

Everyman's Undergraduate Curriculum: A Question of Humanistic Context

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A comprehensive and holistic view of human possibilities encourages continual scrutiny into ourselves and the structures we create. If we wish to encourage such behavior on the parts of our students, we must encourage our faculty to do the same.

The contemporary, widespread reexamination of the undergraduate curriculum has become a central topic of discussion in higher education. While the most publicized self-study and implementation of curricular revamping emanates from Harvard, curricular review continues to be a common undertaking among most colleges and universities. All signs point to a decade of continuing curricular ferment in higher education, especially since curricular change often mirrors larger societal change.

Yet even as the curricular debate continues to unfold, a necessary ingredient for meaningful discussion about man and human institutions is missing: The humanistic context which should inform any review, reorganization, or planning remains somehow on the periphery of the debate, rather than at the fore. If man desires through his institutions of higher learning to contribute significantly to human development, then he must plot the uncharted course enlightened by well-developed humanistic perspectives. Indeed, the questions man asks not only of himself but also about his own creations will drive the entire process; and the very nature of human inquiry will foreshadow all that man can become. Inquiries that account for only partial treatments of what it means to be human will tend to shortchange human efforts.

An exacting humanistic context to guide curricular inquiry should provide for philosophical unity, simultaneously uncovering some heretofore misplaced pieces of the curricular puzzle. Man needs this philosophical unity in order to establish a fit among the many random pieces that describe the emerging landscape. Perhaps, in the attempt to delimit and make complex endeavors manageable, current difficulties with any uni-

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fied philosophy stem from a perspective too narrowly focused. A tree arises here, a valley emerges there, a hill or dale comes into view. Unfortunately, clarity still eludes the philosophical lens that searches for the larger picture.

A more complete curricular picture recognizes those timeless musings about knowledge, but in an appropriate context. Indeed, the questions are not new; neither is modern man, the interrogator, entirely new. Some of the products of man's interrogations are new, however, and the answers man elicits speak of new perspectives concerning man and his relationship to the environment, both internal and external. What was once a rather limited contextual perspective on man and his knowledge has evolved, as man has evolved, such that the contemporary contextual perspective wells up, vast and complex. Nevertheless, the query can remain philosophically grounded if one adheres to an appropriate context. Such a contextual grounding turns upon a rudimentary awareness: Knowledge and man exist concomitantly in a dynamic relationship such that grounding will ultimately reside within the interrogator, himself, as an individual and as a representative of the species—*Homo sapiens*, man, the wise. Such a grounded context would not only describe the direction of the query, but it would also help to delineate the methodology of the quest. By themselves, wholesale concerns with the “whys” and “hows” of curricula will render only a portion of the appropriate context for human education. In the final analysis, the investigator must return to a consideration of what the curriculum is and what the relationship of man is to the curriculum in order to recapture the larger view. In short, contemporary curricular entreaties require treatises with holistic parameters.

This essay argues that an exact humanistic context, that is by definition holistic, should guide efforts to review the condition of undergraduate education. In developing a vision of this humanistic context, the essay discusses the contextual implications for students and faculty, as well as for the way curricula are organized and implemented within and among the academic disciplines.

The Humanistic Context: The Student as Everyman

James Grier Miller notes that “a living system carries its history with it in the form of altered structure and consequently of altered function as well.”¹ A review of curriculum from this frame of reference should enlarge the context of one's query so that the time-released message of expanded vistas can develop. We do not suggest setting aside any of the issues or concerns of the current debate. Rather, the modern effort needs a singular and collective placing of contemporary curricular realities in a “higher context,”² so that the curriculum will continue to evolve as a

handmaiden of knowledge and knowledge will continue to serve man well.

Indeed, man himself may serve as a point of departure for such an encompassing inquiry. A look at the evolution of man's brain and the activities of the brain called "mind" may suggest an approach to curricular inquiry. Carl Sagan explains the functions of the right hemisphere and left hemisphere of the brain evolving such that the right hemisphere deals with "pattern-organization" while the left deals with critical thinking. The right serves an intuitive function; the left serves an analytical function. Furthermore, both right and left hemispheres interact despite the seeming disparity of functions, and

that interaction of the hemispheres is a vital human function. . . . [T]he processes of rational thoughts are not ends in themselves but must be perceived in the larger context of human good; the nature and direction of rational and analytical endeavors should be determined in significant part by their ultimate human implications, as revealed through intuitive thinking. . . . The search for patterns without critical analysis, and rigid skepticism without a search for patterns, are the antipodes of incomplete science. The effective pursuit of knowledge requires both functions.³

