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College: The Undergraduate Experience

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INTRODUCTION

In 1871 a relatively unknown Republican politician addressed an alumni dinner at Williams College--his alma mater. "The ideal college," he said, "is Mark Hopkins at one end of the log and a student on the other."

- o The speaker was James A. Garfield, a former college president, who later became the 20th President of the United States.
- o But nothing Garfield said in his tragically short term in office was to be as long remembered as his romanticized view of the American College.

Today, no one even remotely familiar with the modern college or university with its classrooms, its stadium, and its student union, would dare compare the campus to a log; and, if so, surely not a "single" log.

Still President Garfield's touching image of Williams College remains symbolic of the love affair Americans have with education.

During the past three years we at The Carnegie Foundation have been looking at the undergraduate experience in the United States.

- o We found that a college education is still highly prized.
- o And we were reminded that it's only in America where the decal from almost any college is displayed proudly on the rear window of the family car. The message here is a family on the move.

This faith in education was captured well by a student who said to one of our researchers: "I want a better life for myself. That means college."

We surveyed 5,000 faculty and 5,000 students, 1,000 academic deans and 1,000 high school students and their parents. We spent several thousand hours visiting 29 representative colleges that ranged from an Ivy League institution in New England, to a small church college in the South, to a large, land grant university in the West.

Continuously, we were struck by the great diversity of American higher education. No two campuses are alike. And yet we found striking similarities, as well.

We were impressed repeatedly by the degree of intellectual freedom on the campus;

by the openness of ideas and
by the integrity of those who
direct the work of American higher education.

Our system is, in short, the envy of the world.

At the same time, we found that many undergraduate programs have been overshadowed by graduate and professional education and that the focus increasingly has been more on credentialing than in providing a quality education.

Here again, however, we found wide gradations from one institution to another.

- o Perhaps a half dozen of the colleges in our sample were in good health with clear goals, a curriculum with a purpose, and effective teaching.

- o At the other end of the spectrum, several colleges we visited were barely hanging on.
- o In between, at the majority of institutions, the picture was quite mixed.

Overall we characterized these places as "troubled" institutions and we focus our report on eight specific points of tension that we encountered time and time again.

We consider in our study

- o the gap between school and higher education,
- o the confusion over goals,
- o the conflicting claims of general and special education,
- o the tension over teaching and research,
- o the quality of campus life,
- o the governance of the college,
- o the measuring of outcomes,
- o and the disturbing distance between the campus and the larger world.

We acknowledge that these points of tension are not new. But we conclude that they are also points of unusual opportunity.

And we were enormously encouraged that on campuses all across the country we found renewed interest

in general education,

in the quality of teaching,

and in the evaluation of the undergraduate experience.

Good things are happening and almost every suggestion we make in our report is, in fact, a practice we encountered at one or another of the nation's higher learning institutions.

And so this morning--at the opening of this National Conference in which we are being asked to reflect anew on the quality of college life--I'd like to focus on four themes that are drawn from the heart of our report; namely, the centrality of language, the blending of general and specialized education, measuring effectively the outcomes and enriching the quality of campus life.

I

In the Carnegie Report we conclude that proficiency in the written and the spoken word is the first prerequisite for an effective education.

We conclude that all undergraduates should be able to write and speak with clarity and to read and listen with comprehension.

It's almost embarrassing to have to mention these as essential college-level skills.

And yet during our study we repeatedly heard faculty complain that many students do not have the capacity to do academic work.

One mathematics professor put the problem this way: "There's a lot of talk around here about preparing more scientists and engineers, but the biggest problem I have with my students is getting them to read and write."

In our nationwide survey we found that

more than half the faculty rated the academic preparation of students at their college as only "fair or poor."

This negative rating has increased 8 percentage points since 1976. And in large measure the concern relates to language.

Eighty-three percent felt that today's high school students should be academically better prepared.

And two-thirds of the faculty surveyed agreed that their institution "spends too much time and money teaching students what they should have learned in school."

Evaluating the language proficiency of college students is absolutely crucial.

But we found it disturbing that most language tests focus far too much on the mechanics of language rather than on its meaning.

At one university where there is a statewide language test, given to college students at the end of their sophomore year, the head of the English department said:

"The test devastates the content of our composition program.

Because the Regents Test is primarily designed to establish a minimal level of literacy, our teaching of this test tends to make the minimum the goal,

a circumstance that guarantees mediocrity in the end."

Reading, writing, and computation are essential. But does anyone really believe that measuring these basic skills,

which should have been mastered in the early years, has anything to do with college outcomes?

In the Carnegie Report we say that if college students are to achieve language proficiency the solution lies not in junior or senior level testing but in better precollege education and in intensive remedial work at the beginning of the college experience--when something can be done.

