

IDEALISM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

BY EDWIN M. SLOCOMBE

IF any word is more elusive of definition than the word *education* it is the word *idealism*. One should approach with caution a discussion which involves both of these elusive words. However, the subject of idealism in education is an intriguing one, and although it cannot be defined precisely it can be discussed intelligently.

We might well start at scratch with the familiar definition of education given by an undergraduate. According to this student "education is the process of getting information out of a professor's notebook into the notebook of a student without its passing through the mind of either." That definition may be irreverent but it is not entirely irrelevant. It suggests a distinction between two kinds of education—the kind of education that a man gets, and the kind that gets him. The element in a process of education that "gets" a man, is the element of idealism.

Any discussion of idealism in our American system of education must, for two reasons, come to a focus on the colleges. The first reason is that the colleges have an opportunity to teach idealism that is unapproached by any other institution. The second reason is that for some years past the colleges have been yielding increasingly to the increasing pressure which has been brought upon them to make their courses of study more practical and less idealistic.

Moreover, one cannot overlook the influence of the colleges upon the secondary schools. So far as these schools fall short in the matter of idealism, it must be remembered that they are avowedly preparatory schools whose aims and attitudes are modified by the aims and attitudes of the colleges for which they are preparatory. The best way to lessen the demand upon our public high schools for education with an immediate cash value, is to set up a very different objective in the colleges and to stand resolutely for that objective in the matter of entrance requirements.

With far less opportunity than the colleges have to teach idealism, the high schools, the private preparatory schools, and the grammar schools are earnestly trying to make the utmost use of such opportunity as they have. It is already a widely accepted conviction among the schoolmasters that education for character is a primary

function of the public schools. How seriously they regard their obligation in the matter is apparent in the many and excellent programs of character-education which they have worked out and fitted into their crowded schedules.

Of course the teaching of idealism is not limited to definite programs of character-education, but the concern which the schoolmasters have shown for these programs is evidence of their interest.

At the present time, the American college is the object of spirited criticism from many quarters. One should hesitate before adding one criticism more, and yet, the common disregard by the colleges of their measureless opportunity to teach idealism cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. Moreover, although the connection is not apparent on the surface of things, there is an intimate connection between certain conditions for which the colleges are frequently criticized and their too scant concern about idealism.

One such criticism is that the colleges do not prepare their students for an active participation in the life of the world. The critics disagree in their diagnosis of the malady but the symptoms of the malady are obvious and abundant.

Here, for example, is a young woman who has spent four years at college and received the bachelor's degree in arts. This young woman can read and speak several languages. She knows something about history—in spots—both ancient and modern and in between. She can identify a Rembrandt painting and a Beethoven sonata. She knows the characteristics of Elizabethan prose and early Victorian verse and Georgian architecture. But she doesn't know what she wants to do next. Educationally speaking, she is "all dressed up and nowhere to go!" If you should ask her, she could not tell you how she could turn any or all of her acquired education to the service of other people—except by passing on to others the actual information which she has acquired. Fortunately she kept notebooks in all her courses and she could—she thinks—get most of this information across a desk to the notebooks of a younger generation of students. She would be willing to do this if she had to do it as a matter of self-support, but she has no desire to do it. Somehow her education is not connected with any deep desire in her own life—nor is it connected with any of the deep currents in the life of humanity. She has no vital interest in any great need of any race or group or class or community, and she is unaware of any great need in her own life.

It must be granted that any college which has a student within its care for four years—for four responsive, formative years—and turns that student out into the world at the end of those years with no deeper incentive, and no wider vision, and no higher aspiration than this student has, is morally delinquent. The vital lack in the educative process of such a college is idealism.

However, it is not generally agreed that what is lacking in such colleges is idealism. Many people are quite sure that what is needed is vocational training. They observe that it is only the graduates of colleges of the liberal arts who do not know what they want to do next and are unprepared to do anything. They remind us that graduates of technical colleges and vocational schools have no such lack. In their opinion the remedy for the unhappy plight of the graduates of colleges is a very simple one: it is the inclusion of a sufficient number of vocational courses in the college curriculum.

