

The Research Commitment: Some Observations

OURS is an age when thought is treated more as a product than as a service, when harried administrators goad us to increase our “productivity,” when the printed word is the main vehicle for our career advancement and an advertising medium for the university. It is an epoch when qualification has largely become a function of quantification.

The deluge of articles that internal pressures have caused to spring from the well of Academia has required the laying of new pipelines in every field. The proliferation of these conduits of information has not solved our problems, however. It has only compounded them. In our eagerness to tap all channels of thought, we monitor the multiplicity of publications that distribute information to the scholarly community. The flow overwhelms us. Since we cannot cope financially with the burden of personal subscriptions, we rely on our libraries to purchase and store the intellectual effluent for later use. Before long, though, our libraries come up against problems similar to those *we* faced earlier: excessive strains on the budget, insufficient time to survey and catalog new material, and grievous shortages of space to store that material. Our world is glutted with scholarly resources, but we find it impossible to use them all. So we reduce our scope of inquiry to what Ayn Rand would describe as “the cooking utensils of Babylon and the doormats of

Byzantium" (*The Fountainhead*, New York: Signet, 1971, p. 78).

By specializing more and more finely, we think we can regain control of the situation. And we can. But our decision transforms us radically. From dynamic humanists with an all-encompassing curiosity, we devolve into pale pathologists of art. Constantly viewing minuscule cross-sections of literature through our research microscope, we begin to lose sight of the corpus from which the tissue was cut, and we pay no heed at all to the milieu that brought the corpus into being. We even lose touch with our own environment. Our teaching suffers. Our service to the community suffers. Our living suffers.

Back in 1900, the Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó cautioned that specialization tends to create a woeful imbalance in us as individuals — an imbalance that limits our humanity and ultimately deforms us. The words of Theodore Roszak remind us that specialization and the problems stemming from it did not begin and end in Rodó's age. Their roots go deep into history; they are still with us today. According to Roszak, North American universities

have insisted on evaluating the academic, not as a whole personality, but rather as the receptacle of specialized and seemingly detachable talents. But as Socrates long ago warned the Sophists, to partition the personality is the first step away from wisdom. To isolate any human skill (as the Sophists isolated the skill of rhetoric), to cultivate and assess it apart from the

total person in whom it resides, is to trivialize the skill and diminish the person ("On Academic Delinquency." *The Dissenting Academy*. Ed. Theodore Roszak. New York: Vintage, 1968, p. 7).

We in literature know that the same thing has been happening in our field. We know, too, that such a path is fraught with danger. As literary scholars specialize further and further, they run the risk not only of decreasing their personal horizons as citizens of the larger community but of sinking as a group into what Roszak terms "a condition of entrenched social irrelevance" (12) and, eventually, of attaining what Louis Kampf describes as "exquisite levels of absurdity" ("The Scandal of Literary Scholarship." *The Dissenting Academy*. Ed. Theodore Roszak, New York: Vintage, 1968, p. 45).

How can this come to pass in the humanities? Under the present system, quite easily. Since the Great Depression, the North American university has given significant opportunities to ever larger numbers of intellectually oriented people. For these individuals — many of them born on the outskirts of power — Academia is a garden where personal achievement can be intensively cultivated. As the saying goes, it's a place where you can "make it." You have the freedom to plant almost any seeds you wish in the field you have chosen. You can enrich your lot by tapping into public as well as private streams. You can vaunt your successes in journals and at periodic trade fairs. And if you put everything into your work, you can reap

benefits that are denied to most people on earth: tenure, financial security, a sense of accomplishment — even a modicum of prestige and power.

Unfortunately, many academics tend to concentrate solely on personal and intramural goals, letting issues of broader concern go unattended. Instead of wishing to interact closely with those who live beyond the pale, the academic community prefers to deal with “insiders”: those, we might say, who *speak its own language* — even though that language consists to a great degree of mutually unintelligible dialects.

