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NON-INTELLECTUALISM ON CAMPUS -
PRESSURE TO MAINTAIN A HIGH QUALITY ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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NON-INTELLECTUALISM ON CAMPUS - PRESSURE TO MAINTAIN A HIGH QUALITY ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

The remarks today are my opinions resulting from experience as an administrator, a reader, and an observer of human nature as it has revealed itself on and around the college and university campus. My opinions are not researched carefully. There is no footnote to validate any claim. This is simply a sharing of views; views formulated over twenty-one years of college administrative experience at two institutions.

The selection of "Non-Intellectualism on Campus - Pressure to Maintain a High Quality Academic Environment" as a topic for discussion is easy to understand. To deal with the reasons for a creeping non-intellectualism is a more difficult matter.

CAUSES FOR NON-INTELLECTUALISM ON CAMPUS

For those who are a part of the classical or liberal tradition of education, development of the intellect is the foremost objective of the educational process. The mind, exposed to the richness of literature and language, imbued with appreciation for history and philosophy and immersed in the methods and language of mathematics and science improves its capacity to know and understand, and consequently to explain, solve and invent. Through study, research, and discourse this process is carried on, leading to theories, theorems and often proofs that change the understanding of life and the way people live. Learning for the sake of knowing alone is a commandment handed down by the God of the intellect. Non-intellectualism is anything on the campus
that detracts from the process which helps the mind develop its capacity to think independently and creatively, to penetrate to the essence of a subject and to understand broadly the traditions, values and directions of one's own culture.

There are always disagreements in academe about what subjects or processes qualify as non-intellectual. The technological revolution spawned by original research of the highest intellectual level has created a society with a myriad of technical jobs. These jobs require sophisticated training. Colleges and universities have assumed responsibility for much of this training over the opposition or at the reluctant acceptance of the liberal arts faculties. The practical application of highly intellectual research nurtured in the university, and the demands that application makes on academia, is viewed by some as a threat to the perpetuation of pure intellectual process itself. In other words, the need for technical training has brought about a demand for higher education from people whose chief goal in attending college is to find a better job when they graduate. To many intellectuals this is demeaning to the real purpose of the university community, the pursuit of knowledge and the growth in human consciousness and awareness. How purely intellectual the American campus was in its purest form can be debated, but it is accurate to say that the expansion of professional curricula has tended to reduce the emphasis on intellectual discourse and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and instead substituted a "how to" mentality, a training for a job approach. To the intellectual that is a threat to high quality; to many taxpayers
who now pay much of the bill for both public and private education, it is the reason for the university.

Throughout history the intellectuals of a society have been few in number compared to the population as a whole. A usual home for them was the university, and their thoughts, ideas and endeavors gave the university its character. In the past thirty-five years in the United States old colleges and universities and new ones have accommodated an avalanche of students. We have seen a kind of democratization of higher education in the sense that many citizens have participated in it. The question arises, Can thirty, forty, or fifty percent of the citizens be intellectuals? Is it utopian to hope for that? Is the democratized university and the university as an intellectual center a contradiction in terms? Certainly the weight of numbers has put a strain on those resources in academia that help to maintain a high quality academic environment.

A recent force for anti-intellectualism on many a campus is the perilous financial condition of colleges and universities. When faculty and administrators are conferring and arguing about which programs to cut and people to lay off they are often preoccupied with personal survival, not the improvement of intellectual discourse. This problem varies institution to institution and state by state, but a majority of U.S. colleges and universities have faced or are facing a financial crisis that saps energy and deadens the spirit.

For some time collective bargaining has been creeping into higher education. When a faculty organizes there is a whole new
non-intellectual process that enters the life of academe. Unfortunately, in many colleges there were no less time consuming nor less expensive ways for determining salaries and conditions of employment than the industrial collective bargaining model. It will take years for that process to work itself into the life of universities in a non-disruptive way. The dollar cost for the process itself will never be regained, and will also require a part of the budget that could be spent to improve academic quality.

Apparently our age is the age of entitlement. People believe they are entitled to more money, more power, more freedom to do as they please, less work and less restraint. These ideas have permeated academia along with the rest of society. Now the entitlement is running into some hard economic facts. The socio-economic problem is one of interest to the intellectual for analysis and prescription, but when he is caught up in it personally the problem adds to the consumption of time and thought that do not make the quality of the university any better.

