Academic Order and Purpose of The University

"Critic of society" -- or "seeker after truth"? Some university spokesmen have in recent years claimed for the campus the function of handing down judgments on contemporary society, and some would focus the university purpose on action to reform society. Where does this leave the old concepts of "collection and diffusion of knowledge" and the role of "seeker after truth" declared in the OSU Creed?

Does this new activist role really fit the university, an institution which evolved originally for teaching, for speculation, and for the testing of ideas? The goal of activism can assuredly produce "diffusion" -- but a diffusion of the resources, facilities, effort, and purpose, suggest some scholars today.

If the university generally adopts activism with attendant demands for contemporary relevance and early commitment by undergraduates, will the would-be student then have to cultivate an indifference to the constant campaigning so as to study and to contemplate, to try ideas for fitness, to observe debate, to debate, and to change sides without making lifelong commitments for partisan causes? Will he have to school himself toward becoming a lifelong learner by first overtly schooling himself to reject commitment?

Did the university historically gain academic freedom as a concession by society in order to provide society with a fearless critic? No, Angus Armitage seems to answer in describing Copernicus' life at Bologna. He indicates that the unique legal status of the university student community as "a little state with its own rulers and laws" grew out of the desire by downtown businessmen to attract the non-citizens to that university city, where otherwise the faculty and students from outside Bologna would not enjoy the civil rights of regular Bologna citizens. In modern times the transient scholar has these civil rights anyway, making such special extra-legal concessions no longer necessary for the survival of the university. Instead, today many a scholar feels he needs a refuge from the constant campaigning environment now developing. Scholars also deplore the diversion of effort and enthusiasm from the classical collegiate competition of wit and logic in university debates where all who attend must of opposing sides. They cite the recent Cambridge Union debate between editor William F. Buckley, Jr., and economist John Kenneth Galbraith aired by KOAC-TV as superior to the non-debate causist advocacies by individual campus speakers. Mass campaign movements and exhortations tend to close minds and to harden them against intellectual flexibility.

The university's new "critic" role now assumed on many a campus will thus move the academy not toward the objective, critical evaluation associated with one definition of "critic" but rather toward campaigns and duress instead of freedom and voluntarism in the search for truth.

"Great numbers of students and even faculty now in our institutions of higher learning either do not understand or consciously reject the idea that the purpose of the university is to advance learning and to analyze everything around it as nearly disinterestedly as is possible in an imperfect world, and that it betrays its calling as soon as it takes an institutional stand on an issue or transforms itself into an instrument of political action," writes Prof. Charles A. Moser of George Washington University, National Secretary of University Professors for Academic Order (UPAO) in the October 1970 issue of "Universitas".
"Ideally, institutions of higher learning subscribe to the principle of academic freedom, by which is understood freedom of learning, teaching, and research as well as freedom of speech in communicating the results of investigation in one's particular field of specialization. This is an ideal which is rarely attained in reality," continues Prof. Moser. "Scholars have at least as many intellectual vested interests as other people, and certain scholarly points of view may be suppressed for some time by the unwillingness of the scholarly community to entertain them. Political considerations have also played a role in the composition of university faculties. Scholars have generally considered themselves politically liberal and looked suspiciously upon those few who emerged from their academic training with a different political point of view. Indeed there is often greater pressure for intellectual conformity in the academic community than in society at large, perhaps because intellectual matters are more important in the universities than in society at large. Consequently, a selection process has occurred, leading to the entrenchment of the politically liberal professoriate. Professors with conservative political convictions have found obtaining appointments difficult, especially at the more prestigious universities (it is partly for this reason that some of them have been experiencing the greatest difficulties in recent years). Still, the professoriate at least paid lip service to the ideals of academic freedom and political impartiality and in many instances upheld these ideals in practice.

"The current student generation, frequently encouraged by younger faculty members, has decided that the time for discussion and reflection — those purposes for which the university traditionally exists, but which ordinarily lead to a recognition of the complexities of a problem and a realization of the difficulties of resolving it — has passed, and the time for action arrived. Many of these young people, having no commitment to this idea of the university, if indeed they know what it is, have set out deliberately to take it and its considerable resources over as an instrument for accomplishing political ends instead of organizing new and specifically political organizations to do the same thing. It is, after all, easier to subvert already existing organizations, such as the university, than to build new organizations from the bottom up."

Prof. Moser declares, "... the university administration should assert its commitment to the concept of the university as a place for teaching, learning, research, and the free exchange of ideas and opinion. In order to make this assertion credible, the administration and the faculty should examine themselves searchingly to make sure that the university does in fact adhere as closely as possible to the ideals of scholarship — that research does not become the investigation of masses of trivia, that teaching does not become preaching, that students have the opportunity to formulate their own ideas and participate as fully as they properly should in furthering the legitimate purposes of the university." *

27 November 1970

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