WHAT AILS UNIVERSITIES?

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The university is an academic institution that has come un-
done. It began in the Middle Ages as a scholastic guild or a learned
corporation of masters and scholars *(universitas societas magistro-
rum discipulorumque)* which followed a relatively set curriculum
and granted the license to teach *(licentia docendi)*. Students came
from many nations to hear well-known masters, and actively par-
ticipated in disputations. Once they had settled in the cities, they
often found it necessary to band together against unruly towns-
people, unscrupulous booksellers, and unfortunate teachers. Masters
united to form separate Faculties with their own academic require-
ments and prerogatives, with occasional public squabbles over who
was supposed to teach what to whom. Civic and religious authorities
soon realized the advantages of having an institutional supplier of
doctors, lawyers, educated clergy and merchants, and extended
their support (and at times their control) to the new universities.
Somehow a balance of power was struck between opposing factions;
and students, faculty, and the outside community benefited from
the growth of the universities in size and importance.[1]

Today this balance has been badly shaken and the very exist-
ence of the university as an academic institution seems in jeopardy.
Students are demanding more direct participation in the educational
process, "relevance" of subject matter to life's problems, active
criticism of society. There has been a knowledge explosion. A tradi-
tional, coherent curriculum has been split up into isolated areas of
specialized inquiry. New disciplines rapidly spin-off from old, re-
sulting in highly technical jargon and data so extensive as to be

incomprehensible except in small fragments. Then there is money. Faculty members want more of it, departments compete for it, students never get enough of it, and society wants to hang on to it. Along with money comes size — the two-edged sword whereby quantity is needed to provide resources for quality, but frequently outstrips the new resources, increasing the pressure for ever more quantity. Because of the financial pinch, a certain amount of "production" is expected, not always in the best interests of academic pursuits. And, with the appearance of vast multiversities, all the problems of dehumanization and bureaucratization endemic to large institutions rise to the fore.

These problems have brought forth a plethora of analyses and suggestions for improvement in university education, ranging from the jarring rhetoric of the neo-Marxist to the placid defensiveness of those who want no changes at all. As a philosopher who is interested in education as a formal subject and as a former student who is now a teacher and has experienced many of the difficulties first hand, I will attempt in this paper to spell out what I think ails universities and to indicate some possible directions for change. My approach will be more speculative than scientific, with a view to finding general causes of some of the more obvious problems.

To begin with, I would distinguish between (a) problems arising within the university, which have to do with personal relationships within the institution (whether those of faculty to student, or of faculty to faculty); and (b) problems having to do with the university's relationship to society.

Personal Relationships within the Institution

Many criticisms of the university by students and faculty members stem from the unsatisfactory personal relationships they have there. There are obviously too many students for them to know each other, or faculty to know them, or even faculty to know faculty. The size of the modern university is one of its greatest problems, not only from a financial, but from a personal aspect as well. Students and faculty tend to feel lost in a huge institution which cares little about them and will not miss them when they leave. The computer becomes more important than the individual and is much more difficult to replace.

The problem runs deeper than that of size, however. Donald McCulloch has made a useful analysis of what he calls "relationships

of unilateral respect and constraint."[2] Such relationships come into being "whenever two persons or groups come into sustained contact and potential conflict, perceive differences between themselves, define these differences as inequalities, and assume these inequalities to give the one person or group rights of command over the other." These relationships can be found in most large institutions because they promote utility, efficiency and productivity, while providing the security that comes with predictability. According to McCulloch, "the more nearly a task requires persons to behave like things, like extensions of machines, the more efficient do unilateral relationships become."

A case can be made for interpreting the positions of teacher and student at the university in terms of unilateral relationships. The teacher is the dominant member who knows more and better than the student and feels responsible for him. The student's role is to be taught by the teacher so that he in turn will know more and better than the incoming student. The teacher has something to dispense; the student something to receive. The relative positions are clearly established and the most efficient operation requires that they be respected and maintained. Unfortunately, creativity is usually lost in such an operation and the student resents the impersonality of his treatment and the irrelevance of what he is being taught to his own concerns.

