

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: WHAT OU INTENDS TO DO

OU's Plan for the Future addresses itself to the widening awareness of the ineffectiveness of much of our undergraduate education. The following excerpts have been taken from the plan's chapter on undergraduate education:

Colleges and universities from Berkeley to Swarthmore have questioned nearly everything about themselves except the premises upon which their various undergraduate programs are based. Admissions officers at Amherst and Williams admitted only a few years ago (unknown to each other) that their two colleges differed only to the extent that one required a rigid program to "liberalize" all freshmen, while the other left all options open to the freshmen to choose courses totally at their own discretion. The adoption of these two philosophically contradictory concepts at otherwise similar schools indicates some confusion about the goals involved. Students at Harvard have so much latitude to choose courses that one commented recently that no undergraduate program really exists, or at least he failed to see any real identification of the needs of undergraduates as distinguished from any other students on campus.

The tradition has been generally to ensure that the student discover and develop an interest in a "major"—presumably preparatory to his entering a career or graduate study for which study in this discipline would have readied him. However, "majors" are as narrow or broad, relevant or irrelevant as the academic units that spawn them. Most often they are limited. The result is that nontechnically oriented students at least find that their choice of a major field has become increasingly immaterial to their post-undergraduate lives.

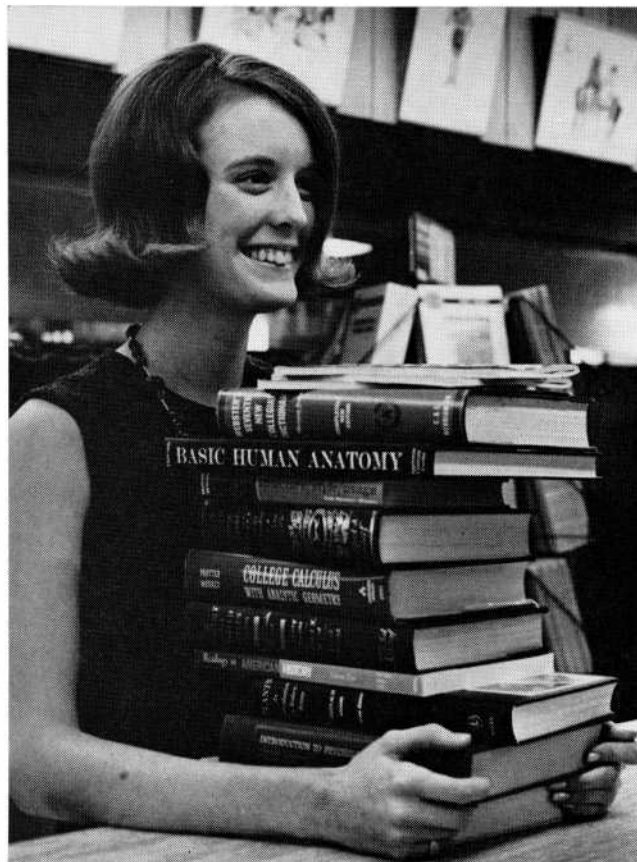
Archibald MacLeish helps clarify this problem by explaining why undergraduate study has become disconnected as it is from the real needs and concerns of many, even most, undergraduates: "What is happening, and in the greatest universities as well as in the less great, is that the entire educational process is becoming fixed—hung-up, as the phrase goes now, on its vocational end result. The job out there in the profession or the industry dictates the 'training' (their word, not mine) in the graduate schools, and the graduate schools dictate the preparation in the colleges, and the whole system congeals from the top down like a pond freezing. The danger is that the society may congeal with it, for nothing is more certain in the history of our kind than the fact that frozen societies perish."

Once Hutchins had articulated the concept of "general education" at Chicago and Eliot had emphasized elective courses at Harvard, the uneasy and permanent quarrel between training in the discipline and humanizing general education was institutionalized. That unsatisfactory compromise between the professional and Thoreau's "liberally educated man" now lies moribund everywhere, its failure demonstrated by the widespread disinterest and apathy of students who would rather "drop out" because their work "turns them off" or simply fit in passively.

