

Address to the Faculty on Curriculum Change

(Delivered at the Faculty Retreat)

First in a Two Part Series

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Guilford College declares itself to be a liberal arts college, but whether we are actually dedicated in a focused and self-conscious way to the liberal arts strikes me as an open question, a question, however, that could be raised about most colleges. The nature and goals of the liberal arts are not subjects we or anyone else discuss often; and they are, perhaps, subjects about which we may discover ourselves to have little agreement. It is encouraging, though, that we as a faculty have decided, by a more or less spontaneous process, to examine our curriculum in light of our educational ideals.

This examination requires some definition of the liberal arts. We will not do more than begin such a discussion today; hopefully we will never finish it, but if we can generate enough interest to begin a dialogue in meetings such as this and continue it over coffee, lunches and on the sidewalks, continue it with some passion and friendly disagreement, we ought to invigorate our sense of what education means to us; we might come to some consensus as to how our programs should be formulated; and it is possible that we may pass more of this concern and understanding on to our students in a variety of ways.

I would like to begin by saying a few words about the character of the liberal arts. Then I will discuss some of the implications that follow, and I will conclude with several recommendations which might serve as a basis for today's discussion.

"Liberal Arts" is our rallying slogan. We may not shout it from the rooftops much except when feeling seriously threatened, but we do growl it from time to time

to keep our enemies in their places. The liberal arts are under attack, and always have been, no doubt, not from deliberate opponents so much as from the pressures of society, in our case a society which questions the practicality of what all of us, I hope, believe to be the larger view. Given the pressures, we must, to avoid fading away, come to a consensus as to what we are up to. We must be able to

articulate our ideals and purposes to ourselves, to our students, and to all the skeptics.

The liberal arts, if the expression means anything at all, means the installation of a program of study which holds the intention of promoting intellectual freedom. The liberal arts are the studies appropriate to free people, to citizens, to ones who should and must in some sense survey the world, know where they stand in it, and make decisions for themselves and others which are well-informed in some sense logical, and seriously ethical. The liberal arts also assume that free men must be able to communicate their views.

In considering programs of liberal arts study, we have, for practical purposes, two broad areas: the academic majors and the area of non-major studies. Guilford has made certain decisions to move into what are traditionally professional directions with its majors, although with the attempt to maintain this professional interests within the liberal arts framework. The questions of what our major programs should be is not a concern for us today. The issue we need to address is what goals we should have in general and particularly for the core and distribution requirements. It is in this area that a liberal arts college most clearly defines its intentions. These intentions, broadly speaking, must be to encourage our students to begin to move vigorously along the path of intellectual growth, a growth which has private value, but in a very real sense and in its larger import bar public value. We, therefore, need to consider what sorts of study will most promote such intellectual movement. We need to consider not just what we should do, but where we are.

To locate ourselves, we must recognize that we set out to "commence" students. If we are the formal ending of a long educational process, we are only the beginning of what ought to be a life-long growth. We can not hope to educate a person for a life of freedom with any set of programs we could possibly devise to fill four years. Four years at Guilford will only be a start, but it must be a start in the most fruitful direction. Since the greatest part of a person's education occurs outside of the classroom and in the years beyond college, our programs must

have as their first responsibility the promotion of self-education. Students who upon leaving us feel bored with ideas and remain uninterested in the world beyond their doorsteps mark us, individually and institutionally, as failures.

Our first goal must be to promote self-education; this means promoting self-education in college classrooms. We must not accept as a liveable norm the initial hesitancy and passivity toward discovery which characterize so many of our students when they arrive. Our first concern should be to encourage students to ask questions and to seek answers. Any classroom which does not encourage such activity will promote the opposite: inactivity, passivity, disinterest, and boredom.

Our formal educational process can do things which students have trouble with on their own. It is our business to identify primary issues and sensitize students to the importance of those issues, to encourage students to ask their own questions, and to give experience, instruction, encouragement, and methods of asking and seeking answers.

Above all and most important, we must work to arouse curiosity. In a really effective education, thinking takes primacy over information. Thinking requires information. It demands information, sifts it, and uses it, but as the material of thought and problem solving, not as a matter of primary consequence in itself. All useful and liberal education of a higher sort begins with the curious person asking a question and pursuing the answer.

Yet, in our practices we

tend to arrange the sequence in the other order. We provide information and often leave it entirely to the student to discover the questions and look for the answers. And we do this most frequently in those courses which introduce his experience with a subject. Our concern needs to be with process, the process which begins with wanting to understand. The difficulty of this has been born home to everyone who has attempted a BHTC 101 section. Failure in this particular area is what we should most fear, and when experienced is most discouraging. But when we do succeed, we recognize the results through students who want to know more than our standard classroom fare offers them.

The literature of educational theory contains a number of notable works which propose various methods of promoting the curiosity of students. From Rousseau on, visionary educators of the romantic tradition have seen standard education as a process by which natural curiosity is inhibited. There is enough truth in this perspective that we should both examine what we are doing and make a serious effort to work in directions most likely to produce intellectual activity. And we must do this in a way that encourages our average student, if there is such a thing. Whenever I get to know a student well he ceases being average and almost inevitably turns out to have real interests in a variety of matters. Yet these interests are not always apparent in class. If we are inclined to accept the norm of apparent uninterest and half-hearted classroom efforts, we do injustice to our ideals and to our students.

If my impression is correct, upper classmen often seem the most half-hearted and uninterested when out of their majors. That's a bad sign.

My bias, in programs, aside from generally developing courses and methods designed to promote the questioning, problem solving process, would be to consciously design a program within the core and distribution requirement which is aimed in a variety of ways through every subject at the big questions which we seldom care to take on: What am I? Where am I? What do I believe?

How should I act? These are the matters we ourselves spend our lives sweating over; yet how seldom does education consider them directly. But they must be questions which we must admit an interest in if they are to be dealt with. Such questions are too general and important to be left to philosophers. The philosophers, in any case, don't know any more about many of them than the rest of us, except in being privileged and obligated to discuss them.

All of us need to be concerned with the historical perspective. We need to come out of our specialized closets and admit to what is really important. We don't have to have all the answers, but we do need to air the questions and profess that we feel that they are important not only to students but to ourselves as well. Where we can reasonably do so, we should build such concerns into our courses, particularly those courses which students take to broaden their liberal education.