It is an exaggeration to depict this as a "Mr. Charlie / nigger" relationship.[3] The student does indeed have rights and influence (though he may not be fully aware of their extent) and no university could continue to exist if it chose to ignore them. There is also some justification to the claim that there cannot be equality in a teacher/student relationship due to the unequal nature of knowledge itself. Charles Frankel rightly insists that the university is "a hierarchical human organization, based on the premise that some people know more than other people, and that the community cannot perform its tasks effectively unless these graduations in knowledge are recognized in its form of government."[4] The students do come to learn and the teachers are there to teach; this fact cannot be denied if one is talking meaningfully about education.

What has to be remembered is that learning is a mutual endeavour. The teacher really learns his material when he has to organize it and present it for critical inspection; the student learns by clarifying, evaluating, and trying to apply the facts and ideas

which he is presented. The expertise of the teacher, combined with the variety of different viewpoints and reactions by the students, stimulates and develops thought. Thus, to depict the university as a "community of scholars" is to ignore the real differences between teachers and students. A better description is a "community of inquirers" each of whom has something to offer and something to gain from the cooperative effort to get at and make use of knowledge. Instead of accepting unilateral relationships, McCulloch urges the fostering of multilateral relationships and cooperation.

The lack of such relationships in the university is a legitimate basis for students' demands for more active participation in their own education. We pride ourselves on up-to-date and improved primary and secondary education; we claim to be highly selective in admitting people to the university; yet all too often we treat the students we get as having little to offer. An intelligent university student has more to offer his teacher and his fellow students than rapt attention and faithful completion of assignments. Since he has his own experience and point of view, his critical reactions should be sought. This is to repeat a contention of Richard Peters and others that the manner of education is as important as the matter.[5] If we are to initiate students into the questioning, self-corrective methods of science, for example, we cannot properly do so by merely telling or showing them what to do. The student should be engaged in the activity itself as a participant with something to offer. To make university education more creative and relevant is to let the students more actively participate in it.

But how are we to foster mutual relationships of respect and cooperation between teacher and student? First, there is a clear need for some kind of decentralization. Sheer size can prohibit interdisciplinary cooperation and encourage rigid, more "efficient" approaches. Courses should be made smaller, more diversified, and more flexible. Second, students should be actively involved in the analysis of and attempted solutions to these problems. As we have said, they have a different (but not necessarily unequal) point of view to offer and their cooperation is particularly useful when the problem to be dealt with is the lack of cooperation. Third, much more experimentation with structure and content should be encouraged. This does not necessarily mean separate, off-beat centers with new approaches to education, but pilot projects in the midst of the more traditional methods.

These are general directions for improving faculty-student rela-
tionships within the university. Since this problem is endemic to
institutions we can hope that the solution to it might be found in the
institution with the avowed goal of pursuing truth. Here, at least,
everyone has something to contribute and all have something to
gain.

If faculty-student relationships are often uncreative and uni-
lateral, those among the faculty themselves are usually little better.
Academics tend to congregate with members of their own depart-
ments and, even then, largely on a social basis. Rarely do faculty
members discuss problems of teaching and research with one an-
other. This in turn inhibits their ability to respond as a group to
student complaints and demands. Again, the causes for such a lack
of communication have to do with size, specialization, money, and
so on.

A professor feels somewhat vulnerable about his teaching and
knows that the money lies with research, so the inclination is to go
off on his own and let others do the same. Perhaps he is stuck on
the top floor of a distant building and does not meet anyone from
outside his department except at receptions and council meetings —
neither much of a stimulus to meaningful communication. Moreover,
the mystique of expertise is prevalent enough among the faculty to
discourage critical evaluation of a fellow member's research or
teaching. Of course, research and teaching are important to get the
job and to get the promotion but, by and large, they do not get dis-
cussed in a serious way by the faculty as a whole. What develops is
a group of conservative academics who are suspicious of change
and protective of their own individual domains.[6]

This "live and let live" attitude among faculty members is one
of the reasons we are following, rather than leading, student critic-
isms of the university. Afraid of saying too much, we have said
too little and have been able to console ourselves with the importance
of our own teaching and research. What student protesters have
done is to prod reluctant faculty into facing problems of teaching
and questions of priorities for research and considering what could
be done to improve things. One thing that faculty could do is direct
some of their expertise upon themselves. All of us share the ex-
perience of teaching and are committed to critical inquiry; why not
discuss together the aims of university education, the best methods
and subject-matter, the function and direction of research? From a

variety of specialized perspectives, we can analyze the problems of universities and evaluate proposed solutions. This should not be undertaken as yet another bureaucratic chore, but as a reasonable part of our job. If we do not like students telling us what and how to teach, surely we should sit down together and discuss the problems of teaching.

