
Editorial Opinion

Elite No Longer

In twenty years our universities have taken not a single important step in defining the tasks of higher education. We professors go through the motions of curricula that have yet to prove their value. The policy at Brown University, which I as a former faculty member know especially well, is typical of the country's self-styled "elite universities." Brown's policy is simple: Do whatever you want. Take this or that or nothing very much. We require no courses but only a major. And, while extreme, the practices at Brown do signal the failure of purpose and the absence of goals that have characterized higher education since the advocates of the 1960s counterculture assumed dominance of the most prestigious American universities.

But, if a new elite is to emerge amid the ashes of the old, where is reform to start? Higher education finds its definition in the answers to three questions: (1) who teaches (2) what (3) to whom? During twenty years of dismantling the received programs and familiar purposes of colleges and universities, those who have been in charge have focused intently on questions one and three. They have had slight interest in question two: what

is taught. That is their weak point: the countercultural professors know full well whom they want to teach and who is to do the teaching. They cannot explain what is to be taught and therefore cannot explain *why* it is to be taught. A pointless *mélange* of topics and purposeless information today stands behind the baccalaureate degree.

The years since the revolutions of the late 1960s have yielded not a single important educational idea, not a single well-crafted curriculum in a major institution. The curriculum debate at Stanford found contending parties unable to appeal to shared conceptions of education: the whole controversy focused on issues of politics, not learning. The universities simply have gone through the motions of adhering to a received pattern whose purpose is neither understood nor appreciated.

We who wish to restore and renew the traditions of learning that once made universities important to society have thinking about the curriculum pretty much to ourselves. We who value intellect still, and always will, take seriously what people think and the reasons they think it. In con-

crete terms that means we have to ask the fundamental questions: What do we teach? Why do we teach this subject, not that subject? How is a young person's life changed, enhanced, through learning and through intellectual activity?

People send their children to costly universities which give courses and so claim that learning matters. The academic degree is gained not by charm or public service or interesting hobbies but by solid achievement in the classroom and laboratory and library, achievement tested and measured by examination and critical scrutiny. By our own word we in universities allege that in the maturing of young people what we teach plays a considerable role, one so critical that parents and society should devote scarce resources to our work with students. Yet if we cannot explain what we teach and why—cannot provide an account of a well-crafted education—then our word is worthless. But if we claim to have such a message, where to start? It is with a sustained attack on the anti-intellectual view that we cannot make judgments as to what is true and what is not true. In the two decades during which few cared what was taught, but only who did the teaching to whom, the universities have surrendered to the view that everything is right for someone, depending on his or her subjective desires, and nothing is ever wrong intrinsically. Accordingly, one subject is as good as the next, one opinion as the next, one act as the next. That has meant that universities could not lay claim convincingly to reason as arbi-

ter of truth, experiment as test of knowledge, sustained critical inquiry as purposeful in determining what is so and what is not. And that accounts for the utter incapacity of the leadership of the last twenty years to deal with the curriculum. If you don't know what is true and what is untrue, then what difference does it make whether you teach this or that or the other thing? Everything is equally worthwhile (or worthless). And all that for upwards of \$20,000 a year.

Indeed, on the campus as we know it, just as the universities cannot tell you what is true and what is false, so they cannot tell you who is sane and who is having emotional problems. Psychotic breakdowns, in the classroom and elsewhere, are not treated as psychotic breakdowns but as normal behavior. Just as all beliefs are equally valid, so all behavior is equally acceptable. In its appeal to reason and rationality (in the form just now portrayed) the university is unable to say, "You are behaving in an inappropriate way." "This is wrong." "This falls outside the range of correct behavior." Or simply: "No." That accounts for the failure not only of intellectual standards but even of rules of routine civility. And it explains why, when the students attack the professors, which was commonplace at Brown when I was there, the professors are put on trial, not the students. When professors are the target, they are presumed to be at fault.

In the renewal of higher education, the necessary attention to the curriculum means sustained and serious reconsideration of what we think and

teach, and why it is worthwhile to think and teach what we do rather than something else. Pioneering in the renewal of what was and is good scholarship and education, innovative leaders in higher learning will win for some universities that paramount position in the intellectual life of this country that today is filled by “elite” universities lacking all educational purpose. These stand as the relics of a discredited age.

Where are the leaders of learning

for the twenty-first century? The country waits for its future Harvards and Yales and Stanfords, which led but lead no more. Intellectual bankruptcy at the once-prestigious universities represents a great opportunity for new initiatives of the intellect and new intellectual entrepreneurship. The opportunity for greatness tomorrow is contained in today’s challenge of reasserting learning and intellect.

—*Jacob Neusner*