The Impact of Specialization and Professionalization on the Curriculum.
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The 80s have brought increased tension between professional education and liberal learning. How did this tension evolve? What are the benefits, the drawbacks? The answer may lie in the history of American education.

One key to the understanding of the current style and character of American educational practice and purpose lies in the history of the professions—the growth of the professionalized specialists who define modern society.
OF PROFESSORS

by Frederick Rudolph

Reports on the crisis in American education have been flooding the land. What is both striking and alarming about these reports is the absence of historical perspective. There is an eagerness to rush into descriptions of decline and prescriptions for reform without any sustained analysis of how and why we have arrived where we are.

What trade-offs have occurred? What are the changing sources of influence? How have our problems changed over time? How does this crisis differ from others? And more to the point, can this crisis be ignored in time-honored American style?

These thoughts are not prompted by any desire to document or solve the unemployment problem in the historians' guild but by a firm belief that we will never know how to get at our problems unless we understand their complexities. We cannot reform unless we understand, for instance, where the power controlling curricular arrangements in both school and college is found. How can we act responsibly unless we know to whom the past has delivered responsibility?

If there is tension between vocationalism and the humanities in the schools, between professional education and liberal learning in the colleges and universities, what are the causes, what are the constraints on what can be done? Where and why have these tensions been destructive? Where salutary? There is no single path to grasping the dimensions of our problems, but surely one avenue, perhaps the key to comprehending the present style, character, and purpose of American educational practice, lies in the history of the professions—not just the school teachers and the professors but the whole range of professionalized specialists who define modern society.

In colonial America, as in England, there were three professions—theology (with a sub-branch of university and college professors), medicine and law—and entry into any one of them required two distinct educational experiences: first, a course of classical studies in the arts and sciences that led to the bachelor's degree; and second, either through apprenticeship or in some less organized manner, the acquisition of technical training in the necessary professional skills.

Of course there were differences between England and the colonies. In England the professions were sharply stratified and access to the top in each profession—the bishops, the physicians, and the barristers—was limited to the sons of gentlemen. That restriction was not possible in the colonies, where there was no hereditary aristocracy. One immediate result, therefore, was the opening up of professions to
members of the lower orders and the launching of the professions in America as instruments of social mobility. But if the professions were thereby compromised, the educational requirements were nonetheless maintained. Destined for the professions, no matter where one came from, the first educational requirement was a course in classical studies.

By the end of the eighteenth century all three major religious denominations—Anglican, Congregational, and Presbyterian—required a liberal arts education as a passport to apprenticeship or reading in theology on the way to the ministry. The first American professional school, the medical school founded in Philadelphia in 1765, required a classical education as the condition of admission to that, in the words of its founder, physicians might "soar above the sordid views of vulgar minds." In the early decades of the nineteenth century the tradition of the B.A. degree as a pre-professional requirement was soundly established that over 90 percent of the lawyers in Massachusetts were college graduates.

What is most instructive about the relationship between the colleges and the professions in the colonial period and into the 1830s was the widespread public understanding that the American college delivered a non-professional and non-technical education in the arts and sciences, an experience in refinement and intellectual growth. In a sense, the future professional had first to be certified as a gentleman, as someone who had been touched by liberal learning and was therefore a community resource, a person of moral and intellectual authority, someone fit to lead.

In a well-ordered society that would probably still hold true, but the equalitarianism that began to get out of control, some say, as soon as Columbus discovered America, experienced an especially virulent expansion with the search for some vital connection with society comparable to that which it was losing as the professions became debased and the status value of a B.A. degree declined. In these years, torn between allegiance to the classical course and demands that it be made more practical, the colleges allowed themselves a bit of curricular tinkering. However, until after the Civil War they were essentially intellectually unmo bombiled—captives of their past, spurred by a suddenly and aggressively mobile society, vulnerable to whatever movement might come along promising renewal of their contract with society and their faith in themselves.

The movement that came along—the university movement in all its many forms and manifestations—at first appeared to be one more threat to collegiate survival, but the colleges soon found ways to accommodate themselves to the intellectual, social, and economic forces that were making possible the new universities, their specialized faculties, and their professional schools.

The American liberal arts college was of pre-industrial origin. Its concern with the education of gentlemen, its lack of sympathy with many of the egalitarian and exploitive impulses of the age, and its Christian orientation suffused the classical curriculum and the humanistic style of the old colleges. The American university, on the other hand, was a child of the new order, a product of the Industrial Revolution eager to play a central role in the refinement and specialization of knowledge and in the training of cadres of experts to keep the machinery of society running.

To the degree that they held on to old purpose and curricular arrangements once the university began to define the mission of American higher education, the colleges were essentially contrary institutions, to some extent acquiescing and responding to a vocational interest now and then, but just the same evoking the old values, suspicious of much that specialization celebrated, preferring to regard higher education as primarily a center for humanistic study, social criticism, and ethical concern. Increasingly the colleges found themselves at a disadvantage, even anachronistic in an age that was being defined by specialists, corporate bureaucracies, growth, and consolidation. The curricular battles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must in some way be seen as struggles between the demands and
needs of the professionals—including the professional academicians—and the traditional concerns and purposes of the colleges as sources of enlightened and responsible community leadership.