Financial problems, collective bargaining where it exists, and dealing with political and public attention focused on the university appear to be taking more of the President's time and even the time of academic officers. When administrative leadership concentrates on money and politics at the expense of involvement in the planning of academic programs and participation in the intellectual discourse with faculty and students, the quality of the academic environment is impaired. It is non-intellectual when the leader of an academic institution has little time for
intellectual leadership.

Good performance by the President and his staff in financial development and management and politics aids the institution immeasurably. At the same time the work can be stimulating to those who do it. Also it is likely to be all absorbing, and the faculty who want, appreciate and are stimulated by intellectual leadership from the President, Provost and/or Academic Vice President are left disappointed at best, and at worst dulled.

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

To meet these forces of non-intellectualism, strategies must be devised. Though they may be difficult to implement, they must be tried or institutions of higher education, with some exceptions, will cease to be alive, intellectually fertile breeding grounds for ideas, solutions, and higher consciousness.

For the largest segment of higher education there can be no retreat from the growth of professional curricula. Not only is it here to stay in the university, but our society's future may depend on its being there. Intellectuals in the liberal tradition of education must not deal with their more professionally, even vocationally oriented colleagues as a threat, but must find ways to envelop them.

At a time when the liberal arts curriculum has suffered and professional curriculum expanded there are practical incentives for professors of the liberal arts to persuade, cooperate, and plan with their "so called" more practical colleagues. If they live together they can share credit hour generation and
A few years ago a decision was made at Grand Valley State to place the Schools of Public Service, Health Sciences, Nursing, and Education within the College of Arts and Sciences. This action was unpopular with many faculty members in Arts and Sciences and in the Professional Schools. The decision was made because the administrative leadership believed that all educated people need the perspective that comes from some understanding of the knowledge embodied by the liberal arts curriculum. The intellectual process that flows from liberal learning and the life of the mind was not negated nor contaminated by the move. Rather, its advocates and purveyors were summoned to do what they claimed was necessary for high academic quality; require of all students, even those in the Professional Schools, to spend a considerable amount of time living with ideas and concepts greater than those defined in one Professional field. Structure was used to encourage dialogue and synthesis. Structure was used to bring together groups that usually prefer to go their own ways with little respect for one another. Both are important to the whole university enterprise, and if allowed to separate tend to bifurcate knowledge and the learning process.

Is the Grand Valley State strategy to keep the growing emphasis on professional education firmly attached to and rooted in the intellectual tradition of liberal learning working? The paraphernalia of academia are there. Faculty from Arts and Sciences and the Schools work together on committees, share together in symposia, evaluate each other's curriculum, and see to it that
all graduates of the Schools have a good dose of liberal arts courses. Whether or not the structure has accomplished its major objectives of fusing the two groups into one intellectual community requires more time.

A complex modern society will have its highly trained specialists. The forward evolution of the human species requires intellectuals who work with values and historical and personal understanding. They must live together in the university. The former need the latter if we are to remain truly human and humane. The former will be here because knowledge has brought us a technological, specialized society that will not yield to intellectual Luddites.

Many colleges and universities played the numbers game in the 1960's and 70's. The temptation to take more students who could pay tuition or make a college qualify for higher appropriations assisted in bringing legions of students to the campuses. Citizens wanted access to education and the promise of a better life, and the educational empire builders accommodated them.

Before considering a strategy to counter the non-intellectualism that accompanies the absorption of a large percentage of the population into colleges and universities, the question of whether or not they should be accommodated needs to be addressed. There must be places where intellectuals pursue their work unimpeded by large numbers of people and in the company of their own kind. Yet the United States has the capability in terms of faculty, plant, and wealth to educate in colleges and universities a significant proportion of its population. To do so, and
do it well, is a noble objective. It can save our democracy in coming centuries if more people are educated in the intellectual process. They will not all have high quality intellects, but they can have historical, personal, and scientific perspective that will help them understand themselves, their society, and other's societies more fully. If universities educate for jobs only there will be generations of disappointed people.

The period of rapid growth in higher education has ended for this century. Though fewer people will graduate from high schools, the same high percentage are likely to attend college. They will be accompanied by a large group of older adults. No growth or decline in numbers of students for many universities does not mean the United States will educate only an intellectual and an economic elite. The desires of the most elitist professors and administrators to provide college education only for a selected few will not be realized in this country.