It is time for professors honestly to face the issue and decide whether they are teachers as well as researchers. Some may not feel they have any responsibilities to students other than letting them observe high-level research in action; others might admit that they do not really see the value of research in the university and would prefer that it be done in special institutes. Nonetheless, the expression of such views and the critical consideration of the issues involved would help both faculty and students. We are clearly not doing all the things the University Calendar or the President out collecting funds euphorically claim we do. We know this and the students do too; why not get down to cases and attempt to clarify what we do, why we do it, and what we think we should be doing?'

I think such an effort at real communication would enrich faculty relationships, while providing better direction for the university. We, like the students, would be more actively, more creatively participating in education. Recognizing mutual problems, we might also be more disposed to pay attention to our students and engage them in subjects we teach. Such an improvement of problematic relationships within the university would make it better equipped to alleviate problems of the outside community.

The University and Society

Most recent critics of universities charge them with failing to live up to their social responsibilities. The days of the ivory-tower are over, goes the argument, and universities must seriously face the problems of their surrounding communities. This does not mean mere analysis and "objective" research into society's ills — and in the process, treating people in trouble like objects in a formal exercise and leaving them no better off than you found them — but it requires active commitment and involvement in social change. Any student radical could read off a long list of alleged sins of commission and of omission perpetrated by universities upon society and he could probably also suggest an appropriate penance.

Most universities are located in urban communities which have problems of housing, transportation, air pollution, crime, poverty and ever-growing discontent. The university can provide such communities with a certain number of trained specialists, if there are jobs available for them. How much more it could offer in the way of critical analyses, diversified resources, and fresh ideas! Charles Frankel has said that "such things as intellectual discipline, mastery of fact, and refinement of taste are social instruments that can be used to improve the human condition." What he does not indicate is the fact that the urban university has an excellent opportunity to engage in more direct problem-solving in the course of acquiring discipline, facts, and taste. The urban problems to be found in the immediate vicinity of most modern universities should stimulate the formation of problem-solving theories and techniques and provide an area for their direct application and testing. What is being asked for is a restoration of the university's role as social critic.[8] This does not mean the university should merely formulate new, lofty aims for society, nor that the university must be in the vanguard of the violent overthrow of society. Rather, it means that the university should pay more critical attention to the problems and needs of its surrounding community and provide new direction and reform for society as a whole. The city offers the university a focus for many of its inquiries and a chance to apply and improve approaches to change. Society itself needs clarification and explanation of its problems and the initiation of solutions to them. The university seems best equipped to do this.

When seen in the context of an urban university, the teacher-student relationship takes on added importance. Here is a setting where academic expertise can be put to direct use in the clarification and attempted solution of real problems. The university could do much to improve city life, while at the same time making its own life more meaningful and exciting. That is to say, an urban university can make use of its location to overcome some of the financial, pedagogical, and personal causes of undesirable unilateral relationships. However, if the university is to tackle city problems in earnest, it must have greater financial support. Most of this support will continue to come from the government. When allocating funds, instead of enrolment figures, governments would have to take into account community involvement. More attention could be paid to what needed to be done and what the university was trying to do.

Disciplines relevant to city problems would be encouraged to apply their expertise directly, and students in such disciplines would gain new responsibility and stimulation from participating in problem-solving. Although I am suspicious of those who adroitly turn our worst problems into our best assets, I do think that universities can benefit from the communication, practical application of theories, and co-operation involved.

Certain qualifications must be added, however. One is that not every discipline has to justify its existence by solving some city problem. To demand immediate relevance is to deny the need for speculation, abstract theorizing, and aesthetic contemplation. It should not be forgotten that some subjects have and only need a personal relevance. We solve nothing by demanding that Classics departments consider only local problems or fold their tents, nor should we require all Sociology professors to swear their loyalty to urban causes. A balance must be struck between new-found social responsibilities and traditional intellectual requirements. This applies not only to the focus given existing courses but also to demands for lower admissions standards and for new, sometimes bizarre curricula. It is as if the black militants have seen how to play the game and are now demanding their own professors teaching their own students in their own programs. Let's face it, academic racism is no prettier than any other kind and knowledge is seldom advanced by letting the uninformed lead the way. How to remain open to community and student pressures, yet maintain reasonable curricula and happy, productive faculty is a task so formidable that the job of university president is one of the hardest to fill nowadays. Yet precisely this kind of tough-minded fairness is essential if we are not to do away with the university entirely through over-involvement in problem-solving.