The impact of the universities on the undergraduate curriculum was devastating. They promoted old vocations learned on the job into new professions, certified by the universities' own professional schools. They dignified old utilities with new learning, revealing an appetite for new subjects and a receptivity to applied science that afflied them openly with the industrial order. They identified themselves as agents of social mobility by offering the courses that appeared to lead the way into corporate and government bureaucracies. In asserting the equality of all subjects, as did Ezra Cornell and Charles William Eliot each in his own way, they invited an expanding clientele to join them—the universities—in their own version of the meritocratic bureaucratic system.

It is no wonder that it was difficult to keep a clear vision of purpose, to give order to academic priorities, or even to remember that higher education had once revealed more concern for the conduct of society than for the ambitions of individual men, more interest in shaping a human community than in shaping individual careers. In an atmosphere of confused purpose, jumbled priorities, and forlornfulness, the universities and the colleges that aped them had no difficulties in offering a course of study equally confused, jumbled, and forlorn.

Of course there was no way for any self-respecting institution to avoid the explosion of knowledge nor to pretend that vast changes were not taking place in American society. The emergence of a wealthy urban industrial society of unprecedented ethnic diversity and complexity was in the process of rationalization and consolidation. John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan may have been notable untaught creators of the new order, but the world that they helped to shape cried out for specialized knowledge, for the experts and technicians necessary to keep the whole complex enterprise running. In this environment professionalism in America experienced a sudden burst of growth and importance.

A profession does not exist until a group of practitioners is accorded autonomy and prestige by society in return for certain services for which there is a market. The professional's authority rests upon a body of knowledge and set of skills certified by the profession, which is characterized by self-regulation, a set of guiding ethics, a shared identity, and sense of community. In the 1880s the old professions emerged from their long period of debarment, Independent professional schools attached themselves to the universities and proprietary schools forged links with liberal arts colleges, in both instances benefiting from the intellectual vigor and rigor that were beginning to define a revival of learning inspired by the authority of science and the market for experts.

Professionalism—the affirmation of experts—was fostered by the universities in a world where, as Magali Larson shows, the goal of corporate bureaucracies was economic efficiency and where the goal of the state became efficient regulation. The university enlarged its vision and in no time at all was certifying an array of new professionals, sending experts in efficiency from undergraduate and graduate business programs to the American corporation, and experts in the regulation of business and other aspects of society from all over the campus-local, state, and federal government.

An expanding system of public higher education quickly responded to the new demands of the labor market. The American economy had moved from an era of competitive capitalism—with its application of entrepreneurial energy to unprecedented natural resources and unskilled immigrant labor—to a more complex of corporate capitalism, characterized by expert decision making, applied science and technology, the decline of small entrepreneurs, the growth of non-manual service occupations, occupational specialization. Suddenly higher education became more pluralist, because it no longer was the institution for certifying a limited lower class: it was now becoming the institute whereby great numbers of men and women could enlist in bureaucracies of opportunity that accompanied corporate capitalism the corporate state. The large public institutions led the way, but the private colleges soon followed: vocational courses took their place in the old liberal courses, intratechnical utility into the course study for the first time.

Perhaps this is the place to dispel the false dichotomy that often clouded any consideration of the useful and liberal in higher education. Liberal studies were from the beginning eminently useful even if they were not specific in their vocational focus. They were expected to be vocational in higher education. Liberal studies were from the beginning eminently useful even if they were not specific in their vocational focus.
For Further Study


Kimball, Bruce A. Orators and Philosophers: A History of Liberal Education. To be published by Teachers College Press.


Another source of trouble for liberal learning was the changing nature of the relationship between professors and students. A defining characteristic of the emerging modern American university was the degree to which it patterned itself after the corporate capitalism that fed upon it and supported it. The undergraduate curriculum departed from the coherence and authority of the classical tradition for a number of reasons, but whatever the reasons, one result was to make the student a client and consumer of educational goods. When students stopped being thought of as children and the colleges gave up the parental authority considered appropriate to the collegiate system, the curriculum quickly became a baraza and the students tourists looking for cheap bargains.

The professionalization of the professors and the proliferation of academic specialists helped to fuel the institutional rivalries that made academic life very much like industrial life. The competition for professors, the rivalries between departments, the focus on size and numbers and growth, and the appearance of endless numbers of specialists in a growing number of departments led to a kind of acquiescence and imperialism that made students both objects of conquest and victims of professional indifference. To that end the curriculum was an expression of the power of the professional academicians. Subjects and courses were often offered not because students wanted or needed them but because an essentially autonomous group of academic professionals could and would teach nothing else. To compensate for the unpalatable offerings of one kind of academic specialist, the institution acknowledged their responsibilities to their student clients and the need to bolster enrollments by offering students what they wanted in the way of undemanding courses and career-oriented programs in neo-professional and technical studies. Ironically, when the professors abandoned a curriculum that they thought students needed the substitute for it one that, instead catered either to what the professor needed or what the students wanted The results confirmed the authority of professors and students but the robbed the curriculum of any authority at all.

