A MEANINGFUL COMMENCEMENT

We can only take the President's statement that the Seniors should continue to attend classes the last week of Spring term at its face value, as an expression of uninformed hope. Those of us who are experienced in teaching such classes know that the Seniors have not attended in the past in any significant numbers, and will not do so now. I urge my colleagues to join me in compiling Senior attendance lists that last week, and sending them to the President. He might come to realize that the "meaningful commencement" decision means, in fact, that our courses have been chopped administratively by ten percent.

The other thing we can do is to find out which Faculty Senators voted for this nonsense, and try to replace them in coming elections. It is interesting that the Senate Minutes, distributed to all faculty and dated April 9, 1971, show that a roll call vote was taken; the roll call record itself is not revealed.

The Seniors should, of course, have a commencement with meaning. This should be done by putting commencement back one week, not by moving grades forward one week. "But what would you expect the Seniors to do that week?", asks my Dean. "You couldn't keep them around". Why, I'd expect them to do just what they would do in whatever week came between grades and commencement - to have a last party, to leave town for the beach, etc. Why is it more meaningful if that week is the last week of regular classes?
Some suggest that commencement should be while the other undergraduates are still around, so that they can play in the band (the "vital campus" hypothesis). Is an old teacher really being too conceited to question whether that band music can compare to classroom instruction for one week?

Many people at OSU seem blind to what goes on in the rest of the country. The only two commencement schemes our administrators can think up are not only no good, but also atypical. Reportedly, OSU's odd custom of premature Senior graduation goes back to the Depression, and was designed to give our Seniors the advantage of a week or two in the market place over the competition from Eugene. These days, it is just one more example of the minimal importance placed on formal teaching. Just suppose somebody chopped ten percent off the athletic schedule!

Those of us who regularly have classes of Seniors mixed with other students can look back to 1970, when for the only time all our students finished the whole term and got graded on a common basis. Apparently all we can look forward to is continuing administrative interference with the classroom.

John T. Yoke
Professor of Chemistry
April 22, 1971
"Anti-Intellectual, Anti-Knowledge, and Anti-Science"

President Leonard W. Rice of Oregon College of Education included the following remarks in his speech of welcome to the Oregon Academy of Science on April 10, 1971:

"A powerful mood on the campuses these days is anti-intellectual, anti-knowledge, and anti-science. When this mood exists, intuitive and poetic truth are valued without scientific truth. Emotion is stressed, not research, patient observation, suspension of belief until the evidence is in, and respect for facts.

"Curious correlations are evident. For example, the people in the arts have become ecologists. Scientists who struggled so long with ecological problems in the face of public indifference may welcome this new attention to ecology, but they can scarcely avoid some ambiguous thoughts when they see the science of ecology turned into a passionate belief.

"Another thing occurring where knowledge is deemphasized is an intense preoccupation with power. The notion appears to be that we don't need more research and knowledge; what is needed, rather, is action. Politics, then, supplants knowledge as a primary concern, because politics is about the adjustment and exercise of power. The academic institution is seen as an instrument for direct political action.

"It might appear that as an administrator and an English professor I would welcome all this. Administrators are engaged in politics, and they occasionally suffer because faculty don't see the importance of being political. But I am political enough to know that an academic institution cannot survive as a political agency that takes direct political action. As an English professor I value poetic and intuitive truth. But I don't want poetry at the expense of science, and I don't trust intuition unaccompanied by knowledge. I do look for the unspoken and non-speakable meanings in contemporary music. I shall be guided by these meanings as I find them, but not in contradiction to scientific and historical evidence.

"I have spoken these condensed and oversimple thoughts to you because I think that scientists particularly, but by no means alone on the campus, know the values in rationality and knowledge. Institutions whose business is discovery and communication of knowledge are not luxuries which we can't afford in bad times. The too simple moral of my remarks is as follows. Scientists on campuses should help see to it that knowledge remains the primary emphasis there, and they should also be political enough so as not to allow politics to become the dominant focus of attention."
Dr. Rice reminded us of the dangers in stressing "not what you know but what you feel." History supports him in the pungent comment that "emotion without intelligence leads to superstition." We see plenty around us to urge with him that the cause of knowledge must not be lost.

Symptoms of modern-day passionate anti-intellectualism appear in such phenomena as the heavy sale on many a university campus of books on long-discredited astrology and other fantasies. Professor E. U. Condon has observed that many public decisions including those on the financing of science are made by people who cannot tell the difference between science and pseudo-science, a situation not apparently relieved by the widespread distribution of university degrees.

Arthur C. Clarke's recent startling projections about life in the year 2001 could easily get aborted by the lack of valid knowledge by decision makers, lack of perspective by scientific specialists, and especially lack of meaningful and prompt communication among all elements of society.

The university has an unique task before it to enable modern man competently to probe and evaluate any field of knowledge and the ability to articulate his own field of expertise to assist others.

Anti-intellectualism can even infiltrate the academic research establishment so that unwanted data get ignored (c.f. Allan M. Cartter, pp. 132-140, Science, 9 April 1971, and E. F. Holzman, p. 847, Science, 5 March 1971.). Science must always nurture careful attention to details in the tradition of Kepler's discovery of the true orbit of Mars through noting a discrepancy of only eight minutes of arc in its observed position, compared to earlier theory.

The university has a special reason for cultivating candor and meaningful inter-disciplinary communication. Nowhere else in society do we find such a potentially intimate intermingling of all intellectual disciplines. The unique academic mission consists not so much in the origin of new knowledge as the collection, evaluation, and diffusion of valid knowledge within the entire intellectual community. Thus, a healthy academic attitude toward politics would contribute urbanity, rationality, and justice to the political climate through the activities of individuals participating in the political process exemplifying thereby the reasoned, academic approach.

The university can hardly claim or expect blank-check support for esoteric research when many of its graduates seem as unaware of the implications of Kepler's revelation of the true orbit of Mars as those citizens of his native town who sought to burn his mother as a witch in 1620, nearly two decades after he determined the laws of planetary orbits.

The diffusion of knowledge today appears as the greatest creative task the modern university can perform, along with the promotion of candid communication among all intellectual disciplines. This would probably make the library the vital heart of the university and the scene of vigorous, illuminating dialogue. Let the light shine!

30 April 1971

Fred W. Ueber