

DEMOCRACY and the CURRICULUM

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Universities around the country are now engaged in heated controversy over two kinds of issue, often confused. The first is *substantive*—what requirements, if any, should be imposed for a B.A.; should a program of black studies be initiated, and how; in what form are examinations and grades to be used, if at all; and who among the faculty are to be fired, promoted, given tenure and so on. The second deals with *procedural* matters—how decisions on curricular and related matters are to be reached. Both kinds of issue are important, but the latter is fundamental. Leaving the many substantive questions (which vary from institution to institution) for the present, I shall here propose some principles for the resolution of procedural conflicts. Within a university, what are the appropriate decision-making processes for curricular affairs?

I begin with two assumptions that I think will be universally—or almost universally—accepted. The first is that, where the conditions of its successful operation are met, democracy is the best form of community government. I believe that very strongly, and I am prepared to defend democracy with rational arguments against its critics, both historical and contemporary. But, though we may differ on what conditions its success does require, it is likely that most members of most American universities will agree upon the ideal.

The second assumption is that all parties to the current controversy over curricular matters are acting honestly and in good faith. I believe that to be true. Some students appear to think that faculty judgments are masks for private interest; some faculty do think that student arguments opposing them are duplicitous in the same way. Perhaps there is some justice in both complaints; but by far the greater number, among students, faculty and administra-

tors, are genuinely seeking the best interests of their university. I shall assume that, and with such persons shall direct my attention to procedural questions of great consequence to the long-term well-being of our universities.

Democracy is a way of making decisions in a community. It gives to each member of the community the right to an equal voice in affairs that concern the whole. We are disposed by habit to think of democracy as a way of governing political communities, because that is where its results are most impressive, its absence most painful. But it can also apply to nonpolitical communities: a church congregation, the faculty of a college, a community chess club, a cooperative residence hall, many other kinds of community.

Among the host of issues which the practice of democracy presents in every context (most of which I cannot touch upon here) two points need to be emphasized:

(1) Democracy can operate only where there is a specifiable and self-conscious community of some kind. It must be clear who has the right to participate in deciding what affairs. That is one reason why citizenship is so important for a democratic polity or initiation for a fraternity, or membership for whatever community is in question.

(2) Democracy supposes that all members of the community in which it is operative are members *equally*. The equal voice of each member stems not merely from his serious concern in the outcome of a decision but from the equality of status within it. All citizens of a democratic nation are citizens equally, though some may be wiser than others; all members of a chess club are members equally, though some may play far more expertly than others. Wisdom in the polity and skill in the chess club may be grounds for respect; they do not justify greater decision-making powers for their possessors.

This far I think all can agree, but how does all this ap-

ply to the university? The university is not one community but many. There are the communities constituted by all undergraduate students, by all graduate students, and by all students. There are the communities constituted by the faculties of the several schools and colleges, by the several departments and institutes, and by the faculty as a whole. There are the communities constituted by groups—of both faculty and students—having special intellectual or aesthetic interests in common; dramatic societies for example, or philosophical discussion groups. There are the many residential communities of students, in the dormitories, cooperatives, etc., and some communities of combined residential-intellectual concern. There is also the greater community of the university at large. It would be hard to exhaust the list.

Probably everyone will agree that each of these communities ought to have the authority and power to decide the questions which are chiefly its business; and that within each community of equals those decisions ought to be arrived at democratically. The basic controversy in which our universities are now engaged (and are likely to be engaged for some time) arises in deciding which issues are the chief business of which communities.

This is not a simple matter, and anyone who supposes that simple answers can be given is being, literally, simple-minded. It is clear at the outset that the several communities in the university overlap, and that what is chiefly the business of one of them is also a matter of real concern to other, larger communities. Practically everyone in a university, and many outside it, are affected, more or less seriously, by the decisions of all or almost all of these internal communities. Whether, as an illustration, a colleague whom I respect and like is or is not given tenure in a department other than mine is a matter of deep concern to me. But my concern does not give me a right to participate in the decision. Tenure, in our healthy tradition, is bestowed by academic peers, persons qualified by long study and experience in that professional sphere. It is naive, in some circumstances dangerous to the well-being of the larger community, to insist that every person has a right to a decision-making voice in every affair that affects his life. That is a shallow view of democracy, and it is false.

