

Undergrads victimized by lack of liberal arts

by John Fischer

The revolts which boiled up on scores of campuses last spring — and which probably will begin to seethe again this month — have a good deal more justification than one might gather from the press and television accounts. Some commentators have put the blame on a handful of romantic New Leftists, playing at revolution; or on clumsy, indecisive academic administrators; or on the malaise of Vietnam; or on the vague epidemic of student unrest which seems to be sweeping the world. All these elements are in the cauldron, certainly, but they are not the main ingredient. They could not produce such widespread disorders unless a considerable number of ordinary, nonrevolutionary, usually well-behaved undergraduates felt a deep sense of grievance. And with good reason.

What is going on is not just a passing commotion which can be put down by firmer discipline. Neither is it a revolution. Instead, I believe it is the beginning of a counterrevolution by students — liberal-arts undergraduates in particular — against a quiet, almost unremarked revolution which has changed the whole structure of American higher education within the last two or three decades. The main beneficiaries of that revolution were the faculty. The victims were the liberal-arts undergraduates. Only recently have these students begun to understand how they are victimized — and their protest is likely to swell until at least some of the results of the earlier revolution are reversed.

Freshman seeks self-knowledge

Some youngsters come to a university with their life-plans

already laid out. They know that they want to be doctors or lawyers or professors, and they are looking for a sound training in their chosen trade . . .

Other young people (often the brightest) enter the freshman class not yet sure what to do with their lives. They come to college to find out. They want to learn something about the world and about themselves — to make an appraisal of their own capacities, and of the dauntingly complex world beyond the campus gates; and to estimate how they might best come to terms with it. They don't want professional training — not yet, anyhow. What they want is understanding, and they hope to pick up at least a smattering of it by talking to wise, mature men; by reading under these men's guidance; and by observing how such men conduct their own lives. In sum, they are after what used to be

called "a liberal education". As recently as 20 years ago they might have found it in most good American universities. Today their chances are close to zero.

Professors ignore undergraduates

Indeed, the typical professor couldn't care less about the interests of undergraduates. As a result of the academic revolution, he can safely ignore them. He is concerned only with the graduate students; for as Irving Kristol noted in *Fortune* last May, "a professor's status is defined by his relation to the graduate program. If he is active in it, his prestige is high. If he is not, he is viewed as not having 'made it.'"

If . . . an undergraduate hangs on regardless, he will get scant nourishment. The questions he asks — What is the good life? The nature of justice? The remedy for the evils of society? — are a bore and embarrassment to his professors. After all, none of them profess to have answers to such large and un scholarly questions; each professes his own narrow specialty — econometrics, say, or minor British poets of the eighteenth century. The students who expect "a visible relationship between knowledge and action, between the questions asked in the classroom and the lives they live outside it," get instead "pedantry and alienated erudition." (Fischer quotes Christopher Jencks and David Reisman in *The Academic Revolution*.) Is it any wonder that they are "completely turned off" and convinced that "all systematic and disciplined intellectual effort is a waste of time"?

Students trained, not educated

These grievances, it seems to me, are the underlying reason for the campus rebellions. The nominal issues — whether a Columbia gymnasium or the dismissal of a favorite instructor — are merely triggers, opportune excuses for venting more basic

(and often vaguely formulated) discontents. When undergraduates demand "student power" they are really pleading for a partial reversal of the academic revolution which made liberal education extinct. They are protesting against the new kind of university which that revolution created — a university which in Kristol's words, "is very good at training scholars and specialists" but is "very bad at educating young men and women."

Because they sometimes do not fully understand the nature of the academic revolution, the students' counterrevolution often is aimed at the wrong target. They are inclined to attack the administration, because the ostensible authority still seems to rest with the president and trustees. Few undergraduates yet realize how much of the administration's former power has now shifted into the hands of the faculty. But in time they will. And my guess is that their rebellion will continue, in one form or another, until the students get a reasonable share of that power themselves.

Specifically, they want a voice in what is taught, so that at least some courses will be relevant to their lives and interests, rather than to the graduate schools and the research projects of the professors. They also want better teaching, and hope to get it by setting up some sort of procedure for rewarding good teachers and penalizing bad ones. Moreover, they feel they deserve some say in "the general drift of university policy," for reasons which Joel R. Kramer, or the Harvard Crimson explained in a brilliant article in *The New York Times Magazine* of May 26. Such as, for example, checking "the incredible growth of graduate education relative to undergraduate education" or finding ways to "devote university man-hours and money to the improvement of the local ghetto . . ."

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York - last haven for undergrads

by Linda Bohnen

Again this fall, as reports of student unrest pour in, the typical York student finds himself feeling uncomfortably like an outsider. The complaints of students at Columbia, in Mexico and at the Sorbonne last summer, seem remote; their demands irrelevant to the student's own experience.

At the same time, he knows this is the season of "student power"; not to be seizing it, or trying to, leaves him open to charges of ignorance or complacency or — the worst of sins — conservatism.

Yet there is one very good reason why this is a "quiet" campus: the typical undergraduate receives better treatment here, than at probably any other university in Canada, and quite likely, the United States.

In the excerpt of the essay that is reprinted here, John Fischer suggests that student restlessness is ultimately due to the feeling — and fact — that the liberal arts undergraduate is being gypped out of a liberal education. Fischer talks about the academic revolution described in the new book by Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, a revolution in which the faculty and the graduate school replaced the undergraduate as the *raison d'être* of the university.

So far York has avoided the worst results of the revolution. The conditions here are, no doubt, largely due to our youth and accompanying size. Our faculty is atypical in its youth and

enthusiasm, probably because the malaise afflicting the U.S. has driven so many bright young Americans northward. And York has few traditions to suppress its development or discourage change.

Above all, York is being primarily developed as a place for undergraduates.

H. S. Lee, assistant dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, told *Excalibur*, "The growth and well-being of the graduate school depends on the health of the undergraduate program." Lee points out that the decision to use graduate students as demonstrators and teaching assistants rests with the Faculty of Arts and Science.

If students are suspicious of statements from the administration, they need only look at the university's scheme of development and the prominence of the college concept.

Yet York has its faults.

Tutorials are too large at 20 or 25 students and seem to have a pre-planned drop-out rate to reduce them to more manageable size.

The faculty advisor system has flopped miserably — probably because you can't expect a Spanish professor to be overwhelmingly interested in the psychology-oriented freshman arbitrarily assigned him.

And while an attempt is made, in the first year at least, to coordinate a student's courses, it's only a half-hearted, conventional approach that never fully real-

izes the potentials of course integration.

York's quietude is understandable — but quietude is not the same as complacency.

If we are to learn anything at all from the Columbia experience — or even U of T's "tent city" — it is that the days of the ivory tower university are over. The very well-being of the typical York undergrad gives him a responsibility: to promote the development of his university and to work for useful social change in the community at large.

At York, his responsibility must be carried out by being sensitive to and extirpating errors and inequalities. He must not allow the faculty to ever forget that they are teachers, nor must he numb the enthusiasm that the faculty already has by being an irresponsible blob. His demands for a voice in decision-making must be carefully thought out and articulated — and when granted, fully utilized.

In the community, he must remember that he is a member of an educational elite — an elite that will eventually repay many times the investment that supports it, but an elite nevertheless. The York Student Council's A Better Chance program and Glendon's proposal to make the campus a summer camp for under-privileged children are the first hopeful steps towards community responsibility. They are certainly far worthier than agitation for drummed-up causes.

But this must be only the beginning.

Perhaps, in a young institution such as York, as with a people and its government, the students get what they deserve.

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