The advantage the universities have now compared to the time a few years ago when there was irresistible pressure to increase enrollment, is in the area of faculty recruitment and development. In the steady or declining numerical state of higher education, each college and university should have a strategy to improve the quality of the faculty. Since budget cuts are or will be a necessary exercise for most universities, they should be used to excise the weakest teachers, researchers, and administrators. This will strike the most impressive blow against non-intellectualism, and for a high quality academic environment.
Faculty leadership must agree to the objectives of the strategy, the Board must support the President, Provost, Deans, and tenure committees, and all must make sure that the process is as just as possible as it works towards the objective. Early retirement, challenge to competency, removal of weakest programs, "buy out" can all be considered. In this difficult period probably the greatest opportunity for improvement in quality in most colleges and universities, particularly in the less well known institutions, is in upgrading the quality of faculty. The institution will be sued and the administration will be under severe pressure, perhaps in some cases beyond the breaking point. The quality of education will eventually improve by a ten to twenty percent factor.

The financial crisis in higher education is caused by high inflation and recession. For some it is caused also by dwindling enrollments. The non-intellectual component of this crisis as mentioned previously is the energy, time and thought expended on campuses worrying about it, and fighting about what to do rather than tending primarily to the process of the intellectual development of students.

There is no strategy that can immediately calm a campus caught up in financial crisis. The strategy should try to bring the campus to some equilibrium within a few years. Instead of being overly concerned by the numbers problem, administrative and faculty leaders should decide who are the best people, what are their fields of study and research, what is the institution's natural clientele and how can the institution be of greatest
service. With those considerations in mind, a plan can be devised to shape the institution in a way that maintains the best quality for a projected number of students that the leadership believes can be sustained. It may call for a planned reduction of students that will be faster than if there were no plan at all. This kind of planning requires decisions as tough as those necessary to meet each year's crisis. In the end there is a chance that the turmoil created now may lead to greater stability in a few years.

To propose a strategy to combat the non-intellectualism brought on by collective bargaining taxes administrative creativity. No process in recent history of higher education is less conducive to creating an environment of high academic quality than collective bargaining. The games that are played and the level of attack on individuals appear to be unworthy for people who are dedicated to the life of the mind. Experts who disagree will be eagerly embraced by their colleagues and listened to attentively as they explain their position.

Administrators in unionized colleges should bargain hard for the right to take steps to improve the quality of the faculty. With improved faculty and patient, just administrative leadership, militancy and pettiness may recede. If the local union leadership is wise and in charge there is some chance for reasonable accommodation. Administrators should work for this. Where respectful communication takes place between local union leaders and the administration, there have been a few significant agreements that have permitted education to take place uninterrupted.
by posturing, anger, and disruption.

The best hope is that in time some of the adversary qualities of bargaining will decrease as colleges and universities live with the process. Better professors will take the lead, and more experienced administrators will meet with them. In the end, less time, money and energy will be spent in what is mostly a non-intellectual endeavor.

Times of financial troubles and collective bargaining when it exists are not conducive to furthering a trusting relationship between the President and the faculty. Yet, the best intellectual environment requires the President's attention to the life of the mind at the university he or she serves. The President and the faculty must be in intellectual discourse. Often a President has to use special means to see that the faculty understands his or her commitment to their primary function. They see the President as concerned only with finances and public relations. Though they may understand the need for his or her attention to those matters, many believe the President should be more prominent as a leader in matters of education. How the President does this depends on individual style.

A suggested strategy for Presidential and faculty involvement might include the following commitments from the President. 1) Reserve time for reading, study and possibly research outside the field of university administration. 2) Encourage and accept invitations to lecture in a few classes a year. 3) When addressing the faculty on practical matters of finance and politics, relate your analysis to the educational purpose they serve.
4) Encourage invitations from schools and departments to meet with faculty. 5) Invite small groups of faculty to Presidential discussion sessions on specific topics. 6) Be the host to intellectual leaders from off your campus and invite faculty to meet them. 7) No matter how large the campus, take time each month to walk through buildings and offices, visiting with faculty about mutual educational concerns.

Each institution established and nurtured for the improvement of human beings appears to be continually vulnerable to forces, ideas, and perversities that threaten its usefulness and undermine its original purpose. The university is no exception. The changes that take place in our perceptions about life, and the conflicts and tensions born by those changes are bad or good usually in the way we cope with them. This paper has attempted to analyze a few of the changes in American colleges and universities and how they may threaten the major purpose of higher education. It has tried also to propose ways in which these changes can be incorporated into the life of a university, not to the detriment of intellectual understanding and development, but to its continued ascendancy. In time, when a clearer judgment can be made about the issues discussed here, their outcome may be determined less by the degree of the correctness of the strategies proposed than by the spirit and values of the people in the university. That will be a subject for another paper.