

Are We Neglecting the Talented Minority?

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I suppose nothing is easier for a dispirited professor these days than to recall his undergraduate experiences and contrast them with his present reality as a working professional, afflicted by all the discontents which flourish like weeds in the pastures of learning that once seemed so verdant. Gloom, anxiety and depression are all around us as the 70s limp to a close, while enrollment projections for the 80s offer the beleaguered academic ranks little cause for cheer. No cavalry loom on the horizon to rescue us; so we gather the wagons ever more tightly together and shudder as the wolves howl the same refrain all night long: retrench, reassess, retrain, retreat. The expansive, optimistic climate of the early 60s seems as far away as the Land of Oz.

How can the harassed educator break out of this circle of despair? What can he do to infuse students – and himself – with enthusiasm in this Age of Surliness? Each of us is going to have to devise his own solution, but surely no one would deny that the student-professor relationship remains central. If the spirit of learning and academic excellence are lost (either to the workings of cost-efficiency criteria or professorial cynicism), we are in real trouble. The enemy is Out There, but he is also within ourselves. I am more worried about ourselves, and the following proposal is a suggestion for doing something about our tendency to be our own worst enemy.

Since joining the Humboldt faculty in 1971 I have noted the absence of programs, at least beyond the departmental level, geared to the needs of the superior student. We have programs for all sorts of disadvantaged people, but we appear to take the “advantaged” student somewhat for granted. When an exceptional student comes along we welcome his questions, his interest, his work. We give such persons as much of our time as we

can. But I wonder if these students will look back on their years at Humboldt and feel that they were truly challenged intellectually, in other than a haphazard fashion? I wonder, too, how many of them are exposed to a genuine liberal arts education while they are here? Does our curriculum enable them to leave this University with that feeling of intellectual excitement which many of us were privileged to experience as students? Or has our preoccupation in recent years with meeting the needs of the largest number inadvertently left the talented tenth out in the cold?

I know that curriculum innovation offers no more of a guaranteed answer to these questions than any other academic area, but at least it is a relevant place to talk about them. I am proposing just one curricular means by which we could challenge our best students at Humboldt, and hopefully rejuvenate ourselves in the bargain. I call it a General Honors Program, and it might be structured generally as follows:

Sophomore Year – The student would enroll in two general reading colloquia, concentrating on (but not limited to) staple works in western culture from the ancient world to modern times. The reading would concentrate on primary sources in philosophy, history, and literature. Each student would submit several papers during the term discussing an aspect of the reading. These colloquia should be team-taught, preferably from persons representing different departments.

Junior Year – The student would enroll in two special topics colloquia, with subject-matter determined by the interests and expertise of the instructor. Sample topics might include: City Planning and Community Design, Fantasy and Science Fiction, Russian Drama, Capitalism and its Critics, The Origins of Man. These colloquia could be taught by a single instructor, but the student

could not take more than one colloquium from the same instructor.

Senior Year – Preparation of a Senior Honors Thesis, perhaps fifty pages in length, on some topic inspired by the work the student has done in the first two years of the program. This thesis should be less a formal research paper than a creative essay. It should demonstrate that the student's participation in the General Honors Program has enabled him to identify and discuss some topic relevant to the intellectual needs of a liberally educated person.

REQUIREMENTS FOR PARTICIPATION: The student would be invited to participate at the end of his freshman year, following the completion of two quarters (or one semester) of residence at HSU. At that time the student must have compiled at least a 3.4 grade point average and must pass an interview with some of the participating faculty. Once the student is accepted into the Program he must maintain a 3.4 grade point average; moreover, his progress will be reviewed by participating faculty at the conclusion of each year he is enrolled in the Program. If the student completes the Program satisfactorily, he will be graduated with "General Honors."

I would hope this program might serve a dual purpose: to stimulate and reward both the students and the faculty who participate in it. During my own undergraduate years I was involved in such a program, and I still regard it as the most challenging part of my academic career. I was exposed to an intellectual world I did not previously know existed, I met other capable students from various departments, and I studied under outstanding professors whom I would not otherwise have encountered. Since then I have become a professional academician, confined to studying and teaching in one field – American history. Expertise has its own rewards, to be sure; but I wonder if

there are other faculty out there who share my desire to leave their particular baliwicks and try something different, whether they have had any "professional training" in it or not? And I wonder if there are a few students who would welcome a rigorous educational experience above and beyond their majors? If so, a General Honors Program might be the way to bring us together.