The goals of undergraduate education are indeed multiple and partially contradictory, with each tending to encroach upon the preserves of the others. Two goals have previously been well identified, however poorly they have been integrated. The first is the preprofessional training of competence in a given area or discipline, the degree for the recognition of which should give entry to the graduate into an identifiable role in the society. In addition, the concentration and in-depth study by a student in a given area can make him familiar with the rigorous discipline, technique, and modes of thinking which are transferable to, and applicable in, even unrelated fields. Thus the student can learn in one field the organizations of thought and methodologies of

practice which are associated with expertise in any field.

The second goal is the training of the student to be a responsible citizen and neighbor, to introduce him to the fundamental intellectual achievements of his and other cultures, and to provide him with the minimal equipment necessary to achieve personal fulfillment in society (the ability to organize his thinking, to take tests, to write and speak clearly, to make decisions and perhaps to be creative). The subjects thought most applicable to this second goal of a liberal education have changed over the centuries; we no longer require the trivium and quadrivium of the Middle Ages. Yet the basic emphasis seems to remain constant.



In the first place, exposure to the several disciplines gives the learner a number of perspectives, of visions opening into his world. He who can think like a physicist, a sociologist, and a poet has greater imagination and thus greater resources than the man who views all problems in a single way with limited mental flexibility. The former, wiser man has the multifaceted world view necessary for an "act of creation."

In the second place, the student may gradually discover the inevitable interrelationship among all areas of knowledge; the political scientist and the modern artist may eventually discover how many methods, assumptions, and goals are common to all intellectual pursuit and all purposive human life. Liberal education is, therefore, only incidentally vocational and has centered on the most far-ranging areas of human thought, such as history, philosophy, art, and the social and natural sciences.

There are two additional needs of undergraduates which have been almost totally ignored in our institutions of higher learning. The first was perhaps even understated by Cornell President James Perkins in his forthright critique of "The University in Transition"

in a lecture series at Princeton in 1965: "The student needs some connection between his studies and his concerns, between what he reads and what he sees, between what he thinks and what he does . . . We [in universities] have not been very inventive about how to relate studies and experience or thought and action, and the result can be [and usually is] frustration, or apathy, or even revulsion on the part of good students. There is an excitement and an important feedback from actually seeing and experiencing the relevance of intellectual exercises. Unquestionably, the notion that knowledge can and should be pursued for its own sake is at the heart of our lack of interest in connecting studies and concerns."

The second need of undergraduates that has been only incidentally or unintentionally met is for personal awareness and confidence which derives from finding work that is fun. Undergraduates are people, human beings with feelings—lest we forget while considering them in the abstract as raw materials in the academic factory. People tend to perform best when they are



excited, enthusiastic, and passionately engaged in their work. Therefore an undergraduate education should offer sources of joy. Learning should be enjoyable enough that reading leads to further reading, discovery leads to further investigation and then further discovery, and "school work" loses for students' ears its presently pejorative ring. But before such a positive attitude can be engendered—a goal which is very rarely consciously pursued in the universities at present—the idea must catch on that doing a creditable job in one course or another "just for the fun of it" is a perfectly responsible, acceptable act.

The term "general education" should not imply the notion of a melange of courses so overly general or simple-minded that the student is hard pressed to see their significance for his education or their relation to each other or his discipline. We believe with Daniel Bell that the problem is not really one of breadth versus depth but more of readapting the original purposes of general education (to provide basic understanding of the Western tradition and to counter specialization with an interdisciplinary approach) to present realities. We need a flexible rather than a

dogmatic approach to curriculum planning, while we must maintain coherence and order in general education programs.

The undergraduate colleges of America have concentrated far too much training undergraduates in narrow disciplines oriented toward graduate study and far too little on training young men and women in the discipline with broader learning oriented toward a full, humane, and significant life.

Undergraduates have a far wider range of interests than many university faculties realize. If the University is attempting to produce graduates who, after four years, are generally committed to a direction for their lives then we must offer the student a diversified program designed to develop those many interests which lie outside his limited major.

The University has means at its disposal by which it can broaden the intellectual horizon and sharpen the intellectual equipment of the undergraduate in a manner complementary to, rather than at cross-purposes to, the study in his area of concentration. First of all, a clear distinction should be made between programs that serve the major area of concentration and those that provide for a more general education. Vocational and avocational interests cannot be developed by the same people at the same time without confusing the student and lessening his interest in both areas.

