





# ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

Student beware: A university environment is dynamic and fraught with many perils

By DR. LLOYD P. WILLIAMS

UNIVERSITIES EXIST for good reasons, but the public is not always clear as to what these reasons are. Clarity about them is important, however, because the greatness of a university—assuming an intelligent and courageous faculty—is largely dependent upon alumni and friends who understand the mission of the university, and who will support it in spite of the associated risks.

Universities are not propaganda platforms. Universities are not custodians of eternal truth. Universities are not recreation pavilions. Universities are not adolescent nurseries. Nor do universities exist to provide social status.

Universities are centers of research and teaching. Universities exist to originate, clarify, disseminate, refine and transmit those skills and insights necessary for the development of the individual and for the continued enrichment of civilization. In some ways such an environment is staid, but in some other ways it is dynamic and fraught with peril. Specifically, there are five principal risks to the student who braves a genuine university.

*The greatest risk of a university education is to the student mind.* All of those happy platitudes and unexamined convictions so characteristic of youth are called into question. This is necessarily so, for in a true university students are exposed to new ideas in every aspect of human concern—ethics, religion, politics, social thought, scientific philosophy, economic theory and aesthetic standards. No field of thought is exempt. The ill-digested and unreflective notions comprising the intellectual capital of freshmen are subjected to relentless criticism. If the university does its job properly, they are hammered over the years until they either break or take on the quality of a tough, sharp, carefully honed blade.

Exposure to new ideas logically comes in classes, but classes are by no means the only source of threat to innocence and complacency. The library is ideologically lethal, since a good library contains the very best thought (and this also means the most controversial thought) of men down through the ages. Student bull sessions are also

richly educative and they are closely attuned to the real problems of students. Fortunately, neither parents nor university authorities can control these exciting and spontaneously-erupting student sessions. Although bull sessions are many times dominated by talk about sex, or by irrelevance and trivia, a genuine university environment will stimulate conversation concerning all kinds of theories, isms, orthodoxies, and heterodoxies. Certainly sharing one's ideas with others lays the basis for a clarification of conviction. Even more important, it clarifies the *why* of conviction. The student who has never exposed his ideas to fellow student criticism has no real notion of whether his views are valid or not. At best he may be enjoying the security of a false confidence bolstered by wish and naivete.

*A university education entails a second risk, for some students may decide to take ideas seriously.* The threat is changed behavior and changed conviction. Behavior patterns learned in childhood and carried unreflectively into youth may appear inappropriate to the student learning to think for himself. The certainty of life's purposes, when called into question as they inevitably will be in a genuine university, may overthrow old goals and institute new ones. Religious affiliation dating from infant baptism or youthful confirmation may undergo change; deliberate, rational choice may supplant the accidents of birth and geography. Religious experimentation takes on appeal. One church may be dropped for another. Or, as is sometimes the case, all churches may seem equally vacuous. Yet more dangerous, university students may begin to take the ethical principles of the Judaeo-Christian tradition seriously.

CHANGED AND aroused interests, stimulated by the ferment of ideas and new experiences in a university, may begin involvements never before thought worthy of action. The adolescent, in his middle years a jumble of legs, arms, appetite, vocal chords and activity, may under the influence of a university begin to integrate himself. Although by no means restricted to university life, sexual interests may seek mature expression. Politics may take on new meaning. Political party allegiance, traditional-

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DR. LLOYD P. WILLIAMS (left) is a professor in the College of Education.



ly based on the uncritical emulation of parents, often undergoes change. Realization that the world does not have to be as it is, and the accompanying vision that it can be something different, portends permanent change in both thought and action. The emergence of a critical perspective on previously taken-for-granted political and economic theories frequently frightens parents, but should be interpreted as a forerunner of adulthood. In short, to take ideas seriously means that all the old mores, principles, standards and ideals comprising the psychological environment of youth must stand the scrutiny of a mind that is achieving independence. When this happens, some idols inevitably fall.

