



a time

and a place

for learning



My university would begin with classes, if, after thinking it through, we of the university — students and faculty — really felt classes were necessary.

It might be quite feasible to begin with lectures. Professors would certainly rather talk than issue class cards — they would rather talk than do anything.

The professor might announce that at such and such an hour on such a day in such a place he would begin talking on his favorite subject and continue as long as he and his students wished to stay.

Stamina varying among the faculty and the threshold of boredom varying among students, this might be enough to destroy the present pernicious structure that has almost all learning presented in fifty-minute packages.

As to students, they would walk into these rooms, stay if interested, come back if excited; eventually start lecturing themselves when they felt they had something to say and could prove it.

Under this system, some vexing problems might be met, if not solved.

The dull might be chastened, the glib might be detected, the university might become more concerned with the drop-ins — the students who keep coming back for more — than the dropouts.

Without the obligation to live up to the ideal suggested by class cards and credit hours, the inept, the bored, and the impenetrable might abandon university life, and neither the sense of guilt in the student nor the sense of frustration in the faculty would be aroused.

Very soon, I'd hope, the lectures would give way to the kind of interchange that must be at the heart of a university.

The best professors would get tired of hearing only their own voices, the most excited students — and that's the kind that would be sticking around — wouldn't be able to keep their mouths shut, and pretty soon there would be discourse, people learning from each other — a condition

that is the "unifying" principle of the "university."

At this point, administrators — and these might come from among the professors whose lecture halls were by now empty (it would give them gainful employment and in time would likely develop in them a strong sense of doing worthwhile work) — would probably begin by lot or color of eyes or by initial letter of last name (as is now the prevailing practice) **to arrange place and time where small groups could, when the excitement occasioned it, continue discourse.**

In time, these might be called classes, but their growth would be slow and capa-

ble of being checked, so that their harmful effects would be minimized.

As to what is being taught, nothing, quite obviously.

Some things are being learned.

Under this system, a good many subjects wouldn't appear at all — those for examples, that now infest college catalogues, about which Socrates himself could not be interested.

The Administration of the Elementary School Lunch Program, for example, or An Introduction to Indo-European Phonology or Managerial Functioning of the Home-Owned Retail Mercantile Establishment.

How could even the people doing such things be interested?

These are things human beings tolerate in order to do other things that do engage their interest. The university has no business being as dull as life.

The other large group of things that would not be taught are all the things that one should and can learn by himself or with the help of books or machines.

The grammar of a language, for example, and the principles of sociology and most other such subjects.

Much that involves counting might be so learned — not basic mathematics, which requires a teacher sensitive to the aesthetics of numbers who is capable of communicating that sense, but the many other counting chores that involve putting things into columns and boxes and applying them to merchandise or machines or mankind.

And much dear to the defenders of the liberal arts might be partially removed from the classroom: books, music, drama, art would be removed as objects of study in favor of their becoming objects of doing and love.

In my university we might have to sacrifice classes to preserve learning.

If we did get rid of classes, we might not only develop the mind but preserve its sanity.

A national magazine writes about how Time, high school honor society president, didn't just walk into Yale and start learning, but was screened, registered, and matriculated in the manner of our best universities.

His beginning French class was conducted entirely in French, and after a few days, he began to fear he might flunk out. Quite obviously, the trouble was classes.

A halfway bright student might walk into a lecture in French and sit there wholly unable to understand what was going on. A very bright student might even sit their

long enough to flunk.

But the fault is that there is such a class. Of course one learns a language by exposure.

A child, abandoned in France, should end up as a French-speaking adult. But a formal college class can only faintly copy such an experience and at the peril of driving the student away from language study altogether.

In a proper university, the student would depart at once and come back to class, if he came back at all, when he'd mastered — with the aid of obliging electronic devices — enough french to understand and be excited by what was going on.

Or better still, he would have a constant informal exposure to a foreign language which came much closer to duplicating experience abroad.

Not that the student in my university wouldn't work. However, I'd like to think that the student spent long hours because he was on to something he just couldn't let go of, and that the flexibility of the university would permit his doing so without interrupting him by vexing matters such as classes.

Our course of study would have a termination, but it would be even more arbitrary than the four-year degree program is now.

It could be determined by one means as well as another — by the financial resources available (an extended period in good years, a shorter period in lean), or by determining when a student actually reached a level of accomplishment.

It would necessarily be a matter of years, for a student needs to see how one year's studies carry over into the next and to experience the kinds of development that can take place only over a year or more.

At such a place of learning, alumni and deserving friends would come back frequently —

Not for reunions and alumni weekends, not for degrees or certificates, but to finish up projects that they had to abandon when they left the first time or to take up studies that years later seem to have great relevance to what they are doing or feeling or wanted to be about.

Properly conducted, universities would be most exciting for those whose additional experience enhances their learning and the university's as well. These returning students would pay for the privilege, and their employers would provide the time.

And when they left, as when they returned, they would be going as students just carrying their learning to another time and place.