

Digest of Conference on

APPROACHING THE PROBLEM OF REORGANIZING

A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE CURRICULUM

Discussion leaders:

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SUMMARY

Malcolm MacLean - Factors out of which the need arises for a reorganization of the liberal arts curriculum:

- (1) The curriculum has grown "by self-division, with no power of elimination." Out of old department of history have grown highly specialized departments and schools of the social sciences, - political science, sociology, social service administration, economics, business administration. From philosophy have come the departments of psychology and education.
- (2) Each of these specialized departments and schools has developed its technical terminology, resulting in multiple "foreign languages" in English.
- (3) Highly trained people in one of these departments or fields may be, and frequently are, illiterate in other areas of the liberal arts. The more highly trained they are, the more pronounced this trend seems to be.
- (4) The need has become apparent for some kind of synthesis.

The efforts which institutions have made to provide this synthesis can be classified roughly as follows:

- (1) By condensation of essential elements. The University of Chicago plan. A required survey course in each of the following areas, the Social Sciences, Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Humanities.
- (2) By "mental discipline". The St. John's College plan. The great books theory. Training in logic, formal grammar, formal rhetoric, and mathematics.
- (3) By constructing the curriculum around:
 - (a) the present needs of students. Taking into account their lacks, emotional traits, the way in which they learn, etc.,
 - (b) the needs of adults in democratic society. The activities of alumni. What students do after college. Comparison of the activities of graduates and non-graduates and their interests.
 - (c) results of the impact of environment in general and society in particular on the student. Home conditions, health and economic status.

The last is the plan followed in the General College of the University of Minnesota. These three approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Elements of the three are probably to be found in many good programs, and a blending of them is desirable.

Stephen Corey - While in theory it is a simple matter to get a faculty interested in "changing" students, in practice it is tremendously difficult. Some reasons for this may be:

1. College professors as a class do not themselves have a broad "general" education.
2. Those who do have a broad general education do not know how it was acquired.
3. Almost no graduate schools give attention to general education. At Wisconsin it was found that, as judged by general culture tests, the liberal arts seniors were superior to graduate students. The emphasis on research in specialized fields offers little opportunity for consideration of the problem of general education.
4. The subject matter specialist in the typical liberal arts college is not interested in general education. He reads little or nothing outside his own field.
5. Once a conviction has been planted in a faculty that the curriculum needs examination and revision, the next difficulty is to bring about the realization that these revisions must be continuous. Curriculum revision is not a one-semester job.

E. F. Potthoff - Two additional problems which should receive attention are these:

1. The importance of having faculty members informed, if not expert, in the psychology of learning. If the student is to learn, (a) he must be able to relate what it is desired that he learn to something in his experience, and (b) motivation is necessary. Many high school graduates come to college with no particular interest in general education. Motivation must be supplied. At the same time their choices for specialization must be taken into account.
2. As suggested by the New York Regents inquiry and the studies of the American Youth Commission colleges must recognize that the curriculum must serve students who will not graduate as well as those taking degrees.

Malcolm MacLean - Prof. Robert Selover, of the University of Minnesota in a study based on results of the general culture test of 1000 students at the end of the sophomore year, found that students preparing to specialize in Biology already scored in the biological section of the test an average of three sigmas above students indicating other choices of specialization. These potential Biology majors were almost equally deficient in fields of knowledge other than their speciality when compared with those planning to specialize in these other areas. These findings with regard to the Biology majors were more or less typical. MacLean suggested that it would be well to check results on the general culture tests with results of some test such as the cooperative test on contemporary affairs.

Question: What are the correlations between these two tests and between sections of them?

Answer: The consensus of opinion is that these correlations are low. The scholarly specialist often shows up very badly in tests on contemporary affairs. There is usually high correlation between a vocabulary test and the general culture test.

Q.: Should general education end at the completion of the sophomore or the senior year?

A.: Ohio State University has two plans for general education: one terminating at the end of the sophomore year in the liberal arts college, and another at the end of the senior year in the agricultural college.

President Hutchins of Chicago says that general education should end with the sophomore year, but this "denies the organic concept of education." These artificial barriers between the different levels of education should be broken down. Shutting off general education at the end of any period is simply an administrative expedient.

General education should include some specialization. Some students should begin specialization in the freshman year and delay their general education. This is largely an individual problem, and of course is a complicating factor in the administration of curriculum requirements.

To fail to allow the potential scholar to begin specialization early may seriously frustrate such a person. This calls for constant vigilance. Give either general or special education when the student is ready for it. To some extent at the University of Louisville, specialization is being given first and synthesis later. One difficulty in allowing students to specialize early is that their reasons for their choice of speciality may be faulty.

Occupational motivation is the greatest single drive in the choice of speciality. This brings out the very difficult problem in the small liberal arts college of giving an over-view of the work of the world without the aid of vocational specialists and prospective employers. The superior student in most institutions is woefully neglected. He receives practically no guidance or attention.

Q.: Who should "spot" the student in need of guidance? The professor? Or a counselor?

A.: The "counsel-conscious" teacher is the best advisor. But the official advisor is indispensable. Values are to be gained from both.

Q.: Are colleges trying to do too much when they attempt to minister to the social, emotional, physical and moral as well as the intellectual needs of students?

A.: Mental development is frequently dependent upon solution of problems in these other areas. Specialists are useful to the educational program because teachers don't have the time or the ability to render certain services.

We often fail to teach students how to see their own problems. When they understand better the nature of their own problems, they do much better work.

Q.: How can an administrative officer get his faculty interested in curriculum revision?

A.: 1. Present objective data regarding students.
2. Gather and present reactions of students and alumni to the present program.

(In response to a question by Stephen Corey, nine of the approximately forty present indicated that their institutions were seeking student reactions.)

3. Hold staff meetings for the discussion of general problems.
4. Establish the practice of having professors visit each other's lectures.
5. Cultivate the attitude of the faculty working for the students and the dean working for both. The traditional idea of the dean being the "boss" is hurtful.
6. Establish faculty committees to work out and recommend policy.
7. Evaluate the present program, and each course, as objectively as possible.
8. The professor should tell his students at the very beginning of each course what the aims are and why he feels the course has a place in the total program.
9. Cultivate the proper administrative attitude toward the instructors. Encourage initiative and reward it.
10. Carefully select new staff members. Find out whether they are interested in general education. Extra-curricular experience is desirable in a staff member.

Q.: Do the arts have a place in general education?

A.: Yes - if general education in all the arts is visualized. The traditional approach to the teaching of the arts through the History of Art, etc. is a bore to most students. The creative approach seems to hold out most promise. Another method emphasizes sheer enjoyment of the arts. The problem seems to be which of these three methods shall be used and who, or what training is required for their proper presentation. It was suggested that a blending of the three methods would be best.

Q.: Most college problems are the results of the preparation which students receive from the secondary schools. What do the colleges want the secondary schools to do?

A.: What the student studies in high school seems to make little difference in predicting his success in college.

Q.: What should the colleges do about deficiencies in skills such as, reading, speech, simple arithmetic?

A.: It is probably unfortunate that colleges have to devise "hospital courses" for the students deficient in basic skills. It would be better if the individual professor would take more of this responsibility.

Q.: Are the colleges not neglecting important teaching aids?

A.: Yes. We have yet to realize the contribution which slides, movies, trips, radio, etc. could make to our traditional "lecture-text book" method of teaching.