

The Liberal Arts Course at Illinois

THE essential function of higher education is to discover and train men and women of superior natural endowments for the general enrichment of society. At present there is great educational waste in the training of men and women whose natural endowments are inferior. There is also a great educational waste due to the failure of educators to organize the miscellaneous powers of the good student vigorously around his main talent and master passion. All students who are worth any consideration nowadays go to college with a desire to discover their own powers and a vital connection between them and the needs of the age. Every student who can really be called "promising" looks forward to some kind of career. Every student who gets what he comes after finds himself summoned at some point in his course to an "austere and serious girding of the loins." Somewhere in his course, whether it be in engineering or in the social sciences or in general literature, he must catch the eagerness, the drive, the persistence, the firm linking of one day's work to the next, which characterize the best professional schools.

Those of us who were bred in what old alumni still piously and fondly and a bit hypocritically call "cultural" colleges, have been too much afraid of the professional spirit and the professional ambition, which after all is only a man's fully awakened passion to become what he is, to do effectively what he can do best, to serve the world skillfully with whatever talent he has of whatever sort. In the end, the only other choice is dilettantism and graceful futility. I incline, at any rate, to believe that a properly elevated and well-directed professional ambition is about the most valuable passion, nowadays, that can be imparted to the average boy in college. It is like a love affair in the way it lights up and vitalizes for him what was previously dull and inert. It is like religion in the way it preserves him from dissipation and trifling. It is the greatest unused educational resource in the "liberal arts" college.

In the state universities, the college of liberal arts has been driven to a relatively early scrutiny of its own purpose by the hard and close competition of schools and colleges which are avowedly professional. In the first two years, furthermore, it provides instruction in English, foreign languages, mathematics and other sciences for students who are registered in other colleges and whose last two years will be devoted pretty exclusively to professional studies. What its own purpose is in the last two years with its own students is a question natural in the circumstances—a question recurrently raised with some anxiety by its friends, with some superciliousness by others. Obviously students of the liberal arts are for the most part no better able to afford the luxury of four years of "general culture" than students of engineering or commerce. As a matter of fact, not yet fully recognized, the last two years of the liberal arts college are for the greater number of the more serious students a more or less loosely organized professional training or preparation for professional training. It is a loosely organized training for careers in teaching, public service, literature and all kinds of unclassified vocations. As soon as some capable person has organized a group of liberal arts courses so that they educationally cohere and lead to something, the tendency is to cut them out of the liberal arts college and give them an independent establishment in a College of Commerce, or College of Journalism, with

the implication that the remaining courses lead to nothing.

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois officially admits, however, a three-fold purpose, including the provision of a "liberal education," preparation for "later professional and technical studies," and the provision of certain highly specialized curricula in applied sciences, journalism and home economics. The "machinery" for accomplishing its purpose appears to me to be devised with a good deal of ingenuity and to work fairly well. It consists, first of "group requirements," to insure proper distribution of studies and, second, of the requirement of major and minor subjects, to insure proper concentration. The first requirement, which is supposed to provide the elements of a liberal education, is that every student must elect from five to ten hours from each of six groups as follows: English; Foreign Languages; History, Political and Social Science; Mathematics, Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry; Botany, Geology, Zoology, etc.; Education, Philosophy and Psychology. The second requirement, which provides the "professional" element, is that every student must elect a minimum of twenty hours in his major subject and twenty hours more from a group designated by the major department as minor subjects.

Under this system, ideally functioning, the student would spend the better part of his first two years with his "liberalizing" studies and the better part of his last two years with his professional training—though the contrast is misleading. Its conspicuous merit is that it combines a large freedom of election with a large amount of general guidance. No educational machinery, however, is loafer-proof. And under this system the loafer can, by the skilful use of his one talent, get through with little more than the first elements, "working off," as he says, his group requirements as the penalties for going to college, fulfilling his major and minor requirements with the minimum of the most elementary courses available in the least guarded department and filling up his program with miscellaneous "sight-seeing" electives. His way could be made harder by more extensive and more rigid specification of related subjects to be involved in the choice of his major subject.

This more extensive specification of related subjects would have the additional virtue of checking the tendency of the serious student towards too early specialization. Specialization is too early when it takes place before the student has a well-grounded sense of the interrelations of knowledge. It is usually due, one must admit, to that professional zeal which I have been commending. But it is due to a short-sighted zeal. At the present time the most serious deficiency in our "young men and women of superior natural endowments" who after a college course present themselves for advanced training in the graduate schools is seldom in what we call their "major field." It is rather in the "instrumental" knowledge of languages, in acquaintance with ancillary sciences and related literatures. It is frequently a deficiency so extensive as to disqualify them for their chosen profession. It is frequently a deficiency so serious that nothing less than a liberal education can repair it! If they could have gone through the languorous processes of liberalizing their minds with a lively sense that they were leading to the main business of their lives, how differently they would have ordered their steps.

STUART P. SHERMAN.

