

What About the Student?

THE MOST PRICELESS FREEDOM A COLLEGE STUDENT
CAN POSSESS IS HIS RIGHT TO BE AN INDIVIDUAL

WE worry a lot about college students—what they do and what they think and where they will be taking us in a few years. If we didn't worry about them, there wouldn't be much reason for all this concern about academic freedom. Professors could advocate anything they pleased and arouse no more furor than would any other citizen. But when the minds of our young people are at stake, we take a different view entirely.

An unfortunate segment of society worries so much that they have decided that we cannot afford to take chances. These worriers would create a controlled environment for college students, and they would allow no one to tamper with the atmospheric conditions. They would like to produce a college student who thinks and acts the way their parents do today at the age of 50—not as their parents did as students of 20.

The outward sameness about modern college students might even lead us to believe that this goal is being achieved. They look pretty much alike—they dress alike, talk alike, and to a certain extent they act alike. If this were the whole story about college students, we would have just cause to be worried—but this is not the case.

There is an element in the makeup of the student which is difficult to find elsewhere in the same quantity—an element that is too often lost somewhere along the way to responsible adulthood. For want of a better phrase, call it individuality of thought and action. You can see it in varying degrees on any college campus, and it's a bit painful to watch at times, even for those who welcome its presence.

That student still exists in the college classroom who has the audacity to say to his professor, "I think you're wrong," no matter how distinguished or how autocratic his mentor may be. He will sign up for classes under the toughest professor in the department because "a C in his class is worth an A under anyone else." He will say flatly to the house activity chairman, "No, I can't stuff crepe paper in the Homecoming decorations tonight; I have to study."

And there are a few campus leaders who

aren't interested in winning popularity contests, who voice their convictions because it is their responsibility to do so and who are willing to take the consequences. There is a Panhellenic Council president at O.U., for instance, who refuses to hedge on either the strengths or the weaknesses of the Greek system and who advises prospective Sooner coeds to come to college and look around for a while before making up their minds about whether they need or want to pledge a sorority. This may be treason—or it just might be responsible leadership.

We wouldn't want a campusful of this type of individual, just as we wouldn't want a tribeful of chiefs or a worldful of leaders. But as long as our colleges and universities continue to produce enough of these individuals, we need not worry about the future. If these students are willing to search out and claim the freedoms which are theirs alone in an academic community, they will be willing to claim the other freedoms which exist for the concerned citizen.

No parental frowns or professorial radicalism will lead these young people astray. If something doesn't change them in a few years after college—if society will allow them to be what they are—they will probably be the ones who turn down the country club because they can't afford it or refuse to cheat on their income tax returns. They may be found among the maligned reformers who step in periodically to clean up local government, or they may work overtime at jobs they like simply because there is work to be done—even without time and a half. Anyone who thinks for a moment that hearing all sorts of ideas will ruin these young people is giving professors too much credit and college students too little.

Academic freedom guarantees professors the right to preach their convictions without fear of reprisal. It also guarantees to their students the right to listen, to believe or not to believe, to hear all sides—then it grants them the freedom of decision. And if it intends to advance at all, society must not be allowed to make this decision for them. —CJB

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