The quality of freedom is not strained...

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Academic freedom may well be the most significant of liberties. It is virtually impossible to visualize democratic political life in a country without academic freedom. It may even be suspected that when a spark of academic freedom exists under tyranny, it will eventually lead to the expansion of liberty. This has been recognized by the "successful" tyrants of history.

Unfortunately, the quality of academic freedom which gives it social significance is not adequately suggested by rules and regulations. The procedures outlined by the AAUP for rules of tenure, and such, are only the trappings of academic freedom. Adoption of the trappings does not guarantee academic freedom.

A university stands at the edges of knowledge and must work at expanding these edges. It must be intellectually insecure. If it becomes intellectually complacent and entrenched, it has lost academic freedom. This kind of freedom only exists when there is a continuing probe of established beliefs, conventions, and values. The only value which must be safe from attack is the value of questioning.

Must Be Regular

Academic freedom does not encompass only those rights available to the university community for use in emergencies or when members of the academic community for use in emergencies or when members of the academic community choose to use them. Academic freedom only exists when these rights are regularly used and exercised. Without use they undergo atrophy and the university becomes a hollow thing.

The university has a double obligation. It must continually test the premises of its time and its society, and it must nurture and value those free intellects that will understand freedom and exercise it. Academic freedom involves not only what a university allows students to do but what it may do for them.

Destroy Preconceptions

Only if some of the student's preconceived, basic values are destroyed by his university experience, and only if he graduates with the feeling that he has not satisfactorily replaced these values, is he indeed a free man.

If we judge academic freedom by the number of violations of the rules, we would conclude that the faculty of most universities are freely questioning the sattus of our society without reactions seeking to silence such questions. Unfortunately, I do not believe such a judgment on the state of academic freedom is valid.

The American college or university is typically a well-behaved and staid institution which exerts strong, frequently compelling, pressures to conform. The universities skillfully follow the task of producing thousands of young conformists. Only rarely does an individual emerge who deviates from the pattern.

Little Concern

Most concern with academic freedom has been occupied with assuring the rights to free expression when such rights are abridged. There has been little concern with whether or not the academic community regularly exercises these rights. The approach has been to treat the symptoms when they appear but to do nothing about the underlying disease. By not worrying about whether the range of expression of views sufficiently challenges the premises of conformity, we are probably contributing to the delinquency of the university.

The strengthening of the machinery and paraphernalia of academic freedom such as faculty tenure may sometimes promote intellectual, as well as economic, security. The recent evidences of mass student dissatisfaction on many campuses may represent a sensitivity, however ill defined, to abridgments of the quality of academic freedom. Perhaps the students have been making protests that faculties should have made. Surely university students are entitled to the excitement of living amid clashing ideas which are the basic prerequisites for new knowledge and understandings.

The university fails in its obligation to students, to its faculty, and to society, if its faculty sits in intellectually comfortable enclaves. It is difficult to even find a vocabulary to express concern over faculty members insulating themselves from ideas.

The tremendous effort to keep abreast of the geometrically expanding volumes of information seems to leave little time to ask significant questions and those who ask them have difficulty in being heard. This accretion of knowledge is not only influencing social evolution but has changed the role and nature of the university.

Three major kinds of change seem to have significantly affected the exercises of academic freedom:

Undergraduate Decline

First, there has been a decline in the undergraduate school. Generally, undergraduates would be expected to be exuberant. Their physiology should have inflated their spirits and it should not be expected that experience or responsibility would have deflated them.

With excited professors, this exuberance may lead the student to stand up fearlessly to any idea, new or old, conservative or liberal, and follow its implications until it has been pursued by unrelenting, if not always correct, logic to some remote point. This form of sport is appropriate to a university.

Sadly, it must be recognized that the civilization of our time inhibits the academic deployment of undergraduate enthusiasm. The undergraduate college which once stood on its own feet is now often overshadowed by an array of graduate schools.

Unimportant Ideas

Some of the potentially inspiring teachers are compelled by these circumstances to devote much time to graduate activities. The undergraduate is left with self assurance in intellectual prowess undermined and neglected. His ideas are considered unimportant.

The second factor acting on academic freedom is the rise of the graduate school. Every course that a graduate student takes, nearly every book or periodical he reads, is his vocation. In the humanities the graduate student is frequently not allowed to take a course in more than one department.

Professional Operation

In this framework, the university operates with high professionalism as a trade school. There is an apparent assumption that the graduate student is already educated and that his
efforts should now be bent to acquiring specialized experience which can be marketed. The idealized concept of educating a man or woman, in the liberal sense, thus gives way to the pragmatism of manufacturing a standard, salable commodity.

In graduate school, the student has an intensive education in conformity. The clashing of ideas may not be particularly welcomed. Disagreement will not aid in getting an advanced degree nor aid his subsequent advances through academic ranks. He is pressed to adopt concepts of intellectual "soundness" held by his teachers. He is likely to develop into a bore but he will be well trained in the methods of not irritating the establishment.

**Changing Role**

The third aspect related to the quality of academic freedom is the changed and changing role of the university. Once upon a time (a few years ago), people did not go to college to increase their chances of spending a future in a high-income bracket. A youth intent on acquiring wealth sought his experience in the business world rather than at college.

In the not too distant past, businessmen regarded a college education with suspicion since college taught "a lot of foolishness." We now have to worry because the universities avoid instruction in "foolishness." Formerly, the university could claim a tradition to continue the Socratic tradition to expand understanding by sponsoring dialogue among faculty and students on basic issues. Today a university degree is a must for an upper middle class livelihood.

**Moulding Machines**

When the parent asks his adolescent son, "What can you do if you don't go to college?", he is not speaking of intellectual or spiritual growth. The mechanisms for moulding a young person to the needs of an industrial societal niche are at odds with the concept that a human may exalt his life and his society by taking stands against organized patterns of behavior, against conventions which are oppressive in character.

The problems of academic freedom lie in the quality of freedom rather than in the paraphernalia. The restrictions are pernicious, subtle, and passive rather than apparent and acute. University administrators can only contribute to solving these problems if they love freedom more than they love passivity and agreement. Faculty can only contribute if they exercise freedom rather than allowing it to die of fatty degeneration.