American Undergrads Found As Intelligent, Less Specialized Than English Counterparts

By Griffin Smith

American undergraduates are no less intelligent than their English counterparts—their work is simply far less specialized, a British scholar told a small group at Hanszen House September 26.

Mr. John Crow, who teaches Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama at King's College, University of London, added that English students come to college to study seriously—not, as he put it, “to learn garment merchandising, elementary dentistry, or how to drive a motorcar.”

The American people want much more from their teachers than the English do, he said, referring to emphasis on lectures, guidance, and “busy work.” Personal contact between teacher and student is stressed much more on this side of the Atlantic.

As an example, he said that in an English university a graduate student discusses the topic of his work with his director, “and then he's told to go to the (British) Museum and write it. The faculty hardly ever sees him more than once a year.”

Another important distinction between English and American universities, Crow pointed out, was the difference in size. Approximately 23 per cent of American high school graduates go on to college, while little more than four per cent of English students follow this course.

Crow has taught undergraduates at two American universities, Northwestern and UCLA. He described their attitudes as “quite different” from those to which he had been accustomed. “The most notable phenomenon,” he said, “is that American students seem actually to enjoy Shakespeare—they show emotion, while the Englishman prefers not to show it.”

As a teacher, he was struck by

the fact that American students want such close personal contact with their faculty. “In England people don't cluster around you asking questions after class. There, students are more satisfied with their own company.”

Crow criticized the American penchant for ‘sophomore survey’ courses in literature (such as Rice's now defunct English 230). “I question the value of giving people three weeks of Greek drama,” he said, adding that “this is the sort of thing to do in your vacation.”

At the University of London, the examination system differs sharply from that of the U.S. “Comprehensives, usually consisting of nine three-hour papers in a week, are given at the end of the third year; before that, there are no tests. You don't go along picking up a point here, a point there until age 72,” he said.

Crow compared the English exam system to “Patterson versus Liston.” Everything depends on your ability at one particular time: “however well you've been preparing, however good and virtuous you are—it can still go for nothing.”