More specifically, we are now deeply involved in questions regarding the curriculum of our colleges and universities. Whose chief business is it to make decisions in this sphere? I argue that it is the chief business of the community constituted by the faculty of the college in question. I believe that curricular decisions—say about requirements for degrees, standards and examinations—should be made democratically within the community responsible for the outcome of those decisions. I could defend this claim at great length. Briefly, I suggest two kinds of reasons why the responsibility lies there and not elsewhere.

First, the nature of the university as an institution places certain obligations upon the faculty which they can fulfill only if they control the curriculum. Faculty members are appointed to teach, to guide student study and research, and to do so in ways for which they are specially qualified.

Further, the faculty has a certifying duty. Through boards of governors and deans the faculty ultimately must decide whether certain students are to receive the degree Bachelor of Arts, or other such certificates. If they are to make this decision, and if they are to mean what they intend to mean by doing so, *they* must decide what will qualify persons for the receipt of such degrees. They cannot delegate that power, or share it, any more than an attorney or a physician can delegate or share the power to make his professional decisions (except on occasion with other attorneys or physicians). Will we not agree that the decisions faced by the professor in the arts and sciences, the challenges faced by a professional educator, are as demanding, as intellectual, as professionally serious as those encountered in medicine or the law? Designing the curriculum, implementing it, evaluating the work of those students who pursue it, are all very important parts of the job of the faculty. It is quite understandable that students who are affected by such decisions would like to share in making them, but that desire does not give them a right to do so. Certainly they should not hope to get that right as a consequence of any reputable democratic theory. This factor of institutional responsibility I find compelling by itself.

Second, beyond the matter of responsibility, is the factor of competence. This is a delicate point, one upon which I know many good students are sensitive, and I want very much not to be misunderstood here. I believe it is possible to characterize groups—statistically, as it were—as having (or tending to have) certain talents or training, without making the ensuing distinctions invidiously. No doubt there are some matters on which students, as a body, are more competent than faculty; on other matters the faculty, as a body, is markedly more able and better prepared to act than are students. Among the latter are curricular affairs. I respect the integrity and intellect of my students. I am often proud of them; I know that a number of them will one day join the faculty of my own or like institutions. But false flattery is good for no one, and it is false flattery to refuse to make some discriminations that need to be made in this connection. To say that the faculty is the group most likely to reach wise curricular decisions is not meant offensively, or pejoratively, or condescendingly. It is plain honesty, the honesty we owe one another.

Curricular decisions are difficult. They have wide ramifications, for students (past, present and future), for the faculty itself (what they will teach, and how), for the secondary schools, for the graduate schools, for other universities, and for the society as a whole. It is hard to weigh all these factors fairly, and no person or body can be expected to do so perfectly. Corrections and adjustments will always be in order. But in a university there is no body more to be relied upon for the making of such decisions than the faculty itself. I emphasize again that this is not to express distrust or contempt for students, who are, in my view, for the most part serious, highly intelligent, and devoted to their university. The greater competence of the faculty in this sphere is largely a matter of education and experience. That does not mean the faculty is exempt from error. On the topics now hotly contested in some universities, they may well be in error. But our larger concern is how, over the long run, these decisions



are likely to be best made. Careful reflection obliges me to conclude that entrusting those decisions to a body partly consisting of persons with a far smaller degree of experience and knowledge on the matters to be decided is simply foolish. It is not democracy but an unthinking Populism that supposes all persons, or all students, to be as competent to decide professional questions as persons who have devoted much of their lives to those very questions.

To this it is sometimes replied that students are lower in competence in this sphere simply because they are effectively kept from engaging in the very activities which develop this competence—so that the argument against student voting power is here viciously circular. I would respond first that a denial of the right to vote on these matters is not a denial of the right to participate vigorously in the deliberations upon them. But second, and more important, the criticism misses the force of my argument. The competence of which I have spoken is not simply a skill, to be developed with a few weeks or months of practice or experience. It is a competence flowing from long study, long association with liberally educated men, and long reflection upon the goals, methods and substance of university education. That competence is an essential element of the excellence of a faculty, in which the entire community takes pride. Is this character of the faculty something that serious students would really want to deny?

I find also the factor of competence by itself entirely persuasive in this argument. Unlike institutional responsibility, it does not speak to the question of the rights of respective bodies but to the wisdom of entrusting certain tasks to certain bodies. Taken together, the two factors of competence and institutional responsibility are overwhelming in their force.

Still, the demand of some students for a role in curricular decision making does have some plausibility. Can we do justice to that demand, while adhering to the conclusions reached above? I think we can.

