Education and Skill

The General Education of Specialist Students in the American State University

by

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My aim in this article is to give you my impression of present conditions in the State universities of America and to describe the kind of general education which students are receiving there as a preliminary to their professional training. What I have to say is not intended to apply to the privately-owned universities, such as Harvard, but I do believe that it applies, in greater or lesser degree, to State "institutions" of higher learning all over the country.

It has been said over and over again that where the U.S.A. is concerned, generalisation is impossible, and this is as true of State systems of education as of anything else in that vast and variegated country. Nevertheless one can, I think, say with assurance that all is not well with the State university these days, mainly owing to the fact that it is concentrating, not on "educating" its students, but on "instructing" them in certain professional techniques which will enable them to earn a salary. In defence of this policy, which seems to change the groves of academe into something of an asphalt jungle, it should be pointed out that the object of these universities is not to create an intellectual elite, but to provide young Americans with advanced training for modern life in their own country, and there is no doubt that they have exhibited a realistic awareness of current technological needs. The post-war years have witnessed their tremendous effort to make the supply of trained engineers and professional men meet the demands of industry, and the recent successful demonstration of the Soviet earth satellites has introduced a fresh note of urgency.

The price that has had to be paid for this activity has been that of a pronounced decline in the teaching of subjects not specifically professional in nature, that is to say, the traditional disciplines, which are implicit within the aims of American educators. Although all students entering a State university spend their first two years in obtaining a nominal grounding in literature, philosophy, history and pure mathematics, the third and fourth years free them from these "required" studies, and they are left to concentrate more or less fully upon what has become strictly "job-training." Students in their first and second years too frequently give the impression that they are enduring an unnecessary evil which the sooner the better, will give way to the great good of training for a salary. Those who enter college with a less rigid notion of the nature of their purpose in being there may be largely forgiven if their desire for a sound general education in the Humanities rapidly weakens as time goes on. After all, the advantages of being "skilled" rather than "educated" are everywhere obvious; there are many more jobs available in industrial concerns than there are graduates to fill them; firms are competing for the favour of a man holding only a Bachelor's degree, and the market value of a research degree is considerably greater.

While teaching in America I was especially aware of the emotional and environmental strain on the minority whose interests lie within the field of the liberal Arts. They have to expend so much effort in resisting current trends that they have become cynical and distrustful of a society which, if much commercial propaganda is to be believed, cannot offer them a respected or well-paid place. Apart from teaching, there are few openings for the Arts graduate at present, although directors of several of the larger corporations have lately come to the conclusion that a sound training in the liberal arts is a desirable qualification for a business administrator to possess. The latter idea, however, has not noticeably taken root on the American campus, and comparatively few students of really high calibre remain to specialize in Arts subjects.

By far the greatest problem facing American "instructors" in Arts subjects is concerned with ensuring that no student leaves without having received at least a grounding in the subjects of the traditional curriculum and especially in English. The study of English composition and literature is a compulsory requirement for all freshmen, and so English departments are usually large, overcrowded, constricted by an unwieldy administration and inevitably hampered by shortage of staff. There is, as might be expected, a marked falling-off in numbers at more advanced levels, where most of the students are women preparing to teach in public high-schools, but first-year classes are enormous. Statisticians predict a steep increase in student-enrollment at all American universities, and it is realized that this approaching expansion will have to be controlled in some way. So far, no decisive action has been taken, and so the universities continue to be swamped by a growing annual intake of freshmen and at the same time committed by State legislation to open their doors to all comers.

The visitor to America feels, and many American teachers agree, that much of what is now done at the college level could easily be done in school. Little or nothing that is learned during the freshman year need be postponed beyond the senior classes in high school, and a more rigorous preparation of a general nature at this level would ease the burden on a college teacher while at the same time ensuring that the student had a more solid "background" in the Humanities than he is likely to obtain under the present system. So much time is spent in teaching him to write grammatical prose that freshman English comes to be little more than a training in the rudiments. The problem of dealing with the ever-increasing number of college entrants has been shelved for the time being by acting under the delusion that anybody will do to teach freshmen how to punctuate properly, and so there are far too many poorly qualified instructors at large within English departments. If the student does in fact improve his powers of narrative writing during this first year—and many do—such improvement is more often accomplished in spite of the system than because of it.

The second year of compulsory English is spent trying to introduce students to a choice selection of the gems of our literature. These "survey" courses usually include one of Shakespeare's tragedies, two or three prose works, such as "Gulliver's Travels," or "Robinson Crusoe," and a study of several longer poems like Pope's "Rape of the Lock"—which rarely fails to figure on the reading list. Occasionally a modern novel is prescribed—Huxley's "Brave New World" is popular, especially among engineers.

Up to this time, most of these students have had no literary instruction to speak of, and lack a sense of historical development. The teacher's task is therefore no easy one, for if a course of this type has any place at all in the education of the technologist it should at least teach him something of the relation of literature to human society and stimulate his untried critical faculties. Unfortunately, these courses are more often than not concerned only with a literal interpretation of the texts, and not with the underlying ideas. The examinations, set at over-frequent intervals, are designed mainly to discover if the students have read the books, and usually consist of a series of objective queries on "what happened next."

