Professor’s Platform

GENERAL EDUCATION TASK FORCE

A couple of weeks ago, the Chancellor’s Task Force on General Education submitted its report. If you did not know that such a task force existed, you are not alone. Very few of the Humboldt State faculty had ever heard of its existence. This was not because the Task Force was unimportant or engaged in minor activities. Last spring, the Task Force circulated to the various campuses of the California State System a set of sweeping recommendations for amendments to Title V and the establishment of system-wide guidelines in general education. The basic theme throughout is the insistence that “abilities, knowledge, and understandings” be acquired by students “as integrally interrelated and not as isolated fragments.” Specific recommendations called for a general education component of eighty quarter units for native students, including twenty (fourteen semester units) at the upper division level. These units are to be parcelled out under several categories broadly similar to those presently employed at Humboldt State. However, there are some important changes from the present HSU schema. In addition to Humboldt’s four categories, there is a unit, to encompass one-ninth of the overall requirement, on “activities and study designed to equip human beings for lifelong understanding and development of themselves as integrated physiological and psychological entities.” The report urges that foreign language study be included as a general education requirement. The state-mandated history and political science courses are counted towards meeting the Social Science requirement. All students are required to take an advanced writing course at the upper division level. The critical thinking component is defined rather differently than in the HSU program. All students, not merely those who intend to pursue courses in mathematics and the sciences, are required to demonstrate competence in “numerical computation” or to take non-credit courses until this deficiency has been eradicated.

The Chancellor’s Task Force circulated its recommendations to elicit comments from the State University and College campuses. At some of our sister campuses, the recommendations were shown to each department, and each department submitted objections and suggestions. The process continued at least through the Fall Quarter. But at Humboldt State, a reply was written by Whitney Buck, Dean of Undergraduate Studies, after consultation with the University Curriculum Committee and giving “the matter further thought during the summer.” One may think that Dean Buck’s answer, which defends our general education program and argues for greater local autonomy, is fairly reasonable and well-stated (as I do) or one may not. That scarcely seems to be the crucial issue.

The real issue, it seems to me, is faculty consultation. General education affects every department. The adoption of the Task Force proposals would have far-reaching ramifications. Upper division “packages” would be mandated at the state level, not subject to abolition and difficult to alter at the individual campus. Literature, the fine arts, history, sociology, and political science would be permanently allotted about their current share in the program, with no possibility of amendment at the local level. These are concerns upon which the general faculty has a right to be consulted. Individual departments understand the effects that even slight alterations in general education requirements may have upon themselves better than administrators or committee members. Furthermore, the Task Force had a right to hear from the mass of faculty and perhaps could have learned much. Humboldt State University is one of the few campuses that already has a program of
coherence and required general education courses at the upper division level. The opinions of our whole faculty, and not merely those of the Dean and the committees that administer the program, on the successes and failures of the Humboldt program would have provided the Task Force with invaluable data. The Task Force would have learned what problems a seventy (let alone an eighty) unit requirement causes in some majors, how many faculty feel about the question of mandated course goals and academic freedom, the success in achieving coherence in the program as a whole and in its constituent parts, and much more. It is truly unfortunate that the Task Force was denied these observations based on actual experience.

The Task Force has now received all the responses to its original recommendations, revised them, and submitted their report to the chancellor. Although no copy of the final recommendations is presently available at Humboldt State, the revisions are reported to be minor. Before the proposals become policy, the campuses will again have a chance to make their ideas and suggestions known. I sincerely hope that a full consultation of the Humboldt State Faculty will be sought on this critical question.

LOUIS A. OKIN, History