

# On Sacrificing Sacred Cows

*Says an undergraduate inmate of the system: A ritualistic preoccupation with numbers and a fascination with structure strip excitement and relevance from the university*

By Marjorie Clay

My view of OU this year from the vantage point of a student on one of Dr. Hollomon's "master plan" committees has left me with a sort of optimistic disenchantment. I'm disenchanted because I've seen what universities should be doing but seldom accomplish. OU is not innately excellent, and as a loyal, somewhat myopic undergraduate, this came as something of a shock. But I'm optimistic, too, because I have seen that there are people in universities who are aware of the shortcomings, and though the process is painfully slow at times, they are, for the most part, trying to achieve excellence. The master plan itself is a source of optimism.

However, the current "reform" going on in universities across the nation will achieve little unless it can manage to correct several blatant failures which have been criticized repeatedly but are still evident. The most obvious area where OU, along with most institutions of higher education, fails dismally is in the idea of freedom.

The freedom to learn is severely curtailed by externally applied limits which are as inappropriate as they are irrelevant. The freedom to learn is stripped of personal involvement, *student* involvement, in the learning process, a situation which is perpetuated by outmoded teaching techniques and long-obsolete institutional structures and traditions. There is neither time nor freedom for students to discover the interrelatedness of knowledge, for faculty to expand their own knowledge and renew their perspectives, for both to grasp the unique social problems confronting our era. In this respect, OU, and other institutions like her, has failed.

The effect of this failure is both simple and striking; at a time when relevancy, innovation, and action are lauded, universities are laboring under the burden of irrelevancy, reticence, and a thousand-year-old emphasis up-

on conservation and disengagement from society. The result? Present educational practice is not synonymous with knowledge and understanding, and students have the persistent feeling that education doesn't really count in the modern world.

This is a far cry from Alfred North Whitehead's view that "the task of a university is to create the future, so far as rational thought and civilized modes of appreciation can affect the issue." However, universities built on an aged, anachronistic framework find it difficult to deal constructively with the present and all but impossible to "affect the future." Only through thoughtful experimentation and controlled change can the university ever hope to be relevant.

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Two reasons for the lack of freedom to learn in a university are almost religious in character—at least the devotion and sanctity which surround them give that appearance. The two, a ritualistic preoccupation with numbers and a fascination with structure, reinforce each other and together are responsible for stripping excitement and relevancy from the educational process.

The sacred, unflinching devotion to numbers centers around three rather powerful components—the clock, the schedule, and the calendar. Contrary to popular belief, however, this trio is not necessarily divine and may even be inadequate for the job of learning. At any rate, "safety in numbers" hardly seems an appropriate University motto, though it may well describe the situation.

The creed of this cult manifests itself on every level of university life and involves a pervasive air of mysticism. So many credits for so many hours for so many weeks for so many years with so many grade points, and a mysterious conversion from ignorance to intelligence occurs. Whether

learning also occurs is a problem seldom confronted.

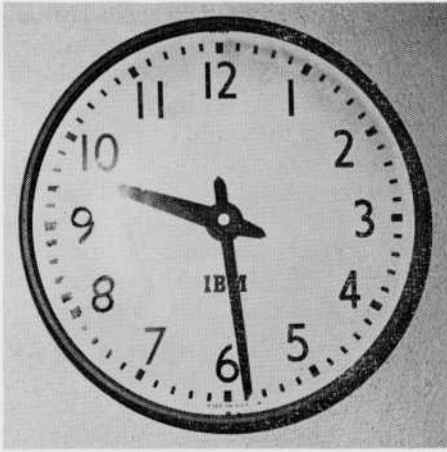
"Since we do not know what a good education is and will not take the trouble to find out, we educate by numbers," Robert Hutchins has said. "College education is 120 semester hours, and since the 120 semester hours are taught by specialists, they can add up to comprehension only by accident. The student is never compelled to put together what the specialists have told him, because he is examined course by course, by the teacher who taught the course. His IBM card must show he passed the requisite number of courses with the minimum numerical average and that is all." And as sad as it may be, Dr. Hutchins' observation is accurate in all too many instances. Even an interdisciplinary attempt is stifled by numbers, because some professors can't talk to people who have less than 12 hours in their subject area.

Another fundamental dogma of the faith is that the student must never—under any circumstances—have free time to do any reading on his own in a course, or on any subject, for that matter. As William Hutchinson comments, "Students, to a sorry extent, are precluded from real reading because, along with everything else, they must run around to fifteen lectures a week to hear their textbooks summarized."

And God forbid that the student challenge the schedule by getting hung up on Dostoevsky the week in which the syllabus requires that he produce a paper on Tolstoy.

A second curious religious faith exists on university campuses and is sometimes referred to as "the structure of the discipline." This faith manifests itself in the belief that knowledge must be rigidly compartmentalized and that communication is contamination. Much too often, however, this protection from "contamination" results only in sterility.

