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Individuals and the society they live in are a great part of what the educational enterprise is all about.

The idea of a university: Some philosophic implications for the community-junior college

by Thomas Dale Watts

Unquestionably, Newman's *The Idea of a University*, published in the mid-nineteenth century, endures to this day as the truly classic statement of a great intellect on higher education. Fergal McGrath has written of it as an "inspiring effort of a great mind to establish a perfect synthesis of the puzzling pattern of human existence, and to honour it as an ennoblement of the concept of man's destiny."¹ George Shuster aptly characterized the influence of the book in remarking that it has done more than any other to stimulate reflection on the character and aims of higher education.

A modern-day twentieth century equivalent of Newman can be found in the writings of Robert Maynard Hutchins. Both Newman and Hutchins are members of a school of educational philosophy that William E. Drake has referred to as the "perennialist" school.² Can the classic erudition of Newman, the contemporary brilliance of Hutchins, the traditional, time-worn values and principles of the perennialist be applied with any degree of relevance or success to the relatively recent and burgeoning phenomenon that is the community-junior college movement? The underlying premise of this essay is that philosophers of education who have addressed themselves to the great philosophical issues concerning the purpose

of the university and of education can have a great deal to say of relevance to the community-junior college movement. Certainly, if the university can be scrutinized philosophically with as much vigor and perseverance as it has, and hopefully profited therefrom as a result of that continuing criticism, then most assuredly the community-junior college can also be profitably and fruitfully considered as a fit subject for philosophical evaluation. By philosophical evaluation or scrutiny here I mean to imply objectives, goals, values as understood in relation to what kind of person the community-junior college ought to produce, as opposed to merely summarily devising means of producing them.

With the premises of this essay already submitted, perhaps the prejudices of the essayist should rightly be brought to the fore: I am concerned that the community-junior college movement has been so oriented to the practical, to producing good technicians, that it has to a great degree lost sight of a historic liberal arts tradition, of the historic ideals proposed and developed by the perennialists and by others. Clifton Fadiman has observed that the controversies in education today are similar to disputes in other vital areas in our society in that they center basically upon issues which are philosophical in nature. "One's attitude toward the proposals made concerning present-day education depends on one's conception of man. It depends on one's view of his nature, his powers and his reason for existence."³

The community-junior college is not a university. But it is a member in good standing of the higher education community. Some observers such as B. Lamar Johnson have through the years made allusions to the community-junior college being too closely identified with the higher education university model.⁴ But Robert Maynard Hutchins, afore-mentioned as one of the most perceptive critics of modern-day education, lumps both universities and community-junior colleges in the same vocationalistic bag and argues that both are guilty of the same fallacies, both are too closely tied in with the "primary conditions" of society as opposed to a need for a broader, more rational consideration of the eternal needs of people. "The tendencies all over the world," Hutchins states, "suggests that the university will cease to be an autonomous intellectual community, a center of independent thought and criticism, and will become a nationalized industry."⁵ Thus, what Newman warned of in the *Idea of a University* when he spoke forcefully for the university and for higher education as being above and apart from culture, not subservient to or dependent on it, Hutchins subsequently develops as a major theme in his work.

It appears as if the community college has become something of a "service station" to society, just as its parent and godfather, the university, has become. Interestingly, Hutchins notes that a rather lush crop of doubletalk has developed, with many an apologist having no difficulty saying that a community college or university must at the same time be a service station for the community and an institution for "higher" learning; classified under the rubric of "higher education." Both community colleges and universities must be focused on the immediate needs of their environment, it is argued, and at the same time engaged in the study of "universally applicable principles or the development of universally valid scholarship."⁶

Newman argues so convincingly here that his words speak for themselves:

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Now observe how this impatience acts in matters of research and speculation. What happens to the ignorant and hotheaded will take place in the case of every person whose education or pursuits are contracted, whether they be merely professional, merely scientific, or of whatever other peculiar complexion. Men whose life lies in the cultivation of one science, or the exercises of one method of thought, have no more right, though they have often more ambition, to generalize upon the basis of their own pursuit but beyond its range, than the schoolboy or the ploughman to judge of a Prime Minister . . . Thus he becomes what is commonly called a man of one idea; which properly means a man of one science, and of the view, partly true, but subordinate, partly false, which is all that can proceed out of anything so partial. . . .⁷