We recommend, therefore, that every college and university work closely with surrounding school districts to improve the teaching of English in the nation's schools.

And we cite in our report the National Writing Project based at Berkeley,

and the University of Michigan's statewide writing project, as examples.

But the language skills we seek in college must be of a higher order.

In the Carnegie Report we suggest that all students must have the capacity

to think critically,

to draw inferences,

and to convey, through effective written and oral communication, subtle shades of meaning.

We propose, therefore, a Basic English course--with emphasis on writing--for all freshmen.

And we recommend that every college educator insist that high order intellectual and linguistic qualities be assessed in every class and throughout the whole of the undergraduate experience.

Here we mention Brown University's Fellow's Program in which undergraduates tutor other students.

And we discuss the University of Texas at Austin which has an English language sequence for all students that extends from the freshmen to the senior years.

The point is that language is not just another subject. It is the means by which all other subjects are pursued.

And it is our position that as undergraduates refine their linguistic skills

they hone the quality of their thinking and become intellectually and socially empowered.

II

This brings me to our second concern regarding academic goals.

We conclude that the undergraduate college should close the gap between general and specialized education.

During our study we were repeatedly reminded that the baccalaureate degree is organized into two sharply divided, often competing camps.

On the one hand, there is general education which students describe as an "irritating hurdle."

On the other, there is the academic major which is far more popular and which appears to operate in a wholly separate world.

This unhealthy separation divides the baccalaureate at the very time we should be trying to put the pieces back together and the first task, we say, is to breathe new life into "general education."

During our Carnegie visits we did find at many institutions a renewed interest in general education. And in a survey of 1,000 academic deans we learned that two-thirds of the

nation's colleges and universities have, in recent years, revised their general education programs.

Since 1970, requirements in English, philosophy, western civilization, third-world courses, and international education have increased. The greatest increases have been in computer literacy, mathematics, and the arts. Parenthetically, during this same period, foreign language and physical education requirements have gone down.

Further, over half of the administrators report that their own personal commitment and the commitment of faculty to general education has enlarged in the past five years.

Indeed, given the fragmentation of academic life we found it remarkable that the vision of common learning remains so powerful a part of the baccalaureate experience.

We are troubled, however, that the distribution arrangement found in over 90 percent of the nation's colleges and universities is rarely satisfying either to faculty or to students.

And when we asked in our study of 5000 college students if they would support more general education in selected fields

the only subject that got strong support was computer science.

Especially disturbing is the fact that history received the least support.

What we found, in short, is that on most campuses general education still lacks a coherence and a clear sense of purpose.

There were, of course, exceptions. For example, when we asked 1,000 academic deans and vice presidents to nominate a general education program that has been most influential, the top five institutions selected were:

Harvard University,

University of Chicago,

Alverno College in Wisconsin,

St. Joseph's College in Indiana and,

Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.

These five programs are remarkably diverse. However, the common thread we found was the priority given to general education.

In the Carnegie Report we say that a college education has two overarching goals:

The first is to help students become independent, productive, self-reliant human beings.

The second is to help students go beyond their private interests and place their own lives in larger context.

The harsh truth is that we have been far more successful in focusing on individuality than in affirming the commonalities of our existence.

And it is here that the claims of general education can be made.

In 1972, I was sitting in my office in Albany, New York.

It was a dreary Monday morning and, to avoid the pressures of the day,

I turned instinctively to the stack of 3rd class mail

I kept on the corner of my desk to create the illusion that I was very busy.

On top of the heap was the student newspaper from a distinguished university in the west.

The headline announced that the faculty had reintroduced a required course in Western Civilization after abolishing all requirements three years before.

The students were mightily offended and in a front page editorial declared that

a required course is an "illiberal act"

The editorial concluded by asking rhetorically, how dare they impose "uniform standards" on "non-uniform people."

Frankly, I was startled by that statement. I was startled that some of America's most gifted students, after fourteen or more years of formal education, still had not learned that

while we are "non-uniform" we still have many things in common.

They had not discovered the fundamental fact that while we are autonomous human beings, with our own aptitudes and interests, we are also deeply dependent on each other.

In the Carnegie Report we propose an approach to general education we call the integrated core. By the integrated core we mean a program of study that concerns itself with the human experiences that are common to all people. The goal, we say, is to broaden the perspective of the students and help them connect the disciplines to the human condition.

But what are the common human experiences that might be explored. Beyond birth and growth and death we say in our report that language is universal,

we all experience the aesthetic,

have a heritage to be explored,

are born into institutions that constitute the social web,

are all part of the ecology of the planet Earth.

We engage in work,

we all live by values and beliefs.

We suggest that within these common traditions a general education framework can be shaped and that the disciplines should serve, not as ends, but as means to explore these larger integrative themes.