The University must have the kind of organization and curricula that will adequately ensure the student's concentrated study in the major while complementing it with other courses designed for his general education. Thus, courses in a given subject designed wholly, or in part, for nonmajors should acquaint the undergraduate with the methodology, assumptions, and problems inherent in that subject. They should seek to impart the excitement and challenge of the subject by exposing the student to the problems which lie at the forefront of investigation or research. In no case should these courses be simplified introductions (which ought to be offered in high school) which primarily emphasize memorizing information.

In determining curriculum requirements and advising on courses, the University should attempt to encourage relatedness of the subjects chosen for any given semester, thus making it more probable that the student can draw parallels between the problems and goals encountered in his various subjects. Counseling for relating subjects should not be provided by only a single department or school, since it is members of the various faculties working together who are able to define these interrelationships.

A wide range of electives should be allowed and encouraged in all preprofessional and paraprofessional programs. Conversely, the professional schools and scientific and technical disciplines should develop courses for the nonmajor, if they do not already exist. Considering the enormous effect of their subject matter on modern life, we believe these courses should be promoted by the University.

The University should have a continuing process of review for its entire curriculum toward an appropriately broad general education for all undergraduates, even including enterprising students with specific interests. Beyond that general effort, the University should offer a number of programs through which students could satisfy particular interests outside their majors. Those who are responsible for maintaining competence in the discipline could not be expected at the same time to manage the programs that put the discipline in the perspective of the student's whole needs without creating unfair conflicts—yet, of course, they must participate in the process of managing those programs. When the faculty member is acting in the role of member of his academic unit—as opposed to other roles—the interests of the discipline should be expected to come first. Students interested in reforming the curriculum are rarely interested in meeting with faculty in their roles as members of academic units in matters of tenure, promotion, and hiring.

What students show interest in is the relation between their majors and general education and the relevance of courses of study to the changing and increasingly complex world outside

the University. Academic units should be free from the continual calls for student participation in their deliberations. Students should be working together with faculty as teachers and advisors, not as administrators of their professional guild. Organizationally, therefore, the various roles of faculty members should be distinguished and separated so that students can work together with them without confusion of purpose.

The University should offer the following kinds of options in controlled programs: (1) allowing certain students the alternative of taking their full college schedule in liberal studies in lieu of the usual combination of major and electives; (2) offering certain especially gifted students the option of taking more than one major, on the condition that they fulfill all the normal requirements of the academic units in each major; (3) offering a program of in-depth study for three or four semesters emphasizing seminars, small discussion groups, and significant individual research and reading as an alternative to the broader and more superficial thrust of traditional studies; (4) creating a common core curriculum for the first two years of college which represents the faculty's collective best attempt to formulate a single curriculum to teach the most valuable and useful elements of the liberal arts. Such a program should be offered to those students who might wish such guidance and should be designed to provide maximum flexibility in the subsequent choice of major.

The University should consider adapting to its own circumstances the "third-tier" scheme suggested by Daniel Bell in which "each student in his senior year would take a number of courses that would 'brake' the drive toward specialization by trying to generalize his experiences in the discipline."

The University should also consider expanding seniors' opportunity for a parallel alternative. Writing a research thesis in consultation with a faculty member as the culmination of his work in his major gives the student a deeper understanding of his field and experience with the discipline and research methods required in many fields. Given full course credit, such thesis work should only be attempted by serious students who are otherwise capable of handling honors-level work.

The University immediately should review all of its present "basic" or "distribution" requirements, especially in arts and sciences, to ensure that they are fully justified. In making this review we must ensure that such requirements do not assume a homogeneity in students' backgrounds and needs which no longer exist.

Modern man has difficulty enough comprehending the range of knowledge necessary to his broader understanding of his complex world without attempting to do so in a cultural vacuum. To round out the cultural part of the undergraduate's life, the University should:

—provide undergraduates with a richly stocked service-oriented bookstore which offers a large collection of paperback and hard-cover books both for courses and for general interest in a wide variety of subjects;

—provide a library designed to satisfy undergraduates' special needs for copies of course texts, comfortable study and lounge areas, and a limited general collection for undergraduate-level research;

—establish smaller libraries in the various undergraduate houses;

—improve significantly the quality and range of offerings in the Stovall and Art Museum collections and disseminate information widely about the little-publicized yet excellent plays, films, lectures, and other cultural events occurring in Norman and Oklahoma City.