*A university education entails a third risk, learning to think and to behave like an adult.* Genuine adulthood means self-discipline. The person who achieves adulthood no longer needs the directive admonitions of others—parents, teachers, policemen—to show him what to do and what not to do. His behavior is steadily becoming more purposeful. His personality reflects the democratic spirit. He chooses deliberately and accepts responsibility for his choices. The genuine university insists that its students learn to consider the consequences of their action both for themselves and for society, and that they actively engage their own personal problems and those of society rather than waiting passively like Mr. Micawber for “something to turn up.”

Nothing is more characteristic of an adult than habitual responsibility. To be responsible is to be thoughtful of the future; it means taking nothing for granted; it means demanding evidence to support assertion; it means cultivation of the scientific habit of mind; it means the contemplation of the consequences of choice. To live in the university is to live in a world in which these demands are relentlessly imposed upon the reluctant young. The only escape is to leave the university.

*A university education entails a fourth risk, freedom—freedom in thought, freedom in behavior, freedom in experimenting with life in its many phases.* By and large, the culture of American adolescents is not conducive to the responsible use of freedom. When it is suddenly thrust upon them in a genuine university, the dangers are very real. It is a foolish adult who does not understand that freedom imperils life, health and moral well-being. Equally imperiled, when students are in their first stages of freedom, are the juvenile attachments and the whole range of ritualistic and paternalistically induced responses to life. All those orthodoxies so carefully nurtured from infancy become candidates for critical examination. This is inherently so, for a genuine university encourages critical evaluation even though it may be wrong. Only by running the risk of being wrong can self-reliance be taught.

**T**O BE FREE is to be exposed to reality; to be exposed to reality is to be in danger. No authentic life can be lived without danger, although, of course, it does not follow that one should court danger unnecessarily. Life cannot be lived in a vacuum and the schools and universities of the country, if they perform their functions, provide that training ground for the recognition and acceptance of reality. Even though life in the university is considerably less dangerous than life generally, it carries with it increasing opportunities for free choice—and thus

it also carries with it the enhanced possibilities of error, mistake and immorality.

*A university education entails one final risk, exposure to greatness—greatness not only in ideas, but also in books, teachers and companions.* Great ideas lurk everywhere in a university. Great books are legion. In a genuine university students may stumble into provocative authors even if professors fail to assign them. Intellectual excitement is couched on every shelf in the library. By accident or design the student may discover Edward Gibbon. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* may become more than just another assignment in history; the students may see it for what it is—a laboratory where in classic prose men and motives are dissected with awesome finesse and objectivity. The elegant style of Macaulay, as he depicts the character of Lord Clive, shows what a truly great command of language can mean. The dramatic power of Plato, through the inspiration of Socrates' refusal to kowtow to the ignorant, may inspire a determination to be courageous and free. Written in a tent by candle light on the banks of the Danube, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* reveals the personality of one of the few men entitled to be called good. Freud may reveal to the student the complex nature of man's unconscious. In David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* students may find the answer to their religious quest—although it will not be what was prescribed in the hometown parsonage. By reading Locke's *Letter on Toleration* their contempt for other religions may yield to kindly accommodation. Should they encounter Frederick Schuman's *International Politics* they may rethink America's position in world affairs. Or should students meet Bertrand Russell or Albert Einstein in either of their little books on *Relativity* parochial interpretation of the world phenomena will rapidly yield to sophistication. The list is limitless. But of one thing we may be sure: university students who encounter great books will never be the same again, although in what ways they shall be different no one can predict with certainty.

Exposure to great teaching is a strong probability in any true university. There is, however, no connection between subjects and greatness, for this prized quality is the product of a particular kind of mind and personality. It comes out in unexpected times and unexpected places. No one can tell when great teachers will appear, and no one can tell for sure who will appear great to whom, but appear and inspire they will.

When reduced to a generalization, the justification for a university education is the enhanced quality of the person and the enrichment of civilization. Those who run the risks of a university education are better human beings and better citizens for having done so. They will better know what they believe and why. Their minds and personalities may become the finest fruits of a free education in a free society. If so, totalitarianism they see as a deception; racial prejudice they see as folly; democracy with all its faults they see as the most reasonable form of social organization; and reliance upon intelligence rather than upon force they see as the most fruitful means for solving our human problems. Although it does so quietly, the genuine university conducts, as Thomas Jefferson enjoined, a crusade against ignorance. The reflective know a crusade always involves risks.

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