Concern For University Community

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As Rice moves into a new and exciting period in which it may “come of age,” I find myself with a mixture of high hopes and genuine concerns. The phrase “a community of scholars” is a classic characterization of the university. Most discussions center about the aspect of scholars and scholarship. My concerns for Rice are largely concerns for community.

Now the word community, as I understand it, stems from the same roots as do the words communication, common, and communion. The idea of community points to something shared in life, to real meeting.

TOO OFTEN as I observe the Rice scene, I gain the impression of a collection of individuals involved in one way or another in academic pursuits. Wherein have we missed community? The topic is too great for a brief analysis. I must rest content to point to a few matters which I believe deserve serious thought on this campus.

For one thing, one wonders if we have paid too dearly for the competition we have engendered and fostered. Competition for entrance in the first place. Competition for the few good grades that are allowed even an exceptional student body. Competition for the favor and acclaim that must be reserved for the few.

THE PRESSURE OF competition exacts its price. Too often I have found my classes tense and anxious about tests and grades rather than eager to come to grips with challenging and fascinating topics in the very field in which they have chosen to make their own.

More often than I like to think, I have discovered that a student has been on the rocks emotionally—perhaps to the extent of needing medical or psychiatric care.

The real pressures are compounded by anxieties that are self perpetuating. I have often noted how many Rice students develop a morbid sense of guilt with regard to their studies. Even when they are participating in some recreation for which they have planned and which they surely need, they find themselves expressing their feeling that they “ought to be studying.”

HERE IS NO community of scholars; here, at best, is a community of slaves to the academic routines.

And this slavery seldom produces genuine scholarship that delights in the discovery or re-discovery of the truth and desires to share its fruits in a community devoted to a common cause.

The solution? I have no easy answer. One hopes that a word to the wise may be helpful if not sufficient.

There can be no community without genuine communication that involves real meeting of person with person at a level of primary concern and interest. Perhaps the most serious breach of community on this campus takes place in the classroom. All too often the community is betrayed by poor teaching — unnecessarily poor teaching.

Many factors contribute to this.

SOME MEN ARE less gifted in the art of communication than others. These, in my view, must work the harder to justify the trust placed in them as classroom teachers. Genuine effort will be sensed and appreciated, and may well overcome serious deficiencies of technique and personal ability.

More seriously, poor performance in the classroom is often based on what seems to me a most pernicious and distorted view of the task. With much practical justification in terms of the pressures of demands placed upon them, many conscientious and hard working faculty members feel that they must pay primary attention to certain activities associated with that golden word “research”—with a consequent neglect of their classroom responsibilities. In other cases, even less defensible matters take first place.

A MAN’S “WORTH” to the university often seems to be measured preeminently in terms of his research production. This tends to degenerate into counting papers and perhaps totaling the amount of sponsoring funds he has garnered.

The academic status symbol

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of the day is the list of publications and the magnitude of the research grant. Along side this, it is difficult to appreciate, let alone evaluate, the stimulus to growth and genuine scholarship of students in the classroom.

In making critical statements concerning the evaluation of research activities, I am assuming that I am addressing readers who know that research (I prefer the term scholarship which seems to me to be more inclusive) is the business of the academic community.

THERE IS A danger, however, that we distort the image of true scholarship as we become enamored of the new, the novel.

True scholarship delights not only in the new and uncharted but also in a more significant mastery of the old. The masters of literature, music, painting have returned again and again to old and familiar themes.

I think this is no less true of the masters of science and creative technology. And the masters have produced to be read, to be heard, to be viewed. A work of art, though it makes demands upon the recipient, is not intended for an esoteric few. It is intended to communicate.

TO IDENTIFY research with the search for the novel and to divorce it from the communication that is real teaching is to distort and perhaps even destroy the character of the university.

The person who neglects his teaching responsibility in the interest of his "research" is thereby destroying the community that is the university and truncating its full function in a most dangerous manner.

For most of us who are destined to make only minor additions to the world's knowledge, it would seem that we should engage in research so that we may be better teachers.

Let this be a mere tirade against poor teaching, let me hasten to remind the student of the other side of the shield. Communication always requires at least two. Teaching can be frustrated as thoroughly at the student end as at the faculty end.

AS I SEEK to understand the roots of our deficiency, I am tempted to speculate that the frenzied pace that characterizes so much of our campus life must surely be detrimental to our proper functions.

It comes almost as a shock to note that the word school stems from a Greek word for leisure. It was leisure that gave the Greek philosophers the opportunity to discuss and ponder, to speculate and create.

How can the university deal effectively with this awesome problem of pace and still relate itself responsibly to a world that itself is embroiled in a frantic race for time?

I must confess that I do not know. But I would suggest that the university will not fulfill its responsibility in terms of the contribution of its scholarship if it loses its character as community.