Thus, could one not analyze the whole curricular enterprise for patterns and organizing principles? Could one not continue to pattern and to organize on the basis of analytical scrutiny? Could one not seek the translating mechanism between the two? The curriculum enlists the disciplines, methods of instruction, evaluation techniques, and the like to define and describe itself, with a definite organizational pattern emerging from the endeavor. But people drive the curriculum in directions of perceived need. In view of that human presence, perhaps people are the translating mechanism, both literally and figuratively, in the conceptual picture. Just as the brain uses a complex cabling mechanism for making vital human connections, so also must man employ connecting mechanisms to make more human his extended helpmates. Indeed, man's curricular extension may demand the most patient, careful rendering of that human context because of the nature of that with which the curriculum deals—man's intelligence, the faculty that sets him apart from beasts.

To be sure, the human element in curriculum has not been without consideration. Volumes of literature intone messages of who students are and why they need education, who faculty and administration are and why education needs them. But ironically, these questions of human need seem to make more elusive those specifics of curriculum over which the debate ensues. To restate an earlier query, the larger question escapes review: What is the human need vis-a-vis the curriculum?

As part of the current reexamination, human need demands an unceasing reflection upon the student as a whole person. Obviously, another level of the examination requires faculty to reflect upon the student as a whole person (and upon themselves as whole entities). There is some suggestion of the awareness among educators that the concept of a student as a whole person begs further attention. Although the following statement is couched in terms of institutional outcomes in higher education, the human element unobtrusively slips in:

The societal impact of college-educated people does not necessarily operate through a simple and direct transference to society of what is learned in college. Rather, the societal impact of higher education is likely to be determined more by the kind of people college graduates become than by what they know when they leave college.⁴

It is generally agreed that the kind of people college graduates become often reflects the kind of people who enter college. Part of the baggage that students bring to college includes definite patterns of beliefs, values, aptitudes, attitudes, abilities, and interests. Yet "where evaluations of student characteristics with reference to the educational process have been made, they have been confined almost entirely to assessments of scholastic ability and academic preparation."⁵ It seems logical that a student's firmly entrenched emotional and intellectual patterning processes would significantly influence any attempts by an institution of higher learning to adapt, to alter, or to reinforce modes of thought.

In fact, such phrases as "earning credits," "taking courses," or "concentrating in Sanskrit" may place the student in a kind of jeopardy from the start. Who is earning what and from whom? Who is taking what and from whom? Is Sanskrit the concentration or something larger? If one is indeed interested in strengthening certain modes of thought, eliminating other modes of thought, adapting still other modes of thought to meet contemporary needs, is not all of the mind involved in the inquiry? For an encompassing reflection upon the mind of a student, one must recognize, on an individual basis, what the student thinks, what the student feels he thinks, what the student feels, and what the student thinks he feels. In this sense, a student comes to higher education "examining courses," "accrediting self," and "scrutinizing a personal bemusement with Sanskrit" in a climate respectfully committed to the origins of the query. Indeed, all that one knows may determine all that one becomes.

Curricular models that take into account individual experiences, methods of inquiry, and competencies represent an awareness of the kind of whole person who pursues an education. On the other hand, making outcomes too specific within curricular programs denies the legitimacy of

human diversity. The larger view should be one of diverse commonalities. Strict definitions of outcomes deny that larger view. Similarly, strict definitions of content based on a fixed notion of truth deny the evolutionary nature of man and the extensions man invents to enable him to transcend his immaturities, both individual and collective.

Part of the existing curricular patterning from which one can draw support for the whole-man concept derives from the Hellenistic Age of Greece. Discovering the whole-man in all of his seemingly opposing characteristics found a central place in Greek philosophies of education. Inquiry about body as well as soul, sense as well as reason, character as well as mind, defined classical humanism.

Although contemporary literature often links the modern age in education to many of the classical Greek concepts, recent critical analysis has gone beyond the classical interpretation of humanistic education. The concerns, problems, and themes—both classical and modern—are similar. Yet contemporary critical thought simultaneously hones as it expands those same issues:

While ritual emotion and reasoning are all significant aspects of human nature, the most uniquely human characteristic is the ability to associate abstractly and to reason. Curiosity and the urge to solve problems are the emotional hallmarks of our species; and the most characteristically human activities are mathematics, science, technology, music and the arts—a somewhat broader range of subjects than is usually included under the ‘humanities.’ Indeed, in its common usage this very word seems to reflect a peculiar narrowness of vision about what is human.⁶

Just as the Greeks recognized the need for a humanistic context in one’s inquiry, modern inquirers appear to perceive an enlarged focal range as the eye strains to clarify the human perspective, in both breadth and depth perception. Having to focus on several things at once in order to shed the appropriate light on the curricular landscape makes the perceptual task more difficult, to be sure. It is nevertheless true that in order to benefit from an illuminating light, one must adapt to all its principles or be satisfied with darkness. It would seem then that only the highest human context will shed the appropriate light on the contemporary curricular horizon.