Like a Vatican of the Intellect, the university exists within the borders of the state but keeps itself largely free of the state’s authority and influence. The Vatican of the Intellect differs from the Vatican of the Spirit, however, in a very important way. Although its members have many capabilities, it rewards only a small spectrum of talents. In most universities, the order of priority goes something like this:

1. The ability to write *and* publish scholarly books and articles, but not textbooks, creative compositions, or material of deep concern to the general public.
2. The faculty for preparing addresses based on highly specialized research and for delivering those addresses at learned conferences, but not for sharing knowledge directly with the masses through oral media.
3. The talent for obtaining research grants from extramural sources, particularly if those grants

support team efforts and generate good press for the university.

4. Skill at getting appointed to high-profile administrative posts in professional associations, rather than in community or public service organizations.
5. The training of a student minority to carry the discipline into the future, but not the designing of innovative programs to imbue the non-specialist majority with a love of learning.
6. The ability to serve on intramural committees without giving up time for research and publication.

Since rewards are apportioned according to this scale, there is no reason for using other talents and doing other things — even if these alternatives were to yield greater satisfaction to the academic, increase the efficiency of the university, and expand the social relevancy of both.

That old bandit Procrustes now reigns in Academia. Everyone must fit the same mold or pay the penalty. How can anyone expect the academic community to be socially relevant under conditions such as these?

Another factor to consider when we scrutinize our activities is our propensity for banding together in professional organizations. Let there be no mistake: this clustering into specialized associations has many positive consequences. Nevertheless, if carried to extremes, it can ghettoize us even further and neutralize us as a humanizing force in society. We

must guard against two things in particular: (1) allowing the hours we spend working for the association or preparing ourselves to participate in its productions to take time from our students, our institution, or our nonacademic neighbors; (2) allowing the sights and sounds that issue from our association in the form of articles and addresses to have an absurd cast either in concept or in style, as do those music videos that are now mesmerizing the juvenile mind. Frilly intricacies of the intellect are not for us. Unlike the androgynous Boy George of today's pop-music scene, we must preserve the potency of our ideas by ensuring that the message and its presentation are all of a piece: direct, forceful, unambiguous. We must make certain that, as we give voice to our concepts, we do not whisper in jargon or wail in the gibberish of another world, like some Michael Jackson of the humanities. Above all, we must make sure that our learned conferences do not degenerate into a kind of break-dancing competition at which our mental acrobatics dazzle those present but leave no lasting impression of value on them or on anyone else.

As Rodó warned, specialization tends to deform the individual and the institution alike. Now is the moment for *both* to move in another direction. The university must make the expansion of its assessment horizons one of its highest priorities. This would imply the creation of realistic methods for identifying the skills and predicting the potential of staff members, encouraging them to use the full

range of their talent, and apportioning rewards accordingly. If universities can devise sophisticated systems for many other areas of human endeavor, they can certainly design a fair, practical system for evaluating and rewarding the performance of staff members who work in their own spheres of activity.

For our part, we scholars must increase our breadth of vision, not reduce it. In the words of Maynard Mack, Sterling Professor of English, Emeritus, at Yale University:

When one reads thoughtfully in . . . works by Darwin, Marx, and Freud . . . what one finds most impressive is not the competence they show in the studies we associate with them . . . but the range of what they knew, the staggering breadth of the reading which they had made their own and without which . . . they could never have achieved the insights in their own areas that we honor them for. Today . . . we are still moving mostly in the opposite direction We are narrowing, not enlarging our horizons. We are shucking, not assuming our responsibilities. And we communicate with fewer and fewer because it is easier to jabber in a jargon than to explain a complicated matter in the real language of men ("The Life of Learning," *ACLS Newsletter* 34, 1983, 9-10).

We must determine what we really *profess*. Once we do, we may find ourselves turning away from intense concentration on research. We may see ourselves devoting more time and energy to diversified reading and conversation, to innovative teaching, to meaningful community services, to the kind of living that makes

every fiber of our being pulse with joy.

Under these conditions, our research will take on a truly dynamic quality. It will not concern itself primarily with pieces in isolation but will stress the interaction between human creativity and the entire fabric of life. It will lead to works that are in harmony with the trend of our times: small in volume, great in potency, broad in applicability, dramatic in impact. Like those marvelous silicone chips that have begun to revolutionize the world, our publications will be carefully crafted configurations, which, when put in place, will activate the mechanisms of the reader's mind, mobilize vast stores of data, and bring the essentials of understanding rapidly to light.