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THE MEANING OF A UNIVERSITY

by

Vice Admiral H. G. Rickover, U. S. Navy 11 JUN 1965 8

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I am grateful for the honor you have bestowed upon me and happy to share in your graduation exercises.

To witness this ceremony is a moving experience. Each roll of parchment put into the hand of a young man or woman represents a promise fulfilled; the promise of a mind potentially able to reach the level of learning that earns an academic degree. The young people here assembled have made good on the promise.

Being born bright is pure luck, but to complete the long and tough course of studies that brings this special gift to fruition is a personal achievement--the kind of victory in which everyone can rejoice, for it is won on individual resources alone, with no aid from social, material or technical props. The diploma you receive today is a just and fair assessment of proven competence. Rarely will any prize won in later life so precisely measure personal merit, pure and simple.

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The traditional solemnities of this ceremony remind us forcefully of the continuity and unity of higher learning in Western civilization. Today's graduates are only a small contingent in a long procession stretching back some eight hundred years to the studium generale of the high Middle Ages; to a time so remote from our daily lives that it seems extraordinary any of its institutions should have survived. Yet, as the late Charles Homer Haskins of Harvard remarked, much of the institutional framework of the medieval university lives on: its character as "an association of masters and scholars leading the common life of learning"; its corporate organization with faculties and deans and a rector; "the notion of a curriculum of study, definitely laid down as regards time and subjects, tested by an examination and leading to a degree, as well as many of the degrees themselves." Plato's Academy and the Greek and Roman professional schools of medicine and law may be considered forerunners, but the university itself is an invention of the European Middle Ages, arising as part of, and in response to the revival of learning of the twelfth century--the First Renaissance.

One can but marvel that a society rigidly divided into hereditary classes, each performing a designated practical function, should have tolerated associations of scholars cutting across class lines; corporate bodies into which one entered of one's own volition--if one had the requisite intelligence--and not because his father had been a member. I find it amazing too that medieval society, which produced only a small surplus above the minimum that sustains life, set aside some of this surplus to support intellectual activities that must have seemed of little practical value to most people. Yet universities obviously stood high in popular

seen, as witness the saying of the time: "Three nations are more fortunate than all others: The Germans because they have the Emperor, the Italians because they have the Pope, and the French because they have the University of Paris." In the formalized thinking of medieval man, these three organisms stood, respectively, for Power, Faith and Wisdom.

It was early recognized that there could be no disinterested pursuit of knowledge unless the university was protected against political and dogmatic interference. Therefore, from its inception, the university sought to establish itself as an entity separate from, and perhaps equal to State and Church; as a Republic of Letters. This was the only way then possible to achieve independence in the management of its own affairs.

I have dwelt on these ancient matters because I want to emphasize what has remained constant throughout the university's long history. In the present age of rapid and drastic change, brought on by the scientific and technological revolution, we are inclined to look askance at anything old, assuming that technology has rendered it obsolete. This assumption, whatever its validity for changes in the material aspects of life, does not, eo ipso, apply to human beings, to their intellectual and spiritual growth, their ethical commitments, their relations with one another--to the very matters that concern education in general and the university in particular. Before we seek to alter the character or functions of an institution which has so excellently served man over so long a span of time, I suggest we ponder most carefully the possible consequences of any proposed change.

Straightforward meddling by government or by religious bodies does not often occur in civilized modern democracies; but other, newer, possibly more dangerous pressures are beginning to bear down on the university; not

the same extent in every country, but to some extent nearly everywhere. They threaten the university's unique task which is to hold in trust the highest level of knowledge attained by contemporary man; to re-examine, reformulate, and enlarge this knowledge and to pass it on to young scholars. The university can perform this task only if it remains what it has always been, an association of scholars; and if it is allowed to pursue, without outside interference, its disinterested concern with knowledge at the highest intellectual level. I should like in the remainder of my remarks to discuss briefly some of the new pressures currently threatening the essential function and character of universities.