The Structural Context: Curriculum

Regardless of the plethora of curricular models currently in existence, most current college curricula focus with relatively fixed aperture in certain areas. That curricular focus encompasses three basic sectors: 1) the depth component or major; 2) the breadth component or general educa-

tion; and 3) the elective component. Much of the current debate refers to the breadth component as the liberal segment of one's education—the segment that assures a human and humane perspective. To be sure, a focus upon breadth seems necessary in order to effect a balance among all of those “characteristically human activities.”

But is not the depth component equally important? For if the breadth component allows one to see all that man can be, does not the depth component allow one to search for self within a personally comfortable context? (Certainly one does not choose a discipline for concentration in which unfamiliarity and discomfort reside.) Study in depth can provide an opportunity for individual scrutiny of a personally meaningful portion of the breadth of human patternings. The scrutiny must, in turn, seek a singular and generic fit among patterns which are at once singular and generic.

Furthermore, if equal emphasis, equal focus, upon breadth and depth characterized the undergraduate curriculum, what would be the emerging pattern for choice of electives? Would undergraduates persist in strengthening a chosen area of concentration, or would they feel free to choose from among many alternatives that would equally enhance the searching self? It is difficult to tell what kind of focus would emerge if differently proportioned emphases among depth, breadth, and electives existed. As Frederick Rudolph contends, it would seem that higher education is really not for the students, but for the professors.⁷ Indeed, it seems true that “faculty members pay attention to their individual courses, departments to their majors, and students to their choice of electives; but few persons, and sometimes none, pay attention to the other three components and to the overall enterprise.”⁸

The breadth component, the depth component, and the elective component each evolved in the college curriculum for specific purposes, to fulfill specific needs. Perhaps it is necessary to assume that each component is essential to the others, particularly if one thinks of the components in a triangular relationship. With a triangle in mind, one might further consider these words of G.K. Chesterton:

You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from the laws of their own nature Do not go about . . . encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end.⁹

The curricular triangle does not appear to be equilateral in most college curricula, varying from institution to institution depending upon particular curricular emphases. Given the significance accorded to depth and the significance accorded to breadth, do they not seem to emerge as

opposing relationships necessary for a whole view? Relatively speaking, among curricular models the triangular formation more closely approximates that of an isosceles curricular triad, with the tensions that maintain the current disciplinary thrust sustaining that perspective. Perhaps a balance between breadth and depth that was devoid of a zero-sum competitive tension could be achieved. Would the curricular triangle then ease itself into an equilateral relationship, with each angle of support in necessary mutual respect of the others? By the laws that govern the nature of triangles, there would still exist certain tensions inherent in the maintenance of the triangular form; but the tensions would be complementary rather than competitive.

Clark Kerr sees this complementarity from the perspective of balance. He believes that the balancing process is one of seeking an equilibrium among the intellectual creativity of the subject fields, the needs of the highest level of skills, and the requisite of expert service to current society. Further, Kerr suggests that this kind of dynamic balance requires perpetual evaluation of the possibilities inherent in each discipline, while maintaining the necessary integrity of all the disciplines.¹⁰

One characteristic of evolutionary processes is the gradual integration of new (and necessary) parts amid older (equally necessary) parts. To be sure, extinction of unnecessary parts occurs occasionally; but even extinction happens slowly and carefully. However the integrative evolution occurs, complementarity of function among parts in relationship to the environment in which they exist remains essential for the survival of the whole.

The disciplines themselves could provide the key to a complementary integration which allows for an adaptive curriculum. The problems of the past and present already describe each discipline as well as the curriculum. The probabilities of the future cannot naturally evolve without a careful juxtaposition of the known against the hypothetical unknown. The disciplines could provide the best organizational structure for the juxtaposition.

For the disciplines to provide a foundation for complementary integration, the first major adaptation that must occur is one of attitude, rather than of organizational structure. To return to a theme mentioned earlier, the disciplines must first begin to reflect upon the person within the disciplinary framework. In addition, the disciplines can help pave the road to a balanced curriculum in concrete ways: by more fully integrating students and the content of the formal curriculum, by minimizing distinctions between liberal and vocational programs, and by supporting administrative and funding procedures in support of balance in the curriculum and among disciplines.