First, a clarification. Part of the plausibility of some

student demands rests upon a confusion over the nature of the larger community in which the decisions are being made. There *is* a community consisting of both faculty and students, having the pursuit of learning as its central purpose; my students and I are bound together in an enterprise that marks us off from much of the rest of the world, and often brings us very close together. The university as a community of scholars *is* an honorable and appropriate ideal. But it is slipshod thinking to infer from the existence of this community that every decision having wide effect within it must be shared equally and universally by its members. Both students and faculty are members of the university community, to be sure, but they are not members of the same kind or status. In the nature of the case they cannot be members equal in every way. This is not paternalism; it is a fact, and one in which the serious student will take pride. His faculty has been carefully selected, screened, tested, in a host of ways, over a period of many years. The qualifications required of the faculty member for membership in the university, his authorization to participate, come from a wholly different source in a wholly different way from those of the student. To suppose that enrollment as a student, after completing high school, entitles one to a role on professional issues similar to that of the faculty is downright foolish.

On the other side, there are two respects in which the student quest for a voice in university affairs is entirely just. First, where the questions to be decided are not professional but concern every member of the community in the same way; or where they concern the rights of individuals to pursue their private business—questions, say, regarding the driving of automobiles on campus, or regarding the private lives of students or faculty—student voices are every bit the equal of faculty voices. In my view, our universities have been much too slow to recognize this, but in this area we are changing rapidly for the better. It is not the university's business how a student dresses, or whom he entertains in his room, or how; any more than it is the business of the high school how a student wears his hair. Students and faculty both are right in demanding control over what are chiefly their own affairs.

The second point is that students do have a major role in making curricular decisions. Their role is a key one because the curriculum is designed, not by them but for their use and benefit. Their voices must be heard, and their views should have a real effect upon the decisions made. The information students can provide, their judgments on how curricular matters have been and are being handled, can come from no other source. Their participation is vitally important.

But there is an important difference between having a role in the ongoing debate, and having part of the decision-making power. The students are the ones to whom the requirements and examinations and other such matters must apply. It is inevitable that in some cases these applications will result in disappointment or unhappiness. It is therefore inappropriate and unwise to make any student representative responsible for helping to determine these standards. He cannot avoid being utterly compromised when put in such a position.

When student decision-making power begins to operate

in this sphere, the academic rigor of the institution is seriously threatened. A great deal of experience in this and other countries, attests to the accuracy of this warning. I have taught in several Latin American universities; I do not wish to denigrate them or their students, who evince more social responsibility than most other elements in their communities. But student power over purely curricular affairs has resulted there, as it may here, in a corruption of the appropriate intellectual relations of students and faculty. The focus of university affairs shifts from learning to intramural politics. Students play an increasingly larger role in the hiring and promotion of staff. Standards drop. I dread all that. I used to think that the analogy between these universities and ours was unrealistic; after reflecting upon recent events on my own and other American campuses, I am convinced that we are subject to what is essentially the same deterioration. The only way to avoid it is to develop rational principles for decision making in curricular (and similar) affairs, and stick to them. [See "The Yanqui University: Ships That Pass in the Night" by Ronald Hilton, *The Nation*, August 28, 1967.]

What then is the proper course? Specifically, I urge that students be given a full and genuine opportunity to present their views on curricular matters as forcefully and as rationally as possible. Along with this is the need for a rapid increase in the sensitivity and responsiveness of the entire university community to the needs and interests of students. How develop that responsiveness? We must work on two fronts. On the formal side, we must open up new channels for representative student participation in policy-making committees, both on college and departmental levels. Here it is important not only that faculty have an opportunity to hear student opinions and judgments but that such student spokesmen be genuinely representative of, and responsive to, their student constituencies. In this area it seems clear that good progress is being made. Perhaps even more important than these formal channels, however, are the informal patterns of student influence on academic matters. Here the problem is more severe, because the great size of our universities makes very difficult a comfortable, easy and effective communication between students and faculty. We must think hard about the redesign of our institutional structure into units with which students can identify themselves more closely—the Residential College at the University of Michigan is one good example—and in which their direct, informal participation can have appropriate influence.

