Students Initiate Para-Colleges

By PAUL GOODMAN

At a conference at Time-Life, where they are preparing a series on "Youth," I was surprised that they hadn't heard of the Free University movement though small dissenting colleges have sprung up in probably a dozen places this year. (I myself have been invited to a dozen.) That is, the Time-Life part of the Establishment is no more in touch with what is going than, say, the Central Intelligence Agency is in touch with Latin America, or the Federal Arts Council is in touch with living theater. Yet how would they know, given the company they keep? So let me spell out this news for a column.

During the Cold War, American education has been increasingly tightly harnessed to (not very ideal) National Goals; it is not unfair to speak of the Factory-University, powered by government, foundation, and corporation money, and processing students. Inevitably, therefore, there are attempts to set up small independent enterprises of higher education, generally in, or next to, big established institutions.

Our situation has historical analogies. In 18th century England there sprang up tiny dissenting academies to escape the Test Acts, a kind of loyalty-oath. During the Renaissance, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge withdrew from the universities, which had rigidified. The very beginning of our present higher education, during the rise of the towns in the 12th and 13th centuries, was the founding of tiny universities of free scholars and clerics in the face of the feudal Church.

And there is an important analogy in our own times. The para-colleges are like the para-politics of the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi to by-pass a system of injustice, the para-sociology of militant community-development to combat the patronizing social work of the Welfare State, or even the para-way of life of the Beats to escape the rat race.

And these para-movements tend to overlap. People who object to credits and grading are likely to object to gray flannel suits and to police brutality.

All the para-colleges have common themes. They object to the impersonality of faculty-student relations, cash-accounting credits and grading, high tuition-fees, administrative paternalism, extra-mural interference with freedom of speech and inquiry and morals, irrelevant bigness in the rather simple function of teaching and learning.

Positively, the dissenters want community, curriculum directly related to social and personal reality, a say in making decisions, intrinsic motivations to study, and tailoring the schedule to individual needs and stages of development.

Naturally, however, each spontaneous group has its own emphasis and style. Graduate students at Columbia feel that authentic scholarship is impossible in the routine in which they are getting their degrees, so in their "free university" they set up night courses to which they invite scholars they respect to teach them real subjects for real.

The graduate students at Berkeley, on the other hand, are suspicious of "anybody over 30"; they feel they can direct their own studies, and they are especially interested in political subjects avoided in the regular curriculum, including direct action projects like organization migrant farm-labor.

An enterprising group at Ohio University (Athens) is after foundation support to hire its own professors; and I have been offered a princely salary by a group of students at San Francisco State (I don't know where the money comes from). In these cases, it seems that what is studied will be an agreement of what the teachers want to teach and the students want to learn; but in other cases the curriculum is determined entirely by the students.

For example, in the Guild of Independent Students started by a drop-out of Swarthmore, each one studies on his own and presents his work to the others, but admired "veterans" are invited to visit, criticize, and inspire. At Monteith, undergraduates, remaining within the school, choose from their own number teachers who they think have a particular competence and whom they can of course depose.

At the new Free University at Rice, professors are welcome but "the problem is to explain to them that we don't want to be taught anything, we want the chance to learn." The free university conference of Students for a Democratic Society, centered in Ann Arbor, has heavily stressed the beneficent effect of interpersonal confrontation, an emphasis coming, no doubt, from the remarkable SDS experiences in community development in poor neighborhoods.

A problem arises in the odd relation of the para-colleges and the regular institutions they are in or next to. President Alden of Ohio has seemed eager for the students to try on their own, so long as it doesn't cost the State anything. When Meyerson was acting-Chancellor at Berkeley, he told me he would give academic credit for the para-courses if they could prove themselves.

At Rice, however, there seems to be ill-feeling and rivalry. Swarthmore cannot (Sept. 21) make up its mind if the independent Guild can use the library. At Rice and Columbia it is, interestingly, religious organizations on the campus that sponsor the dissenters and provide shelter or money.

Meantime, the para-colleges enthusiastically branch out into all kinds of extra-curricular community projects, from political and social direct actions (these are sometimes curricular, under the heading "pragmatic sociology") to coffee-houses, little theaters, literary and political journals, co-op bookstores, student housing. What a beautiful Do-It-Yourself populism! What a pity they are so young and inexperienced. If not they, who?

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