The reaction of students to all this activity in the curriculum was brilliant! They concluded that the curriculum really didn't matter. Their response was an accelerating growth of the extracurriculum, an explosion of frater
The power that the professors hold over American higher education, and therefore over American society, is awesome.

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study is consistent with liberal education, and are both troubled by the extent to which liberal education has come to mean a conspicuous consumption of leisure skills, and reluctant to tamper with that usage.

We protect our disciplinary enclaves and define the curriculum by dividing the turf. It is nearer if subjects are not much encountered outside the specific disciplinary contexts to which they have been assigned. We produce parts of a whole as if some philosopher king qua great engineer had taken care of their synthesis some time ago and it need no longer concern us.

We pretend to ivory towers we do not occupy as we pretend to job training we cannot provide. A corporate personnel director once suggested to me that the prime function of undergraduate management courses was a certification of student loyalty—of their propensity for not asking the wrong questions. His remark may be extended to include a great deal of undergraduate education, particularly in the public sector where the need to process very large numbers of students is an important fact of academic life.

Students are hurried through tours of education. Their sense that a job is all that need concern them is confirmed. Eye contact is avoided. Bottom line language, production based notions of accountability, marketing consciousness, a reluctance to recognize that we share a culture and a community as well as an economy, all shape the structure of the college as they do that of the office and the factory.

As I come back to collegiate life, I am taken with both how difficult and how necessary it is for us to resist these currents of mainstream realism. If we assume that our traditional affirmations of faith, reason, and community are no longer relevant; that the real world is somewhere else, and that we must attempt to mimic it rather than learn from it and act on it, then we will have contributed to making more than just the colleges a reserve where we can, for a time, frolic unencumbered by reality. That it will be done in the name of practical realism will not make it any less a radical abdication of responsibility.

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authoritative government and industry, where holders of professional degrees and specialists certified by the universities, even the professors themselves, wield the power of experts. These are the men and women who decide what an undergraduate course of study is; they define the values of the academy, the content of the Ph.D. degree, the credentials for professors old and new.

If the American college graduate is weak in analysis and the spirit of inquiry, unable to communicate in his own or any other language clearly and effectively, and with it all ethically unsure and ignorant of his own history and culture, the responsibility lies not with the schools or with college and university presidents, not with the politicians or the people, but with the professors. They have the power to will great changes in the undergraduate curriculum. They should not be allowed to get away with pointing the finger of responsibility elsewhere. Surely by the time that we come, sometime in the 1980's, to the end of all these investigations, commissions, and reports on American education, the American college and university—but especially the professors—will have been solidly identified as the major source of the educational malaise in our troubled society. Of course the burden of the future of American education does not rest solely with the professors. A recent weakness; the diffident and even irresponsible role of the federal government, is one of the causes of our problems. For reasons that defy explanation, we would rather land marines in Grenada and Lebanon than literate high school graduates in the work place. Nonetheless, all the money in the world and an enlightened administration in Washington will be ineffective against the power of the professors unless the professors themselves undertake the necessary reforms.

It may be dispiriting to look back at the critics of the changes in American high education that many of us deplore and to recognize how uniformly ineffective the critics were. Yet, it was not that their criticism was so much as their solutions were. Irving Babbitt would hold the university to the nurturing of a narrow Albert Jay Nock argued that all be well if higher education refused to stray from character purpose. Abraham Flexner, on other hand, was so unhappy about intrusion of collegiate values in university, that he proposed everything be discarded but re and he did just that when he in the Institute for Advanced St. Princeton, but without any benefit to higher education else Robert Maynard Hutchins tied vital of humanistic learning books and Aristotelian metaphysics and Alexander Meiklejohn figured the road to curricular coherence from great books to social science. These failed committees: scholars, Michael Harris makes it clear, spoke and acted on the while the vast majority of the leagues were able to content subversion of liberal learning part because of the failure to identify and assess the great and authority of the professors. Professionalism among the others, their narrow specialist complete neglect in their that any concern with teaching or professional responsibility oil to scholarship, are conditions hibit optimism about what liberal arts colleges can do liberally. Too many teachers' subjects are so far gone into patton and into the scientific unifying of their specialties challenging of teaching, of students into a humanistic role of the subjects, are beyond interest or capacity. And, these uncertainties of the academic market and the territorial be goes along with academic deep all but disqualify the professor thinking creatively and be about what a comprehensive current college education can. But, this is where any relief begins. The professors have if They must be encouraged responsibly.