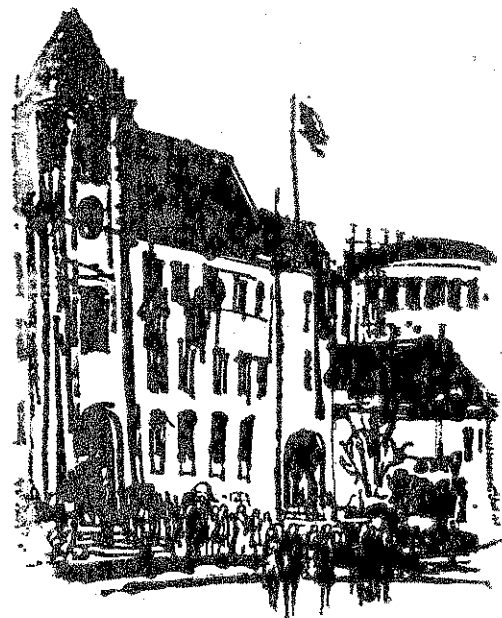
But I also urge that the hard decisions on curricular design and requirements remain entirely in the hands of the faculty. This means, bluntly, that in resolving such matters student representatives ought not to have a vote, either in the faculty as a body, or in the curriculum committees which investigate for the faculty, deliberate as an arm of the faculty, and make recommendations to it.

One proposal that is frequently made must be rejected. It is that, to reduce the present tension, students be given two or three votes on certain key committees of the faculty or administration. This is only to throw the students a bone; it will irritate, frustrate, and do no good. In the first

place, it is a mistake to vest such power in student members of committees with the thought that the faculty retains the right of review, because the faculty as a whole is not in a position to redo the work of its committees, and is obliged to rely upon them heavily. A committee of the faculty is its instrument and should represent it. Other interested parties must be heard, but neither justice nor wisdom requires their enfranchisement. In the second place, those who seek student control in this sphere will not be appeased. If they are right in principle, two or three votes are not enough; they ought then to have at least half the votes, probably two-thirds or three-fourths of them. After all, there are more of them and they are likely to be more directly affected by particular decisions than the faculty members who make them. We must reject on rational grounds the principle that simply being affected by a decision necessarily entitles one to a voice in making it. We must look to the proper business of our several overlapping communities.

If I am accused of undue conservatism, I would note that the long years of academic tradition in our universities, their respect for books and ideas, their intellectual standards, deserve very much to be conserved. Many things need to be changed in our universities and many more in our society. But it doesn't follow that everything needs to be thrown out.

A further dimension of the entire issue of decision making in the university has been too little appreciated on our campuses recently. A historical reminder is in order. American universities have long fought the battle against special-interest groups—the American Legion and others similarly well intentioned—that have sought to impose curricular requirements from without. Courses in American history, anti-communism and others, have been strongly urged as statutory requirements for university degrees. With some difficulty such pressures have, for the most part, been successfully resisted on the solid ground that degree requirements and like matters are professional



affairs, the proper province of the faculty, not the general public, even though the public is affected by the decisions made.

If this principle be given up in the present disputes, universities—especially public universities—will be subject once again to a barrage of demands for curricular changes by nonprofessional groups which have strong convictions, some articulate support, and are genuinely affected by the outcome. The intellectual strength and independence of our universities will be threatened from without.

It is true, of course, that student demands for voting power are within the university, not outside it. But students are surely no more qualified than alumni in these affairs, or than graduates of other institutions who happen to hold political power. If the principle be now accepted that simply being affected by a decision gives one a right to help make it, the American university will suffer a series of major defeats. The result will not only be the wrongful subjection of the university to political pressure, and the weakening of its intellectual stance; it will tend, as well, to work directly against such wholesome progress as our student critics now seek.

In the interests of the universities as independent institutions, as well as the interests of its several members, it is important that faculty responsibilities be clearly recognized and firmly fulfilled.

Three final comments. First: Note that I have said nothing about the wisdom of specific curricular arrangements now in force, or of the changes in them that have been proposed. I am chiefly concerned here with how we ought to make the decisions on these matters. I hope that those who disagree with me will share my concern that we distinguish these questions, for the sake of intellectual clarity.

Second: My own view is that important decisions in a university, including those regarding curriculum, should be made, to the greatest extent feasible, democratically. Perhaps I am wrong in my understanding of democracy; but I earnestly hope that all those, students and faculty who share the democratic ideal, will do it the honor of reflecting carefully upon its proper application. Let us not be guilty of cheapening our own ideals with careless rhetoric, as so many of our political leaders have so frequently done to our distress and shame.

Third: Even if agreement on these matters is not reached, now or soon, I repeat my conviction that the vast majority of the participants in the ongoing debate are serious and honest. That seriousness and honesty can best be recognized and made effective in a context in which all of the arguments on all sides are carefully heard and weighed, composure and rationality maintained, threats avoided. That, as J. S. Mill remarked, is the real morality of public discussion. I urge that it be respected.