From this, what can one fashion the two-year, terminal, technical training of many community college trained people to be? Are we training a whole plethora of narrowly trained technician specialists—inhalation therapists, library technicians, real estate practice specialists, automotive technologists, etc., who are really, despite perhaps even scattered humanities courses taken during the course of their two-year program, quite ill-equipped to understand, partake of, make reason out of the complex interworkings of the modern society we live in? Are we seeking to achieve a society consisting of great hordes of “technically trained” people, bereft of a broader intellectual background in the liberal arts, a broader vision? What is being said here and the questions being raised have been said in other ways before—by none no less than John Dewey, who argued that education must prepare citizens for living in a democratic society. In order for citizens to understand and participate in democratic society, argues Dewey, citizens must be educated in and of that society. Amazingly, as that very democratic society gets more complex, the junior-community college almost pretends as if that society, that democratic society, did not exist . . . or perhaps we could say the complexity of that society did not exist. A narrow, technical training is stood in stark relief alongside that complex society. Of course many technical training programs include some humanities courses. The question is whether it is really enough. So often, the talk is of “opening lines of communication between the professional staff and the students,”⁸ whereas now “sensory needs take priority over the rational eternal needs of the people.”⁹

When we speak of the rational and eternal needs of the people we mean going beyond the tangible, the immediate moment. It is true that we need more inhalation therapists in hospitals. But perhaps as importantly, and really more so, we need more inhalation therapists who know something of the role of hospitals in the larger society, the ethics of health care, the position of health in the total social fabric, and so on. The inhalation therapist is going to have to know more about the “politics of health care” that is now being spoken of so often. If the student is narrowly trained in a given community college technical education program, there is serious question as to whether he or she is really liberally educated enough to participate in and to understand the complex, dizzyingly abstruse entity that is contemporary society.

The criticism of community college vocationally oriented education (and its counterpart, university vocationally oriented education, which, these critics say, dif-

fers only in kind) has been best voiced throughout the last decades (and before that) by a group of educational philosophers previously referred to in this essay as the “perennialists.” Perennialism is at once a philosophy of education and a philosophy of culture. It is a philosophy of culture that involves protest, protest against some of the main patterns of Western culture as they have been woven since the eighteenth century, especially as it has involved what they regard as an excessive emphasis on science and technology. They agree that there is some justification for assuming that formal education over the past century has improved quantitatively and qualitatively, yet, in spite of these “improvements” the core of our common life does not seem to have improved markedly.¹⁰ This core would include our means of communication, feelings of affection, community undertakings, what we know in common, our shared literary, cultural, philosophical traditions and the like.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, like Newman a member of the perennialist school, and heavily influenced by Newman's thought, expresses well the basic ideas of Newman with many insights of his own in his numerous writings. William E. Drake assesses Hutchins' ideas well:

Hutchins sets forth a comprehensive conception of education based on metaphysical premises concerning man's ‘fixed and essential nature.’ These conceptions, worked out in some detail as the essence of a liberal education, are to determine the nature of the remodeling of our educational institutions—elementary, secondary, and higher . . . Hutchins holds that the university today cannot be a true intellectual center because it is too closely tied up with the primary conditions of our society, conditions such as (1) a false theory of democracy, (2) worship of monetary power, and (3) a materialistic conception of progress. . . .¹¹

A former United States Commissioner of Education once quite laudably noted that: “Increasingly, we are persuaded as a Nation that education is not reserved for youth but is properly a lifelong concern. . . .”¹² It is a truism that in keeping with the tradition of such thinkers as Newman, Hutchins and Lippman, we must yet be concerned with what kind of lifelong education this consists of. Certainly, it must be an education in service of the community; this much Hutchins and most everyone agree on. But what kind of service? What does the community need? Fields has noted that “the community college is committed by philosophy to the specific purposes of serving all members of the community,”¹³ while Medsker says that “it is hardly conceivable that an institution would long remain in a community and not feel the obligation and challenge to perform such services.”¹⁴ Medsker later defines community service as the various special services an educational institution may provide for a community over and beyond formalized classroom instruction.¹⁵

Whereas Hutchins and Newman argue that an institution of higher learning can best serve the community by dealing with “liberal knowledge,”¹⁶ Harlacher goes so far as to say that “the role of a college in providing a special program of community services becomes that of a catalytic force—to supply the leadership, co-ordination and co-operation necessary to stimulate action programs by appropriate individuals and groups within the community.”¹⁷ Those words strike heavy notes with the likes

of the perennialists, not the least when Reynolds argues that "the acceptance of community services as a major function of this truly unique institution of higher education has led to the junior college's identity as a 'community service agency,' "the process of which involves "both college and community resources."¹⁹

What is essentially being argued here is a completely different conception of "service to the community." The perennialists say that an institution can be of more valued service to the community in being intellectually away from that community, looking at it critically, coolly, with detachment.