An interesting tendency is evident in this group, a kind of persecution

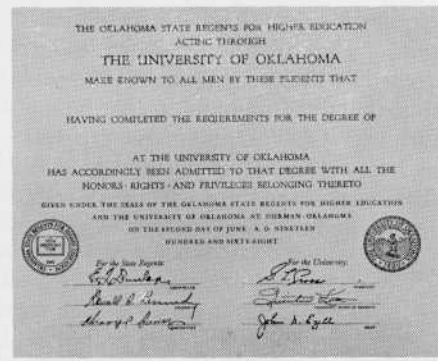
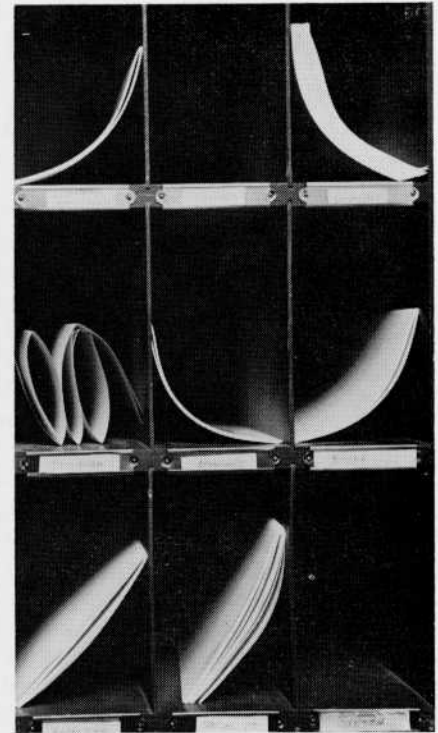
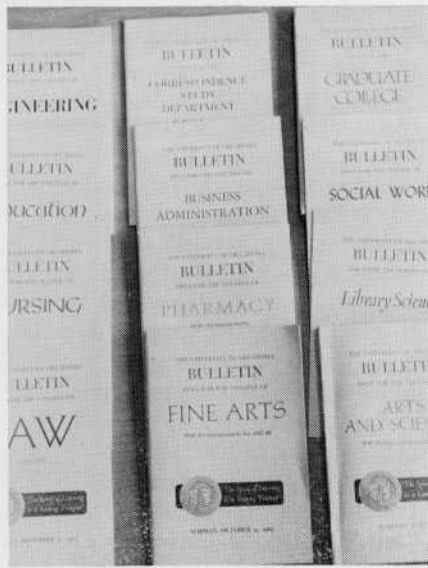
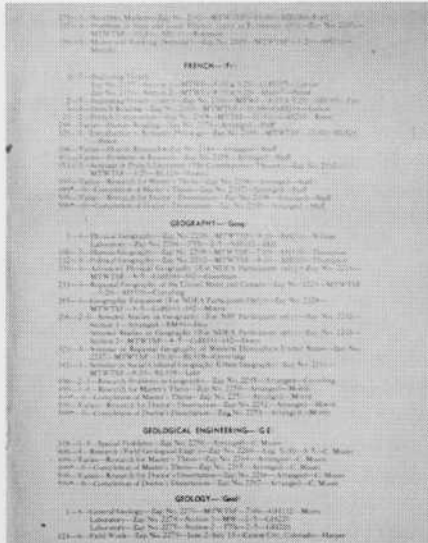


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The sacred, unflinching devotion to numbers centers around three powerful components—clock (above left), schedule (above center), and calendar (below left). A second religious faith is sometimes

referred to as “the structure of the discipline.” The compartmentalization of departments (above right) has its bibles—the bulletins (below center). The holy grail is shown at lower right.

paranoia. When the “disciples of the disciplines” are confronted with an interdisciplinary proposal of any sort, they immediately conclude that what is really involved is an attempt to destroy the disciplines altogether. Nothing could be farther from the truth. On the assumption that a discipline is not subject-matter information but rather a set of tools and methods by which changing subject matter can be explored, interdisciplinary work utilizes the disciplines, and in a sense, fulfills them at a very significant level. Division of knowledge into disciplines—and disciplines alone—seems strikingly irrelevant in an age when we need “to see things whole” more than at any other time in history . . .

when we need to bring our best minds to the solution of problems which are not, after all, segmented into academic disciplines. Though I may have overstated the case to make my point, the fact remains that when numbers and structure become ends in themselves, the freedom to learn is effectively eliminated and involvement in the learning process is only a student dream. To demand that the learning process be focused on personal involvement is to demand freedom in the classroom, and this raises two fundamental questions: what does it mean to be free to learn? and what are the results of “free” learning? Johann Pestalozzi, a 19th Century

educator, observed that “we must bear in mind that the ultimate end of education is not a perfection in the accomplishments of the school, but fitness for life; not the acquirement of habits of blind obedience and of prescribed diligence, but a preparation for independent action.” More recently, Henry Steele Commager points out that “we still refuse to learn what Oxford and Cambridge, for example, have taken to heart, that lectures often interfere with learning, that professors cannot be expected to do all the teaching, and that a major part of education is and should be performed by the students themselves.” These sentiments are echoed on the

OU campus. Paul Ruggiers, David Ross Boyd Professor of English, believes the antidote for educational failure is "to get the student involved in his own education, make him more responsible for it by giving much of the responsibility back to him, by finding ways in which to give relevance of the materials to his own experience."