The same, more or less, applies to the methods of teaching history. Americans are inclined to doubt that a knowledge of the past can have much value for a nation which is eagerly anticipating the future, but some State universities make it a compulsory requirement, teach it as a hotch-potch of facts and dates and examine their freshmen with standardized objective tests. It is not much wonder, then, that these young people come to embrace their professional studies in the third year with a wholesale contempt for what they imagine these departments represent, and confine their future reading to the sports pages.

It seems to me that these courses could be of inestimable value if the social maturity of these young Americans were given more freedom to balance their intellectual immaturity. My own experience with this kind of teaching showed me that the sophistication which the high-school implants enables these students to appreciate from experience certain human situations —the "Romeo and Juliet" predicament is an example of what I mean — which to European undergraduates of the same age would be more or less hypothetical. Thus, although their essays leave much to be desired grammatically, many of these which descend to the depths in the matter of technical presentation have a crude wisdom about them that is deserving of notice.

Departments of classics and philosophy have been fellow-sufferers for a long time, and attract only a handful of voluntary students, even at the elementary stage. Pleas for what has come to be known as a "core curriculum" in traditional disciplines have not been received with much enthusiasm by professional departments, since it is feared that extra time spent on the student's general education may lengthen the time he has to spend in college. Industrial pressure on the universities demands that the student get his degree at the earliest possible date, and provided that he can show evidence of his professional ability in the form of a diploma, he will suffer no penalty for being more or less uncurlised in other respects. The trend just now is towards a new order of brainwashed specialists.

From all this it follows that the level of attainment which the B.A. degree represents in America falls on the average far beneath that of a corresponding qualification obtained in a professional school, for the latter can and must maintain standards which no Arts department would consider practicable for fear of losing students. Short-sighted administrative policy leaves little choice in the matter, since it decrees that the running of a course in any subject depends upon a minimum enrolment of students in that course. It seemed to me that not enough recognition is given to good teaching, and that far too much attention is being paid to high-pressure research on the part of junior members of the staff. When a young instructor finds that he is supposed to work for a Doctor's degree, teach, grade scores of essays every week, and assist in the clerical work of his department as well, he may start off enthusiastically by putting his teaching first. But when he learns that promotion depends mainly on his getting a research degree as quickly as possible, the teaching side of his duties falls to second place, and often a very poor second at that.

To conclude, the American experiment in higher education for all on the same terms seems to be leading the universities astray. The students themselves have been complaining for some time now about the "trade-school" attitude to education, and even the professional bodies are doubtful of the value of a Bachelor's degree from a State university. Pamphlets recommending a change in academic policy have been appearing in increasing number on the campuses, and now the popular periodical press has begun to take up the cry. The obvious solution is to close the gap between the high schools and the colleges, either through an intermediate year at a junior college, or by inculcating a more serious attitude to study in the high schools themselves.

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Postscriptum:

I do not think that a Canadian reader will find it difficult to perceive the analogy between all this and his own systems of higher education. Although a next-door neighbour of the United States, and thus rendered especially vulnerable to the pressures of American propaganda, Canada's link with Britain, together with her own national consciousness does have the effect of making her adopt a more detached view of the vulgar virtues advocated by such propaganda. Nevertheless, the same trends are present—the influence of the Columbia Teachers' College on the public schools is not far to seek. The conduct of universities on "engineering principles," the shamlogic of the tongue-in-cheek defenders of what they imagine to be a liberal education, the lack of any positive belief in other-than-monetary rewards—all these and many more signs of the modern "Waste Land" are evident in Canadian, and to a lesser extent, in European seats of higher learning.

What is urgently needed here is a radical extirpation of the American "Fifth Column" in education, not simply to satisfy a minority group of iconoclasts, but as a matter of sheer national necessity. The 1945 Harvard Committee Report on General and Special Education was full of intelligent comments on the education of the expert, but in 12 years the plight of the universities has worsened. It is not enough to write books and articles (like this one) deploring the trend—the intelligent public, particularly those members of it who have sons and daughters in their middle 'teens, want action. But so far no enlightened despot has arisen to restore order and we still await the day when "philosophers will vouchsafe to instruct kings with their good counsel."

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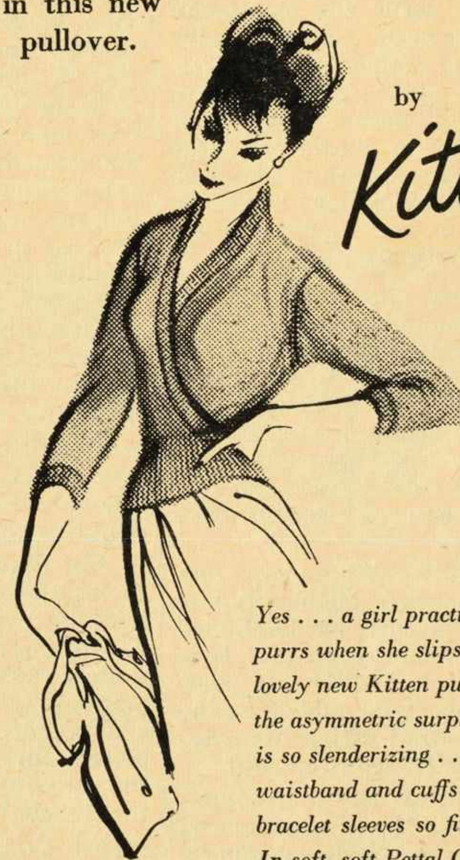

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