The Humanistic Context: Faculty as Everyman

The quest for the balanced curriculum, shaped and given meaning through humanistic context, belongs to professional and student alike. Once one specializes, is the task complete? Once one writes the last paragraph of an honors thesis, is the query over? Once one becomes a part of an academic department, is the object to lose one's self completely in its protective camouflage, or to continue to find self? If the teacher is not curious about the larger view, how can the student be curious? If one does not respect the probabilities of personal potential, how can complementary potentials emerge? Indeed, the risks of change appear to be very personal, very human in essence.

Although it seems almost too obvious to observe, it is nevertheless true that higher education is a highly personal endeavor. It is not merely the pursuit of academic knowledge. Rather, it is one human being teaching another human being what one knows about being human. In this sense, there can be no separation of cognitive and affective, liberal and vocational, practical and theoretical, because these words merely describe humans and human endeavors. For this reason, teaching must be a profession, in every sense of the word, not merely a job. (Perhaps the separation into dichotomies of cognitive and affective, liberal and vocational is a result of job-like thinking, rather than professional thinking.) Is it possible to be that which one professes?

From early Greek classical culture, a precedent exists for the unification of educational theory and practice. Grammarian and rhetorician alike not only expounded Homer and taught the art of speaking, but also extolled the virtues of their authors in and out of session. Greek educators behaved as if a community of teachers and students involved more than a formal transfer of certain kinds of knowledge. These early educators acknowledged the need for a kind of contact that encouraged the informal, silent, yet equally important transfer of other kinds of knowledge. Thinking and feeling, cognitive and affective, liberal and vocational—one's profession to educate embraced then and embraces now all of these. To be sure, doing that which one professes involves risk because it exposes the self. Nevertheless, there is no good reason why faculty today should not risk a holistic endeavor.

If one of the basic objectives of the curriculum is to provide students with a foundation and appreciation for lifelong learning, then the professional must learn throughout life as well. If students need to demonstrate "the ability to analyze written and spoken ideas and exposition, to use computational tools properly, to integrate information gathered from more than one source to produce new conclusions or observations, to test the validity of conclusions, and to use knowledge to solve problems,"¹¹

the professional also needs to demonstrate the same. Student and professional must reflect upon each other; they must learn from each other; indeed, they must recognize something of value within and among themselves. From this very human perspective, teaching, research, and service never conflict because the inquiry retains the holism of a high human context. Providing an environment that encourages the making of moral and ethical decisions requires nothing less than the commitment, in so far as is humanly possible, of the professional to create that environment. If higher education means what it says about curricular objectives, then its professionals cannot afford to transmit double messages from either the lectern or managerial desk. The unspoken message of the professional must augment the spoken message.

Bringing human needs into agreement and focus helps frame the larger view of undergraduate education. Carl Rogers asked: "How does it happen that the deeper we go into ourselves as particular and unique, seeking for our own individual identity, the more we find the whole human species?"¹² A fresh look at curriculum requires a regard of and for the people involved. An awareness of the reciprocal nature of the relationship, meta-multifaceted though it may be, between the institutions and the people they serve may provide the unifying mechanism through which curricular models can legitimately emerge. The task seems more comprehensible when the physiological, psychological, and spiritual potentialities of man foreshadow the outcomes. Indeed, the task becomes a very personal undertaking.

¹James Grier Miller, *Living Systems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 23.

²Edward G. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

³Carl Sagan, *The Dragons of Eden* (New York: Ballantine, 1977), p. 175-182.

⁴Howard R. Bowen, *Investment in Learning: The Individual and Social Value of American Higher Education*, The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 270.

⁵Jerry Hochbaum, "Structure and Process in Higher Education," in Kenneth Feldman, ed., *College and Student* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1972), p. 13.

⁶Sagan, *The Dragons of Eden*, pp. 181-2.

⁷Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 3.

⁸The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Missions of the College Curriculum: A Contemporary Review with Suggestions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), p. 10.

⁹Sagan, *The Dragons of Eden*, pp. 65-6.

¹⁰Clark Kerr, "The Frantic Race to Remain Contemporary," in Robert S. Morrison, ed., *The Contemporary University: U.S.A.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 26-7.

¹¹The Carnegie Foundation, *Mission of the College Curriculum*, p. 120.

¹²Courtney D. Schlosser, *The Person in Education: A Humanistic Approach* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), p. 133.