And as Richard Terry, director of OU's systems research center, observes, "The average teacher presents his subject matter by answering questions which the student is not asking."

These men seem to be saying essentially the same thing—that it is the student who must learn and that students learn through their own personal involvement in the learning process. But too often, the most important questions are those which will appear on the next test, and even the most persistent find that their own questioning becomes an extracurricular activity.

"The intellectual impulses of youth require freedom," Karl Jaspers maintains. "They are crippled when studies are led by the apron strings of the curricula and a premium is placed on memory. Our examinations are less and less tests of judgment, which in the classroom has already taken a back seat behind the mass of knowledge."

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What are the implications of this freedom? For students, it means freedom to learn, to raise our own questions, search our own answers, evaluate our own findings. Little is accomplished when, as Terry notes, "the good student does everything that he is told, only what he is told, and exactly as he is told. He is not the initiator of his own activity and he dares not, if he expects a good grade, venture far from the well-outlined class behavior his professor demands."

The freedom to learn also involves the freedom to reject blind devotion to numbers and structures as minigods and to see, rather, that they are only tools, merely guides. It involves the freedom to break schedules in order to get education; it means freedom to see disciplines in perspective, to see interdisciplinary study in perspective, and to see the two as complementary rather than separate poles in a dichotomy. Such a freedom includes seeing that curriculum as it is now geared is

responsive to subject matter but it is not always responsive to human learning by different human beings; it is the freedom to demand opportunities, seek new adventures and not to conform without protest to dead patterns of the past. And, as all freedoms, it demands responsibility.

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But freedom to learn has implications to faculty members as well—they become free to teach. It is their job to direct the learning process, not to control it; to stimulate new questions, not to answer questions never raised. Theirs is the responsibility of teaching the student to learn without a teacher, to continue his intellectual life on his own initiative and with his own resources.

And the result of this freedom? "Our educational purposes must be seen in the broader framework of our convictions concerning the worth of the individual and the importance of individual fulfillment," John Gardner writes. "What we must reach for is a conception of our perpetual self-discovery, perpetual reshaping to realize one's goals, to realize one's best self, to be the person one could be."

What we must also reach for is a conception of institutional self-discovery, perpetual reshaping of institutional goals, to realize OU's best "self," to be the university OU can be, and this constitutes the roots of my optimistic faith in OU. Educational purposes—both individual and institutional—are formulated through goals and developed through experimentation, and both activities are in progress at OU.

In the area of goals, OU must continually examine its own reasons for being, assess its current strengths and weaknesses, and envision what it hopes to be and can expect to become in the years ahead. Along with emphasis on goals must be a continual evaluation of existing programs and facilities with recommendations for their maximum utilization and constant improvement, in addition to a renewed and committed concern with making OU a first-rate educational institution.

In the area of experimentation, new patterns for new content are needed, as well as new groupings of existing resources, whether they be students, courses, or departments. Current ex-

perimental programs should be evaluated and either implemented, rethought, or abandoned. A complacent "we need more of what we've got" without a thorough, thoughtful consideration of "what it is we've got" is not the answer to OU's educational problems, at least not at a continuing level. Merely extending existing programs is considerably different than using them as a basis for change and renewal.

Richard McKeon points out that the "liberal arts have liberated man in the past by adapting themselves to the problems men have faced, and they have become obsolete and ineffective by elaborating old methods without consideration of new facts and problems." What are the "new facts," the intellectual skills, values, attitudes, and concerns relevant to a society dominated by the social impacts of science and technology? Perhaps this is a question which should be asked at OU with some degree of frequency—and relevancy—during the coming years.

Emphasis on experimentation, however, does not mean that the university's traditional functions of conservation and dissemination of knowledge be disregarded. It rather suggests that conservation and dissemination without reference to the questions "of what?" and "for what?" are as destructive and irresponsible as the idea of change merely for the sake of change. Both need to be viewed in the proper context.

So after a semester of scrutiny, it appears that flexibility, adaptability, experimentation, and imagination within the framework of the goals of the University have emerged as essential ingredients to its further development, to the freedom of both its faculty and its students, and if Whitehead is accurate, to its responsibility to the future.

Or, as Dr. J. Clayton Feaver, David Ross Boyd Professor of Philosophy, comments in a chapter from *World of Ideas*: "Grow or perish is an imperative; there is no hope for the University of Oklahoma, or any institution, except it face straightway into the future with vision and daring, wild imagination, and careful planning to let be what must be in the challenge of this complex century . . . there is 'no exit' but the future." ●