These seven themes could, we say, be studied through a core of required courses, through a purposeful distribution pattern--through or a blend of both.

- o We also suggest that the themes could be explored outside the classroom--through special lectures and convocations and all-college seminars that bring together the whole academic community.

III

But an additional challenge remains. How can general education be more effectively related to the major?

We found during our study that what colleges teach most effectively in the major is competence--competence in the exploration of a special field of study.

- o But what most of today's students are not being asked to do is to put their speciality in larger context or to consider the crucial question: Competence to what end?

During my days in government, I'd often be seated at a table where a dozen or so experts would prove, during long discussions, how technically competent they were. But almost all the really tough issues had less to do with specialized knowledge--than with insight, wisdom, and compassion.

What we worried about were such questions as these:

- o Should HEW fund "gene-splicing research" that may introduce new mutations on the planet earth?
- o How can we keep human subjects from being harmed during experimentation in the labs?

- o And how can the city of Chicago desegregate its public schools in a way that serves all children and avoids white flight to the suburbs?

On these subjects there are no "experts." There are human beings at a table trying to solve new and complicated problems--not simply by a recitation of facts--but by putting the problem in perspective.

- o Therefore, in the Carnegie Report we conclude that the crisis in undergraduate education is not the focus on careers--after all education has always been considered "useful."
- o The crisis is that, in too many fields, skills have become ends and the student's vision has been narrowed.

Alfred North Whitehead wrote about the unimportance, indeed, the evil, of "barren knowledge."

Knowledge, Whitehead argued, becomes important only when we use it, when it becomes a part of us and I might add, when we apply it to humane ends.

In an editorial titled, How to Make People Smaller Than They Are, Norman Cousins wrote:

The doctor who knows only disease is at a disadvantage alongside the doctor who knows at least as much about people as he does about pathological organisms.

The lawyer who argues in court from a narrow legal base is no match for the lawyer who can connect legal precedents to historical experience.

The business executive whose competence in general management is bolstered by an artistic ability to deal with people is of prime value to his company.

We suggest in our report that the values professionals bring to their work are every bit as crucial as the work itself, and we conclude that general and specialized education must be blended during college just as, inevitably, they must be blended during life.

And we suggest that general education run throughout the baccalaureate experience--from the freshman through the senior year.

We also suggest what we call the enriched major. The enriched major does not mean a capstone course in morality or ethics. Rather, it means having students pursue some aspects of general education through the major, as departments put their specialties in historical, social and ethical perspective.

Consider these examples:

- o Students specializing in computer science might be introduced to the history of technology and the social impact of the information revolution.
- o English majors could be asked to explore the roots of language and consider how symbol systems can be creatively used or dangerously abused.
- o Those in architecture, genetics, industrial technology, and television production might be asked to examine the social and ethical implications of their work.

Eric Ashby wrote that the path to culture should be "through a man's specialization--not by passing around it. A student who can weave his technology into the fabric of society can claim to have a liberal education, and a student who cannot weave his technology into the fabric of society cannot claim even to be a good technologist."

One important caveat must be made. In the end, courses alone do not bring coherence. What we need are teachers who not only are devoted to their disciplines but who also exemplify in the classroom the spirit of a liberal education.

IV

This brings me to the matter of evaluation.

Are there ways for this more integrated view of education to be appropriately assessed?

For the first 200 years, college students in this country had to prove themselves

- o not only in classroom recitation
- o but also in a public oral examination--at the end of the baccalaureate experience.

The goal was to demonstrate to the entire academic community that the student did, indeed, possess the skills of an educated person.

At Amherst College in the 18th century, for example, the records read as follows: "Everyone is obliged to talk on his feet, unless he stammers or is physically unable of standing upright." The examinations were conducted, according to the records, by outside committees composed of "Literary Gentlemen of Good Standing."

Even for young women at Mount Holyoke, to whom the professions of law and the ministry were closed, public oral examinations were the rule.

One Mount Holyoke student wrote to a friend in 1846: "Just think of reciting History before the Faculty and students of Amherst College, to say nothing of being pumped on Geology before the man that wrote the book ..." Amherst men had to pass judgment on Mount Holyoke women!

Often this final declaration was a rigid procedure in which both creativity and relevance were denied. But the assumptions underlying the declamation were absolutely valid.

The practice of asking outside examiners to question students rested on the notion that

- o beyond the scrutiny of each teacher, it was the responsibility of the college as a whole to certify that graduates truly were equipped to enter the world of educated men and women.
- o And that, through a public declamation, the student should demonstrate to peers and mentors a capacity to think and communicate as well.

Today students are forever taking quizzes and filling in the boxes.

They meet the requirements for their credential

- o and are handed a diploma
- o but can they adequately write or speak or think?

These questions are not as foolish as they may sound.