Another qualification is that the university should not be looked upon as the source of salvation for all. Growing disillusionment with governments and churches has led many to point accusing fingers at the university and demand action. The university is an academic institution; it is not necessarily the best place to distribute food to the needy, launch political campaigns, find jobs, or give spiritual solace. Its primary tool is reason; and though the public chide it for not doing enough, they cannot legitimately require it to know and do everything. In many areas, the university can do something (e.g. a university health center could treat poverty

cases); but it should not take responsibility for all facets of city life (i.e. there should be city hospitals and private physicians as well). Even in regard to education, the university is by no means the only institution available to the city. Better day care centers, vocational high schools, legal aid and employment centers, and public clinics are needed first and only much later can we even begin to consider a role for the university. To claim the university has not done enough for its surrounding community is not to demonstrate that it can do everything best for the community, nor that it can be promoted as a foundation for a completely re-built community.

This is to argue that whatever new directions we give the urban university, it should remain an academic institution, where courses are taught with a fairly definite subject-matter, methods of appraisal, and a certain tradition of use. Any new course would be set up along similar lines: key texts, abiding themes, style, critical evaluations and the like. It is folly to suppose that students who come to be initiated into such subject-matter and methods should have a veto over the structure and content of a course. I would agree with the statement that: "What intellectuals know how to do best is to discover what the world is like, and the reason we send our children through years of school is that we believe it is meaningless to talk of changing things for the better if we don't know how to tell what they are like in the first place."[9]

A kind of micro-community should develop with the teacher providing initiation, guidance, and order and the students supplying vitality, fresh outlooks, questions, problems, criticisms. I see the ideal teacher-student relationship in much the same terms as I see what the city and the university have to offer each other: relevance and expertise, problems and proposals, experience and theory, reason and concern. To bully, harass, or attempt to bypass the teacher in such a learning situation is to set up another form of unilateral relationship that smacks more of revenge than of sound educational value.

References

1. The most complete study of Medieval Universities is that of Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, (ed. by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Enden), 3 vols., Oxford University Press, 1936. Charles Homer Haskins has written two highly readable ac-

counts: *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, N.Y.: Meridian Books, 1957 and *The Rise of Universities*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957. A good selection of documents can be found in L. Thorndike, *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1944. The best recent study is that of Gordon Leff, *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons, 1968.

2. Donald J. McCulloch, "The Community of the University," in *The University Game*, (ed. by H. Adelman and D. Lee), Toronto: Anansi, 1968, p. 25.

3. As was done by Jerry Farber in his infamous "The Student as Nigger" article (*This Magazine is About Schools*, Vol. 2, Winter, 1968, pp. 108-16). Farber's analysis of teacher-student relationships has just enough truth to it to tempt us to swallow its grosser elements. The McCulloch article is an effective antidote.

4. Charles Frankel, *Education and the Barricades*, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968, p. 50.

5. R. S. Peters, *Authority, Responsibility, and Education*, N.Y.: Atherton Press, 1967, *Ethics and Education*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966; and *The Concept of Education*, N.Y.: Humanities Press, 1967. This concern for the manner of education can also be found in the writings of Whitehead and Dewey, among others.

6. A point raised by Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, N.Y.: Harper Torchbooks, 1963.

7. A recent attempt to emphasize the teaching function of faculty members is described by Joseph Tussman, *Experiment at Berkeley*, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1969. The "experiment" involves a small two year program of studies in early Greek and 17th century English thought, to be followed by the normal specialization in upper-division courses.

8. Cf., for example, H. Adelman, "In Search of the University," in *The University Game*.

9. E. A. Rapping and L. A. Rapping, "Politics and Morality in Academe," *Saturday Review* (Oct. 19, 1968), pp. 64-5, 75-6.

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