Like other organizations which provide valuable nonmaterialistic benefits--for example, top level music or art--universities cannot earn their way. This means they must depend upon patrons; consequently upon the capacity of patrons to understand and value the particular work a university does. In modern democracies, the principal patron is the electorate. Even when universities have large private endowments, they usually require some financial help from the taxpayer. Moreover, the tax exemption of their endowments depends on the good will of the electorate.

As a patron, the electoral majority in most countries has a somewhat uneven record. Nearly everywhere it is in favor of education and reasonably generous in voting education funds, but at times it meddles unwisely, evincing less respect for university autonomy than certain royal autocrats. Thus Halle, in the early years of the eighteenth century, enjoyed a more secure libertas philosophandi under Frederick William I than do some modern universities which depend financially on popularly elected legislatures. This is to be explained by the tendency of the public, even in the most

liberal and politically mature countries, of viewing universities through
sterile ground to utilitarian and egalitarian notions about education.

For most people it is difficult to overcome a deep conviction that
something so costly to the taxpayer as higher education ought to have
immediately discernible practical uses, "practical" having the connotation
of amenities, comforts, material things; also of services to the adult
community in the handling of problems that require expertise. Exactly the
sort of things a university is not able to supply if it is to meet fully its
basic responsibilities. Indirectly of course, the university's activities
do yield the results desired by the public. From some of its most esoteric
researches have come eminently practical products, but these have been
developed outside the university. Rarely does the public at large grasp
this necessary two-step procedure. Instead, it would like to order
university research as one orders lamb chops from the butcher, not realizing
that the most productive use society can make of a scholar is to leave him
free to pursue ideas that interest him, whether they appear to lead to
useful ends or not.

Let me quote two Americans who have commented perceptively on popular
concepts of higher education. They describe American attitudes, but I note
that similar attitudes are beginning to be discernible in Europe as well.

According to Richard Hofstadter, the public looks on education as "an
instrumentality rather than one of the goals of life," and feels that
education "ought to pay its way." Harvard's president, Nathan M. Pusey,
warns of the threat to the university of "demanding, dominant forces and
concerns--largely economic--that now run rampant"; he calls these the
"mundane" world, "the world without spirit, the world of the ordinary--the

subscribed, narrowly material world of men which drains most of our energies into its service and will not, unless it is made to do so, yield final meaning beyond its own superficial self." Universities, he declares, "were not put into the world to play the servile role of administering exclusively to ordinary mundane needs." I would amend this to say that ordinary mundane needs, as Pusey defines them, ought never to concern the university at all.

Nor should the university be used as a reservoir of expertise upon which the adult world may call whenever it encounters difficult problems. If as an institution it is drawn into handling such problems as urban congestion, unemployment, social inequalities and the like, or if individual professors are lured away--often in the middle of class--to act as consultants to government or industry, the purpose of the university is subverted. This purpose is not to deal directly with such matters, but to train professionals who will then be equipped to handle them. Again, the two-step procedure.

No modern society is prepared to do without the benefits that flow directly or indirectly from the work that universities alone are able to do, not the least of these being the education of professionals who have become the one wholly indispensable part of a modern work force; without whom, indeed, modern society cannot function at all. Most technically advanced countries are hard put to meet the demand for these people. Under the circumstances it would seem to be as unwise, as it is ungenerous, to divert the university from its basic responsibilities: Ungenerous, because we rob youth of the full attention they must have from their university; unwise because we are eating our seed corn.

It would also appear the better part of wisdom to refrain from attempting to change the essential character of the university, for the ability of the university to do a special kind of work is predicated on its being an association of scholars. This, perforce, makes it a minority institution, as are opera companies, symphony orchestras, ballet ensembles, Olympic teams, or any other organization operating at the summit of human capabilities. Most people can sing a little or play an instrument of some kind, or dance or ski or swim or run. But only a few qualify for admission to the elite institutions where top performance in these fields is expected.