At one top ranking university we visited, a professor surveyed upper level students and found that 75 percent said it would be possible to spend 4 years completing a degree without ever saying one word in the classroom.

We also found that students can complete many majors without serious written work.

I propose that in the current push for college-wide evaluation, we urgently need to measure not the recall of specific facts that often measure that which matters least.

- o What we need to measure is the students capacity to integrate knowledge, to analyze what has been learned and to apply general and specialized knowledge creatively to contemporary problems.

For this to be accomplished

- o we suggest in our report that every student be asked to complete a senior thesis,
- o one that focuses on some aspect of the major and puts the student's special field of study in historical, social and ethical perspective.
- o We also suggest that every student be asked to enroll in a special senior seminar where the thesis would be orally presented and critiqued.

We have an additional suggestion. We propose that every college introduce a senior colloquium series,

- o a public lecture program in which a selected number of seniors would be asked to present their final papers in a public forum and then lead discussion of the issues.

Such a program would, we are convinced, underscore for all students the larger meaning of a college education.

- o At the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Miami University in Ohio, all students enroll in a Senior Workshop. They meet weekly in small seminars and develop a written Senior Project to share their progress with each other and with faculty advisers. In the spring of their senior year, all undergraduates in this college present orally their Senior Projects, and faculty and students throughout the University take part in this event.

V

This brings me to one final observation.

After visiting campuses from coast to coast, we became convinced that one of the most urgent obligations is to focus on the quality of campus life.

The evidence is overwhelming that the effectiveness of the undergraduate experience is dramatically shaped by life outside the classroom. And yet we found a great gap on most campuses between the academic and nonacademic life of students.

Almost all colleges happily have abandoned in loco parentis and, yet, administrators are confused--and occasionally deeply troubled--about what precisely should replace it.

Even students are ambivalent about the authority they want:

One young woman said: We'd like you to understand one thing. We don't want the university to interfere in our lives. But we want someone in the university to be concerned with our lives.

A subtle distinction, perhaps, but our research suggests that today the university is not, in fact, much involved with students.

- o Almost 50 percent of the students in our national survey said they are treated like a number in a book
- o About 40 percent said they do not feel a sense of community at the institution.
- o About the same percentage report that they have no professors who are interested in their academic program.
- o And 2/3 feel they cannot discuss personal matters with professors.

Here disaggregation is important. Only about 9 percent of the students at liberal arts colleges say they feel like numbers in a book and 75 percent of these students say there are professors with whom they can discuss academic matters. We found, in short, that some of the myths about the small college happen to be true.

At the same time, we found larger campuses where counseling and advising are, in fact, successful and where personal contact with students is maintained.

In the Carnegie Report we sound a bit old fashioned. We say that colleges need standards

- o Not just in academic matters
- o But in nonacademic matters, too.

The goal, we say, is not to return to in loco parentis

- o Rather, is it to assure that all parts of the community of learning are governed by high standards.
- o And that students learn while still in college to fulfill their social and civic obligations.

I do not wish to romanticize the notion of "College as Community". The modern university is a culture comprised of many cultures. And we must acknowledge the important fact that about 30 percent of today's undergraduates are part time and older students.

Yet, are we content to view the nontraditional student as someone who simply picks up credits without becoming a part of a community of learning?

Carl Schorske, Professor Emeritus, of Princeton University, in a brilliant study of creative communities, describes Basel, Switzerland in the 19th century as a place where civic and university vitality were inextricably interlocked. To quote precisely, Schorske said that

- o To understand the special quality of Basel's cultural creativity one must look to the university.
- o The "profession of learning," he said, was prized among the merchant families of Basel just as the priesthood was in Ireland.
- o The primary function of the university, Professor Schorske concluded, was to foster "civic culture."

If a city can be concerned about the quality of life, if merchant families can have the vision of a creative community of learning

- o is it not possible for administrators and scholars and their students and trustees on a college campus also to join in common cause?

With all of the divided loyalties and tugging special interests, we remain convinced that a college, at its best,

can bring together the views and experiences of separate parts,

can create something greater than the sum and

can offer the prospect that the spirit of community will be deepened and renewed.

Without getting sentimental, we suggest in the Carnegie Report that the college must be held together

- o not just in its scholarship
- o but also in the quality of its human interaction.

Thus, the problem of the American College--as we observed it--is not that the failure rate is so large, but rather that the expectations are so small.

And to revitalize the Undergraduate College we suggest strengthening the connections

- o between colleges and schools
- o between the liberal and the useful arts
- o between the academic and nonacademic life on campus
- o and, ultimately, between what is learned and how one lives.

We proceed with the conviction that if a balance can be struck between individual interests and shared concerns a strong learning community will result.

And perhaps it is not too much to hope that the college, as a vital community of learning, can be a model for society at large--a society where private and public purposes also must be joined.