

Ideas on education from the top.

Don Mazer Psychology

The issue is the goals of the University, what the University should be about. A good question to be raising and one that I think most professors and students have sadly neglected is individuals. A purposeful university only exists with directed, purposeful, responsible individuals - persons who are aware of what they are seeking from the University experience, or who are working to become aware of what they are seeking at the University. If you're aware of the fact that such confrontation with goals and motives is lacking in the U.P.E.I. administrative, faculty and student communities, well, at least that's a start.

I teach freshman, sophomore and upper level courses. In each of these courses, I often ask my students such questions as why are you here, what do you want to investigate, what's important to you here, what would you like to do, or know, etc. The answers are dishearteningly predictable. Freshman reply (after significant silence, gentle prompting, considerable discomfort), "We don't know anything about psychology. You tell us what it is, then, we'll know better what we want and what is important to us. After all, we're just Freshman."

Fair enough, let's proceed to abnormal, the sophomore course. "Well, I've only had one psychology course, just Intro, so I don't really know anything about abnormal psychology or what interests me about it. You teach me what it involves and then I'll know better what I want and what interests me. After all, I'm only a (lowly perhaps?) sophomore and you are a very wise man." Hmm, I say to myself, flattered by his misplaced allegation of wisdom, but becoming dubious of what seems to be occurring. Ah, but clinical psychology, filled with juniors and seniors (and majors, too, now these folks will clearly know more about what they want from this experience). "Uh, well, you see sir (!!), I've never really had a course in clinical psychology before, only in intro, abnormal, personality, research methods, developmental, holistic, creativity, learning experimental and statistics. So if you'll teach me what it is all about,

then I'll know better what interests me and what I want. After all, I'm only a senior - you can't expect me to know much."

A trend seems to be emerging here. Tell us what to do, tell us what you want, professor, tell us how to do it, and we will obediently follow.

Such a trend might also be related to such phenomena as hesitantly stated personal opinions, seminar silences, preoccupations with requirements, etc. And of course, there are always a number of students who are more self-directed than the majority. But unhappily, in my experience, there are almost as many self-directed freshman as there are self-directed seniors. Four years of university education seems to have little effect on the development of self-directed, self evaluating, personally responsible learners. Often, at the end of four years, a student may not even be able to tell whether or not he understands something unless he is tested on it. Perhaps, one might predict that such persons will continue to be dependent on future teachers, bosses and supervisors for defining their needs and interests.

I don't really blame students (anymore than I would faculty or adminis-

trators) for this unfortunate chain of events. The development of responsibility for oneself and one's education does not come automatically with four years "maturation" as some would contend. My observation of freshman - senior similarities seems to become self-directing and personally responsible thorough experience. I feel that a viable goal for the university should be an attempt to development personally responsible, self-initiating learners, able to identify their individual goals, motives, and interests and able to generate plans and methods of study and experience to meet these goals. A viable goal for the University, therefore, becomes the creation of an environment that enables students to contact their own (and I assume, varied) individual goals.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me say that I am not referring only to the ability to take one's place in society, or to select a major, or to choose one's courses when I refer to responsibility and self-direction. A personally responsible learner may decide that courses and majors are an obstacle to pursuing his interests.

In order to work on the goals I am discussing, we

need to become sensitive to the university as an environment. Our present university atmosphere does not facilitate the development of responsibility and self-direction. The professor who defines what the student needs to know is creating the same process as the student who will rarely make a move unless he knows what is expected of him, i.e. an externalization of values and evasion of responsibility. An environment filled with the pressures of external evaluation (grades, deadlines, required courses) may produce the individual who is only responsive to external pressures, who is unable to contact his own goals. The student who is trying madly to respond to the demands of five courses may not even have the time to ask himself what he is interested in, and certainly little time or energy to pursue it if he knows. Furthermore, deep involvement in an intellectual interest would likely result in poorer performance and less attention to course requirements. Given the choice between interest and requirements, most sensible students choose the latter. But one might speculate that reducing the pressuring, anxiety-provoking aspects of the university environment might facilitate the

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"Be what you would seem to be' - or if you'd like to put it more simply - 'Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you would have been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.'"

"I think I should understand that better,' Alice said very politely, 'if I had it written down.'"

Alice's dilemma is all too common for those who devote a great deal of thought to the University of the latter 1970's. What is the University? What should the University be? Everyone has an answer, but for those who would be so bold as to attempt to define the nature and goals of any university, especially with some degree of implementing their ideas, it does help to have it "written down."

My own view, which by no means offers any panacea for the real of imagined ills of the University, is built on a number of premises:

1. The University must remain a place where dialogue and ideas form the basis for existence.
2. The University cannot remain apart from the community. This does not mean that it becomes the handmaiden of society,

but that it must never become so aloof that it ceases to have any meaning for society.

3. The University must be a place where students and professors can operate in a humane environment designed to provide maximum opportunities for individual fulfillment.

All of this is, I suppose, not very novel or startling. The difficulty is in implementing ideas in the real world of structures, committees, conflicting opinions and all those other impediments to our Utopian visions. It is in this stage that the most attractive-sounding schemes begin to founder. But despite the obvious rocks and shoals, it is still possible to steer course for change. Some of my own modest suggestions include:

- Doing away with the department as the primary basis
- "Board of Governors, Senate