General Honors at Columbia

IN Columbia College, as elsewhere, the advantages of the elective system have been somewhat offset by the loss of intellectual tradition from college life—by the disappearance of any body of knowledge with which all the students are familiar and all the alumni once were. Some extremists consider the loss of any tradition as a gain; on that score they have no complaint to make of the elective system. But even they may regret the passing of common intellectual interests. Scholarship in a state of isolation is a pretty thin career, and that is about all our social-minded age offers even to those college boys whose disposition is toward scholarship. In the days of required courses the undergraduates attacked their problems together as they went from class to class; Brown sat next to Burns, Smith next to Smithers in Greek at nine o'clock, Trig. at ten, History at eleven. They may have grumbled at the excessive symmetry in their lives, but what they knew of the classics, of mathematics, of history, they knew together; not only their sports, their dormitories, their meals, but also the adventures of the mind, were experiences to be shared by all, and the college gave them the ability to think and talk in one intellectual world, such as it was. The intellectual world may not have been the best possible, but nothing could have been better than the way they shared it.

The elective system offers a superior world, but only the individual enters it; the college boy no longer takes up a subject as though his neighbors knew all about it, but rather as though it were a little discovery or whim of his own. In one classroom he sits next to Brown; the next hour he finds himself next to Jones; the third hour he is next to Smith. When he meets Brown, he could of course discuss the first-hour subject with him, the second-hour subject with Jones, the third-hour subject with Smith; but the effort is too great for the normal boy, so he discusses something they all have in common, something they still have as a tradition—girls or athletics or compulsory chapel. These may not be the subjects nearest their hearts, but since man, to talk with any satisfaction, must be understood, they avoid their specialty and stick to what they all can understand. Their serious studies are not social but private; herded together in all other pursuits, they cultivate the mind like the scholars of the old régime in China, each in his separate cell.

When America entered the war, the Faculty of Columbia College had just adopted a plan to offset this centrifugal tendency in the elective system. Granting that there was some virtue in keeping a body of students together in common studies, they agreed to offer a two-year course so comprehensive in its scope as to occupy a large part of the student's attention. While the course was in the experimental stage, it was to be elective. Any student could drop out, or be dropped, for cause, but no student could enter it except at the beginning with the group who would be his companions through the two years. With this first principle agreed to, the Faculty discussed the content of the course. It is sometimes said that the old-fashioned gentleman, in contrast with the modern college graduate, had read all or most of the great books of the world. The statement is probably exaggerated, but there would be no great difficulty in reading all the great books at least once within a reasonable period of time, provided we read none but the truly great books. After some heated argument as to which were the great books, the Faculty agreed on a list of some fifty or sixty, from Homer to William James,

masterpieces in all fields—literature, economics, science, philosophy, history—with the general purpose that students in the new course should read one of these books each college week for two years.

The war postponed the plan, but it went into operation in the autumn of 1920 under the name of General Honors. The students who elect General Honors meet with a group of instructors every Wednesday evening for two hours, sometimes much longer, to talk over the book of the week—the *Divine Comedy* or the *Wealth of Nations* or the *Origin of Species*. Much of the reading is done in the preceding summer vacation, but the student must be ready to discuss it with at least as much precision of reference as he would discuss a novel he had recently read. One instructor leads the discussion, which soon becomes a genuine give-and-take between him and his colleagues as well as between instructors and students. At the end of each term the examination is held in the college library, where the students are encouraged to use all the books they know anything about, and they have four hours in which to compose an essay on some assigned topic suggested by the discussions of the term. At the end of the first year the honor students are promoted in a body to the second year's reading, and the incoming students start at the beginning, in a group of their own. The General Honors course is open to Juniors and Seniors. It is elected in the current year by over a hundred students, and it seems likely to succeed in its purpose, so far as it reaches the college body; already those who have taken it are conscious of an intellectual life in common. Those of us who are unregenerate in the modern world of education think that no great failure would follow any study done in common—certainly not if the study is devoted to the masterpieces of the race.

Immediately after the war the Faculty of Columbia College set up also a compulsory course in Contemporary Civilization, which is now the backbone of the Freshman year and which serves in a remarkable way to give the students a common intellectual world. The course was a natural outgrowth of the studies in the Causes of the War, which were improvised in our colleges for the use of the Students Army Training Corps. After the peace it was inevitable that similar enquiries should be made, though with no sinister prejudice, into the causes of contemporary civilization. The course at Columbia is given by instructors from the departments of Philosophy, History, Economics and the allied social sciences. The purpose, says the catalogue, is "to give the student early in his college course objective material on which to base his own farther studies," but the effect is much more—it is to give the students as a body a wealth of ideas and suggestions which they can and do talk about as about any other interest that might be alive in a human society.

The importance of these two courses in the eyes of the Faculty is shown by the place they occupy in the college catalogue at the head of the other required and elective studies. The instructors who take part in either course testify to their own profit from the experiment. They meet weekly or monthly to discuss the material for the next recitations or to prepare themselves in some other way for the work; for under the elective system teaching may be as narrowing as studying, and to inculcate a social interest in knowledge a teacher must first cultivate it in himself.

JOHN ERSKINE.