General education need not be sandwiched between secondary school and upperclass work, yet it must not break the sequence of the development of deep interest and talent in the area of concentration. The University must ensure that all students' pro-

grams include a perspective on the broad range of man's endeavors and accordingly require substantial work outside the major. Also, we must recognize that we have suffered in the past from the fallacy that all students who enter the University have the same educational needs and motivations.

The University should design all its general education programs in a way that accounts for the differing needs, precollege backgrounds, and intellectual interests of its students. The University of Oklahoma should contribute to a humanizing influence on all students by offering a number of different, carefully designed programs from which students can choose for themselves the one most personally satisfying.

An undergraduate's work often seems to him no more than a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The University can save him such despair, and it must if it and he are to be able to work together in the future. This University must consciously and actively provide for the vital connection that needs so desperately to be made between the student's work inside and his life outside the institution.

The University's organization should be structured both around the student's absorbing a certain body of knowledge and around the means by which he can apply that body of knowledge to the society around him. For example, it is not just to be a psychologist that a student studies psychology; he must be able to apply psychological tools to understanding people in places like the urban ghetto or in small towns. Just being scientists is not enough. Young people want to be able to evaluate the relevance of their work as scientists or engineers.

There are innumerable combinations of expertise and application, and we must open up these opportunities rather than foreclose them for the inquiring student. The sociology major could become engaged in discovering how his discipline applies to art, human relations, and technology—areas of human interaction in which that student is particularly interested. He might study the expatriation of artists from their homelands, the social immobility of American Indians, or the effect of a nonvalue-oriented technocracy on the stability of a previously value-oriented population.

The University's substantive interests will vary much over time, but students and faculty should always be engaged together in creating and applying their expertise in two ways. First, they should be bringing the perspectives of many disciplines to bear on study in any single discipline. Second, they should be applying their expertise in the disciplines where appropriate problems of society. Some of this interdisciplinary teamwork is oriented toward problems defined within the University, while some is oriented toward problems defined in the larger society which we must recognize and begin to solve. There must be a workable framework within the University which will ensure that the student can be brought to see the vital connections between his discipline and the real problems faced by people outside the academic community.

Many students can best learn by becoming actively involved in the practicalities of their field as well as studying its theoretical aspects. Opportunity and academic credit should be given to interested students for field work (for instance, staff duties at city hall for the political scientist or field investigation in the city's slum for the urbanologist). We should continually seek out new means by which students can be exposed to the practical situations and human lives to which their school work relates. But the field work must be related intellectually and rigorously to a discipline.

The University should facilitate the offering of a limited number of "ad hoc" courses, oriented toward particular current topics (e.g., Vietnam or black power) which may not merit permanent inclusion in the curriculum but in which strong interest might be expected. It might be in the interest of everyone at the University to offer a course or courses on the problems of higher education and the relationship between students and society and the University.

The University must be in constant communication with the job market to ensure that its graduates can adequately fill roles actually in demand and to ensure that the career planning advice provided to students is the best they can obtain. Graduate Record Examinations of all students and other means should be utilized by the University to measure the success of academic programs in preparing graduates for later life. Nevertheless, teaching in the classroom must involve enough grounding in fundamental principles, methods of analysis and general intellectual training that students will not be tied to a narrow vocation.

The University should provide means by which undergraduates can have regular personal contact with the faculty and graduate instructors. The student should be personally familiar with the character and attitudes of those committed to applying the skills he is learning before he can decide whether or not to make a similar commitment. One tested means to facilitate such contact is a program involving small group tutorials with qualified graduate students and faculty members. Such tutorials also provide opportunity for in-depth reading and discussion about the disciplines and their application to the student's life and society.

Studying and working in a university should be stimulating and exciting for all its students. It need not consist of a rigid lock-step system in which there are innumerable barriers to movement and initiative. It need not involve overly restricting portions of what constitutes a course or what subjects should be taught. Even more important, undergraduate education ought to be comprehensive as an organic whole which transcends the many parts into which it must divide itself to serve multiple needs.

