student rights: responsibility demands faith

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In any discussion of student rights and student freedoms, one runs the risk of sacrificing an argument for a cliche. This was the position I found myself in during the recent panel discussions sponsored by the Texas Bill of Rights Foundation and the Southwestern Association of Student Personnel Administrators. For this reason I wish to clarify certain points of my argument that have been misinterpreted in one place or another.

It is my hope that the University will come to play an important role in the development of the whole person, both at the staff and student levels. In assuming this role, the university would do well to accept some fundamental psychological principles.

First, persons participating in the formulation of the rules of society will come to appreciate both the meaning and the role of rules in maintaining order in society. Certain misinterpretations that arise from the request that students be granted more freedoms imply that a society without rules is advocated. This is not the case.

No society can exist without rules. But a society soliciting maximum participation of its members in the formulation of rules would produce a community with maximum respect for its rules.

Every society needs a mechanism to rid itself of bad rules. If the decisions to change rules are made by the society rather than by a few self-appointed guardians of that society, respect for those rules will be maximized.

Bad Rules Make Law-Breakers

Second, bad rules foster disrespect for the whole system of order, including the rules and their enforcement. A bad rule will invariably cause a law-abiding person to become a law-breaker, whereas good rules promote respect for the ordered society.

The best way for students to understand the difference between good and bad rules is to be given the responsibility of formulating rules.

To give students this responsibility requires a good deal of trust on the part of parents, staff, and administrators.

In my opinion the argument is simply this—the prime motive of the police mentality is to protect the good guys from the bad guys. Therefore, rules governing the total society are motivated by an attempt to keep the bad guys—only a small percentage of the total society—in check. Inadvertently these checks also serve to dampen the spirit, freedoms, and curiosity of the rest—the majority.

In contrast, a system of rules designed to permit and promote the expression of potential by the majority would instill respect for order and might inspire on their part a desire on their part to aid in the control of the perverted members of society. A preoccupation with pathological cases diverts concern from the potentiality responsible.

Too Uneducated To Be Educated?

The argument is used that students entering the university are too immature to assume responsibility. One might just as well argue that they are too uneducated to receive an education.

The function of a university is to stimulate the student to acquire an education, and it is very difficult for me to separate the concept of education from that of maturity.

To achieve this goal the faculty and administration of the university must come to grips with the fact that students are concerned with politics, writing, art, sex, alcohol, and dozens of other facets of the world they live in.

To expect maturity and high performance in one of these areas is to forbid participation in others with arbitrary rules, is to incite misbehavior, anarchy, and total disrespect for those in positions of authority.

If we adults think we know what is best for students, the best way to prove it to them is for us to make it work in our own lives rather than to "protect" them with such arbitrary rules.

It requires a certain amount of faith in students to permit them to formulate the rules of their society. Some contend that such permissiveness will bring chaos. I do not believe so.

It is my firm opinion that many of the rules now in existence would be retained—and respected—if the students were permitted to formulate their own rules.

We cannot turn off the responsibility faucet in students during their tenure at the university and expect them, or the commencement speaker, to turn it on the day after graduation.