

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 1 | Issue 4

Article 7

1931

Too Much Tradition

E. H. Shaffer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Shaffer, E. H.. "Too Much Tradition." *New Mexico Quarterly* 1, 4 (1931). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol1/iss4/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Too Much Tradition

By E. H. SHAFFER

COLLEGE tradition is the sentimentality that encourages the student of today to continue the imbecilities of yesterday.

College tradition, perhaps the most sacred thing about an institution of higher learning, lends sanctity to the trivial, the non-essential.

I know of no college in the United States that grimly upholds the tradition that every student shall learn something.

I can recall holy collegiate injunctions that men do not have dates at football games, that they do not smoke on the campus, that they raise their hats to prexy and commit other absurdities.

There is the universal and pious doctrine that first-year students must be humiliated. It is ordained that second-year students, those who have just learned how to sneer at the professors, shall be in charge of mortifications.

Sophomores are equipped neither by age, experience, sophistication, nor wisdom to levy even amusing tribute from boys a year younger. Sophomores are at the robustly callow age of life. They have just learned to find their way about without knowing where they are going. They lack both intuition and judgment. Yet this crew of irresponsibles is permitted, year after year in every college in the land, to discourage young boys who might otherwise get a valid idea of the reason for colleges.

The freshman is the most important unit in college life. He is comparatively unspoiled. Left alone he might become a student. He might acquire information and culture. He might justify America's enormous annual expenditure for higher education.

The freshman enters bewildered. He is sufficiently frightened to take stock of his surroundings. He is not offensively sophisticate. He can still be told things.

The professors, for the most part, shamefully abdicate their offices and permit the unbalanced sophomore to discourage, humiliate, and debase the young fellow who with proper encouragement might have become sincere.

The inane freshman cap becomes the most important feature of first-year college life. Many a sober young fellow, eager to know, when confronted with this undignified and silly tradition has said "Oh hell" and quietly chucked the whole childish business.

The freshman cap is neither presumptive nor humorous. It is simply silly. The freshman cap is a definitely juvenile manifestation, sadly significant of American college life.

Some day, somewhere, we hope to read about a freshman class with the initiative and courage to put an end to the freshman cap nuisance.

Such a class of geniuses will resolve about as follows:

"We, the freshman class of Podunk, recognize that in collegiate experience we are children. Nevertheless we must decline to submit to the ultra-childish horseplay of our immediate seniors by wearing an outlandish uniform.

"We have entered Podunk to acquire knowledge, to steep ourselves in the lore of the past, to fit ourselves for the emergencies of the future. We must decline to conform to the juvenile indignities that appeal to the sophomoric mind as the only method of distinguishing us from upper classmen."

On the day that a first-year class firmly takes this position, American colleges will have begun to develop culturally. We can then begin to expect something from college graduates. We can then start hoping that a college degree means knowledge and breadth of mind rather than 128 hours of credit.

Such a Homeric stand by any freshman class will be impossible so long as the college elders continue to countenance passively the immature horseplay that mocks their efforts to impose the standards of maturity on college life.

American colleges should commence inspecting and overhauling their traditions. Ninety-nine per cent of them are fit only for kindergarten intelligences. Most of them are neither sensible nor romantic. Not one out of fifteen can be observed without raising a snicker for the man or woman with ordinary gumption.

And the person with intelligence enough to grin at an amusing tradition will most likely be blanketed by a set of muscular fellows without brain tissue.

And that situation checks the problem back to the question of campus sense. It calls attention to the tragic lack of mental maturity. The American campus, concerned with its trivial traditions, is far from adult. The campus is too often a mental nursery. For a student to show interest in his studies, for him to reason and think maturely is quite likely to set him apart as a pariah. Such a one encounters the devastating contempt of empty but influential colleagues.

I do not know how much blame to assign to the administrations and faculties for this condition. I doubt if they are greatly at fault. I think probably the adults about a college are helpless in the sea of immaturity in which they are marooned. But so long as they do not help raise a challenge to the childish college traditions that have continued through the years, they can expect no improvement.

The earnest need of higher education in America is that it grow up. Until American colleges become reasonably adult in their efforts and their outlook they will not take their proper place in American life. And American colleges will not shed their diapers until they throw overboard many of the puerile customs called tradition.