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General Education: A holistic approach to intellectual development

"Looking Back, Looking Forward, and Pulling It Together: A Celebration of Teaching Excellence In the Minnesota State Universities," Bush Spring Symposium, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

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Educators generally agree that university-educated college graduates ought to have a broad educational background which includes studies in philosophy, humanities, fine arts, natural science, mathematics, and the social and behavioral sciences. Moreover, they believe that a general education program will help students broaden the scope of their knowledge and educational experiences, and that general education courses will help them develop and extend their capacity for inquiry and critical examination of human values.

Without the breath offered by a general education program, students tend to develop illusionary conceptions of themselves and others which are obstructive of clear thinking and mutually beneficial human exchange. The struggle for knowledge and clear thinking is not simply against ignorance, but more importantly against illusion. Clear independent thinking seeks truth below the surface and behind the images.

However, there is a tendency of students to view the general education program as, at best, peripheral to their educational goals and at worse a burden or an obstacle. For many students, general education courses are useless courses that are imposed on them. Where does this negative attitude come from?

It should not surprise us that many students feel that general education courses are useless. Students are molded by capitalist culture and strongly influenced by the continuing messages from government and business that knowledge that is truly valuable is the kind that has market value. Thus knowledge in areas like philosophy and humanities is considered less worthy of scholarly pursuit than knowledge in business and technology.

A concrete example of how educational policies and values are being shaped by political and economic forces that drive the university toward narrow specialization, which tends to undermine general education goals, is the effort of some politicians to pass legislation that does just that. In the Minnesota Senate, several powerful state senators have proposed a new funding formula (S.F. 1234) for higher education (Stranton, 1995). The new formula would:

- base state funding of colleges and universities on the number of diplomas and degrees they issue (instead of enrollment).
- require colleges and universities to provide tuition-free education to college graduates who are unable to find a job in a field related to their degree or diploma.

Reflected in this "education" bill is the operative model of business with its emphasis on production and labor market conditions. The dominant values of capitalist culture present a formidable challenge to the efforts of educators to help students develop a broad and deep appreciation of knowledge, ideas, and things whose value defies measurement by market prices. We as educators are compelled to be strong advocates of general education lest the economic and political forces push the university more towards multi-specialization with less emphasis on general education.

We have to inform the public that a narrow university education is both educationally inadequate and illusionary in a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, we must persuade government officials that the general education program has great merit by more effectively explaining its goals. In the present adverse political climate, we must make the argument that: 1) general education offers a reasoned approach to helping students comprehend reality; 2) it is designed for all students; 3) it is a program of studying and grasping varied and deeper meanings of life; 4) it is concerned with personal and social transformation; and 5) it is designed to challenge students to analyze their own experience and determine how they fit and function in society.

The most critical problems facing human beings are social in nature: war, class oppression, racism, sexism, etc. In recognition of this, we need to revise the general education program to foster human sensitivity such as passion for justice, moral concern for the vulnerable, and empathy and caring for the victims of social injustice. Ron Karenga, a prominent educator, notes that:

Emotions are both instructive and inspiring. They should motivate critical engagement, under gird sensitivity to personal and social suffering of the masses and inform moral outrage against injustice. Human sensitivity or emotion is essential to critical understanding.

To teach general education courses effectively, we must not only develop good ways of helping students learn about things but also stimulate interest in social, political, and economic affairs at all levels. We need to help our students develop the perspective that the general education program represents both the core and the scope of their education while their academic major represents an area of concentration or focus, but not the base for their full intellectual growth.

More specifically, a general education should:

- provide opportunities for students to both challenge and change in the light of new and compelling evidence and circumstances,
- create tension between firm convictions rooted in moral, religious and political views and values, and critical thought,
- promote fact-facing, open-mindedness, intellectual flexibility and sensitivity to the demands of new experience and knowledge in the context of a constantly changing reality,
- undermine and overthrow constraints on human thought and freedom,
- encourage commitment to higher values like truth, freedom, justice, and equality-categories of moral concerns,

- promote constant dialog with and challenge from others as a way to check personal and egocentric biases,
- provide a social and moral critique of the established order,
- offer alternatives to the established way of doing and looking at things,
- help develop a way of understanding multicultural exchange and the process of defining difference.

A general education program also should help students to:

- search for both basic and extended meanings,
- develop analytic categories and concepts to organize systematize and explicate social reality and to facilitate comprehension,
- critically think through issues.

Summary

The general education is being undermined by students' negative attitudes toward courses that are not specifically related to their major area of study, misguided educational policies of government, and powerful influences of the forces of business. We educators must assume a more active role in defending and promoting general education if we are to protect whatever educational integrity is left in higher education. Imagine a university without a strong general education program. Will we allow the university to be re-made in the image of a technical institute designed to serve business and foster its values. Unless we struggle against the narrow interests of business and their government supporters, the technical institute is the university's future.

References:

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Stranton, Russ. See Action Alert Memorandum, April 10, 1995, from Russ Stranton, Director of Governmental Relations, IFO.