Every normal child, properly taught, is able to complete an education that makes him literate and numerate and gives him mastery of the elements of learning he needs to function on his own in today's complex society. But not all can absorb enough post-elementary education and specialized training to become skilled workers, technicians or semiprofessionals. And only a minority of young people have the requisite intelligence for academic studies. Of these potential university students, not a few prefer other careers--the women among them, marriage, for example. Nearly half of those who start out on a university preparatory program do not complete it. If every bright child could be discovered and induced to develop his mind to the fullest, perhaps as many as ten percent of a given age group might complete a university education. Countries now boasting of larger university enrollments simply equate a much lower type of education with that pursued at a true university.

Four centuries ago, Pasquier said universities were built of men, "bâtie en hommes." This is as true today as it was then. What makes a university is the caliber of its human constituents. Lower the quality of

students or of the professoriate and you have something other than a university. It may be an institution surrounding itself with the most splendid paraphernalia of higher learning--buildings, libraries, laboratories, playing fields; it may hand out beautifully engraved degrees, but all this is debased academic coin. A story about Abraham Lincoln comes to mind. He asked: "If you call a dog's tail a leg, how many legs has he?" The answer being "five," he said: "Oh no. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it so."

To boost "university" enrollment figures by mislabeling inferior institutions is futile; sooner or later the truth will out. Yet, it appeals to a public more concerned with the names of schools and degrees than with the content of the education these represent.

Nothing so becomes modern man as his determination that every child must have an equal chance to become educated. Out of this determination has come the modern trend toward shifting financial responsibility for educating children from parent to taxpayer--beginning long ago with elementary schooling and now proceeding apace toward complete elimination of the cost factor in higher education as well.

But removing the price tag has had the curious and perhaps unexpected result that in popular thinking education has become a "consumer" good. By this I mean that the public regards it as but one of the many desirable consumer items modern societies offer all their citizens at no cost to the individual recipient, or at greatly reduced cost. They expect higher education to be mass produced and shared out equally. Any demand that one must qualify for it strikes them as "undemocratic."

Education differs from other consumer items in that it can never be

than the offer of an opportunity which the individual must then earn by making the necessary effort. It was so when parents paid school fees and it cannot be otherwise even when fees are abolished. Socializing the cost of education merely eliminates "ability to pay" as a prerequisite. It merely equalizes children as far as the financial resources of their parents are concerned. It does not equalize human intellect or the motivating power that drives some bright children through a tough preparatory program and into the university, while others, equally bright, drop out on the way.

There is evidence of some correlation between family background and success in higher education. This is difficult for citizens in a democracy to accept. I suspect it has been difficult to accept for Russia's rulers as well. Egalitarianism, as you know, is part of the Communist faith. Children of educated parents obtain seven times as many places in Russian higher education than their actual numbers warrant. This was true even in the days when the government actively discriminated against them.

I am shocked that democratic egalitarianism practices its own discrimination against children. Dogmatic egalitarians who oppose separation of academically talented children at the age when they are ready to begin university-preparatory studies are never concerned with the educational needs of bright children, only with those of the less able. It is argued that schools--or classrooms--"deprived" of the bright would lose tone; the children left behind, and their teachers would feel discouraged; they would lack leaders and so on. I find this readiness of dogmatic egalitarians to "use" bright children for the ends of others quite appalling. Should not the Kantian imperative apply to children as well? He said: "Every man is

be respected as an absolute end in himself; and it is a crime against the dignity that belongs to him as a human being, to use him as a mere means for some external purpose."

Apart from humanitarian considerations, I believe much talent is lost through barriers set up by egalitarian dogmatists. Children held back when they are ready to move into the higher levels of secondary education will be bored and may lose interest in education altogether. Their potential for academic studies is wasted; consequently, the universities will send out fewer of the much needed professionals.

The university cannot increase its student body unless the flow of talent from the secondary level proceeds at its proper pace. There is need, I think, for wider understanding of the whole interlocking process of higher learning. To help the public achieve a better comprehension is a responsibility university alumni ought to assume, as a small quid pro quo for the precious opportunity which was given them to earn a university education. "A university," as Dr. Pusey said, "is one of the noblest creations of the mind of man and one deserving the widest and wisest understanding."