Of course, the contemporary community college—university advocate argues the reverse, or so it seems. The community college, as the previously aforementioned authors (such as Reynolds, et al) pointed out, should be almost synonymous with, parallel to, linked with and in, the community. The college in the town rightly exists for the town, not the college (which many college administrators of years gone by had to seemingly be constantly reminded of—and nowadays more likely by the cruel hand of finances). Thus, there is the attempt to bring the college into the town, and, more importantly, the town into the college. We are living in pragmatic, empirical, Deweyist North America. What works should be used.

In all of this continuing debate there naturally exists the great danger of polarization. What both sides perhaps are failing to recognize is that there are inherent but not insoluble difficulties on both sides. Perhaps Henderson summarizes it best in his essay in his book *Higher Education: Dimensions and Directions*:

A primary thesis of this analysis is that liberal education should be dynamic rather than passive. A corollary of this is that liberal education should be concerned with the cultural heritage for its value in understanding the present and in developing the future. The full comprehension of civilization will not be found in the seclusion of the ivy-walled campus, nor merely in passively absorbing knowledge . . . the study of theory becomes meaningful in relation to practices. Knowledge becomes more fully assimilated and individual attitudes are changed.²⁰

Certainly it would be difficult to deny the truth of the observation by Dewey that wisdom, and the skills with which to use it constructively, derive from personal experience.²¹ The liberal arts in a community-junior college curriculum must be oriented as much as possible toward the personal experiences and current situations of contemporary students. We would want to avoid a liberal arts education at the community college level that is not truly "liberal." I would favor more basic philosophy courses at the community college level, in that philosophy would tend to encourage the development of a wider, deeper,

more "liberal" liberal arts dimension and tradition. We must attempt to avoid the opposites of the stereotypical effete "English gentleman" liberal arts tradition on the one hand, with all its snobbish, unworldly airs, and on the other hand a highly technically trained robot, unaware of wider culture, on the other. Somewhere there is a middle ground. Society is at stake here, and it is only through the education of free citizens that society is what it is and functions as it functions. How best to improve society is what the educational enterprise is about.

Footnotes

1. Fergal McGrath, *Newman's University: Idea and Reality* (London, 1951), p. 511.
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3. Clifton Fadiman, "Today's Lost Generation," *Saturday Review*, Sept. 12, 1959, p. 13.
4. B. Lamar Johnson, *Islands of Innovation*, Occasional Report Number 6 from UCLA Junior College Leadership Program (Los Angeles: School of Education, UCLA, Mar., 1964), p. 13.
5. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Learning Society* (New York, 1968), p. 119.
6. Harold R.W. Benjamin, *Higher Education in the American Republics* (New York, 1965), p. 207.
7. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Ibid*, p. 108.
8. "Students Talk, Administrators Listen," *NEA Research Bulletin*, March, 1971, p. 16.
9. William E. Drake, *Ibid*, p. 324.
10. Robert Oppenheimer, "Tradition and Discovery," *ACLS Newsletter*, October, 1959, pp. 9-10.
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13. Ralph R. Fields, *The Community College Movement* (New York: McGraw-Hall, 1962), p. 90.
14. Leland L. Medsker, *The Junior College: Progress and Prospect* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p. 83.
15. Medsker, *op cit*, p. 78.
16. Newman, *Ibid*, p. 137.
17. Ervin L. Harlacher, "California's Community Renaissance," *Junior College Journal*, XXXIV (April, 1964), p. 14.
18. James W. Reynolds, *An Analysis of Community Service Programs in Junior Colleges* (Washington: U.S. Office of Education, 1960), p. 9.
19. James W. Reynolds, "Community Services" in Nelson B. Henry, Ed., *The Public Junior College*, 55th Yearbook, National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 142.
20. Algo D. Henderson, "Liberal Education," *Higher Education: Dimensions and Directions* (Tucson, Arizona, 1970), pp. 106-107.
21. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, 1939).