly to feel our peculiar responsibility for trying.

The only course open to us now appears to be that of trying to get agreements on the inadequacies of higher education and of setting in motion an honest, organized, vigorous and continuing attack on these inadequacies. To insist that educators constantly reexamine function, content and method is to insist on the obvious. Yet few could defend the many as discharging this obligation either eagerly or successfully.

The institution of higher learning is, by definition, a moving, growing, changing thing. Education in a democratic society not only should, but it *must*, enable its citizens to assess its commonly-held values, strengthen or alter these values, and extend the realization of these values to all members of the society. We cannot achieve such an education by looking to others for help. New health, life, movement, growth and power must come from within. And it must come now if the higher learning in America is to survive.

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