The University must make every effort to dissolve the separation between high school and the predegree program in the University College, between that program and the degree programs of the undergraduate colleges, and between graduate and undergraduate programs. The University should seek to put into practice through every possible means the idea that education is a continuum which should allow easy entrance and exit at any point. Performance should therefore become the criterion for matriculation to the next level, thus allowing for greater freedom for individuals to move at their own pace and subject to their own interest.

In order to foster the self-reliance, independence, and self-confidence necessary for hard personal choices and challenges that students must face during and after their years on campus, the University should give recognition on the basis of merit and apply high standards to everyone a student works with and looks to as an example. This means that faculty and students both must demand excellence in each other's performance. It also means that the whole student body must consist of the brightest and most highly motivated students that this University can attract.

Standards of admission to the University should therefore be substantially raised; students without the ability or desire to work consistent with our ever rising standards of performance should be discouraged from coming to the University. The present formula which allows entrance on the basis of only one of several possible qualifications should be replaced by a system which screens applicants on the basis of a number of flexible criteria which take into account both our responsibilities to the State and our hopes and designs for an outstanding student body.

Equivalent substitutes for high-school diplomas based on performance criteria should be allowed to ensure that the specially gifted student of any age or high-school class can begin college-level accredited studies as soon as he can show the necessary intellectual prowess and justify his acceleration. The University of Oklahoma should take steps to make it possible for selected high-school students to take courses concurrently at the University and receive credit for such work on subsequent entry as freshmen.

Experimental programs toward a continuum between high-school and college should be undertaken by the University School which should be substantially enlarged and improved, with master

teachers in the basic disciplines perhaps faculty appointments at the University.

The selected students with intellectual potential who come from socially, educationally, or economically deprived backgrounds must be given all possible aid by the University to build self-confidence, learn the minimal skills required to begin college-level study, and fully realize their potential. This is not inconsistent with our admission policy because the students meet our admission requirements.

A general improvement in the quality and diversity of the student body will have another valuable effect beyond the obvious boost it would give to the quality of education and life at the University of Oklahoma. The source of much of the meaning and memory of life and joy for undergraduates on campuses everywhere is in informal, personal discussions and arguments among friends. The more likely a student is to be challenged and broadened intellectually by his peers, the more complete and satisfying is his total educational experience.

It should be well noted that true diversity is attained by ensuring that people from a variety of ethnic, national, racial, religious, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds are represented, not by predetermining simply that students will come from a wide range of countries, states, and counties.

The bane of students' lives often is as much the way they are taught as it is the content of their education. Undergraduates on campuses across the country have tended to be the last to benefit from improvements in teaching methods, better student-faculty ratios, and reduction in class sizes, if they have benefited at all.

The University should make every effort to counter this trend. Computers for teaching, closed circuit television, team teaching, and other techniques should be used. Medium-sized classes should be abolished in favor of smaller discussion classes and multisection lectures, except for single-section courses.

Consideration should be given to the introduction of a reading period during which most classes would not be scheduled to allow all students adequate time to prepare for end-of-semester examinations, to read material cited in the lectures, and to write papers.

The University should do significant further research on the relationships among grades, motivation, and performance. We should deemphasize grades as the sole criteria of performance and emphasize substantive comment by teachers which would give students our best counsel on how to improve the quality of their work. Where desirable, the University should initiate a limited number of experimental programs which, though ungraded, would still require a high standard of performance.

Students who might benefit significantly from a year of absence from their undergraduate career should be encouraged to take one. As Mrs. Raushenbush of Sarah Lawrence observed, "It took us [in colleges and universities] a long time to discover that drop-outs were often able students who resisted the uninterrupted span of four years after an uninterrupted span of twelve years in elementary and high school."

Students who have dropped out or who have taken a leave of absence should be allowed a reasonable chance for a reentry based not only on the previous academic record but perhaps more importantly on assessment of the motivational and other benefits accrued during the time off.

One can look at a bright yellow flower in the sun and simply see a flower. But one can also look at that same flower as Fellini would, unself-consciously aware of the flower—its colors, its forms—and the way it affects him and his surroundings; the flower then takes on meaning and a life of its own. The University must create an environment and thereby discover its meaning and inherent beauty. To make that discovery students only need open the eyes of their minds. But they will never even blink until universities offer them a wide enough range of options and a stimulating enough classroom experience so that learning becomes a source of joy.