This suggestion assumes that the greatest service which a college can render its students is not to teach them how to live but—how to make a living. It assumes also that the greatest need of social, political, and commercial agencies is a need of men and women who have acquired certain technical or vocational skills, whereas what these agencies really need most is not men and women who *have* something, but men and women who *are* something. Technical and vocational skills without a liberal education may be a liability instead of an asset, both to the agencies and to the individual. If a man is a technician and a technician only, he is not much of a man. His largest interests and strongest inner drives will seek an outlet apart from his narrowly limited and merely technical occupation. His education will have prepared him to make a success of his vocation; it will not have prepared him to make a success of his personal life.

In opposing the demand for the vocationalizing of the colleges of liberal arts, President J. Edgar Park, of Wheaton College, declared that: “. . . the liberal arts college holds with the experience of the Civil Service in the British Empire. (This Service) has taken, year by year, the most brilliant students of the British universities, those schooled in the classics, or sciences, or mathematics, or history, and has turned them loose in their posts in British colonies to pick up there the particular technique of their job.”

Among the proponents of the vocational remedy must be included those who believe that the liberal arts college should be primarily a

teacher-training college. The objection to the vocationalizing of the college in the interest of any other vocations, applies with equal force to the vocation of teaching. Moreover, in so far as there is need of pedagogical training, there is abundant opportunity for it in summer schools and in colleges which specialize in this training. It is significant, however, that ambitious teachers who seek additional preparation after they have entered their profession are far more inclined to take courses in the subjects which they teach than in the technique of pedagogy.

There are other critics of the college of liberal arts who explain the plight of its graduates by saying that a college of this traditional type no longer has a definite place to fill, nor a specific function to perform. The development of the all-inclusive university, they say, has made the four-years' college an unnecessary appendage to our educational system. These critics point to Germany where, as they remind us, "general education is much more thorough, and is carried much further, in secondary schools, than with us; and where the university as a consequence is composed entirely of what we should call the graduate faculties of philosophy, medicine, law, and theology—with the technical and vocational training relegated to separate institutions."

Other critics approve the Junior College plan, especially for students who intend to continue their studies in some technical or vocational school, on the assumption that two years is enough to spend on general "culture"!

In one opinion all these groups of critics are agreed, namely: that the four-year college of liberal arts has outlived its period of usefulness. Adverse criticism could hardly go further than this. And yet, in view of the life-transforming influence of many of these colleges upon many of their students, it does not seem probable that these critics have made an accurate diagnosis of the ills of the liberal arts college. Is it not, rather, probable that they have failed to perceive what the real function of a liberal arts college is?

Unfortunately it is not only the adverse critics of the colleges who seem unaware of that peculiar function. The educators within the colleges commonly speak of the function of the college as a divided and not a unified one. This divided function is concerned with the differing aims of the first two and the second two years. The aim of the first two years is to provide the student with the founda-

tion of a general education. The aim of the second two years is slanted toward the student's special field of interest. If his interest is in a particular profession, his studies are slanted toward that profession and the subsequent specialized training of the professional school. But in any case, there is a distinct difference between the aims of these two periods of study.

If the college had no higher function than the intellectual one which it seeks to fulfill by this division of its aims, it could scarcely defend itself from the barbed shafts of those critics who contend that it occupies an anomalous position in our educational system. These critics accept the division which the colleges themselves make between the first two and the second two years, and then go on to contend that the program of the secondary schools should be extended to include the studies of these first two years, and that the studies of the second two years should be included in the program of the professional or graduate schools, thus eliminating the college altogether. It is pointed out that our system of education would then be in accord with the European, or German system, in which there is no institution closely comparable to the American college.

But the American college, peculiar as it is, is indigenous to the soil of America. Throughout its history, moreover, it has had a distinctive and a unified function. It is only in recent years, with the increasing emphasis on the necessity of vocational preparation, that the college has forgotten its primary function and become chiefly concerned with its secondary function which may well be a divided or twofold one.

Certainly there is as great need today as there ever was for some institution within our educational system which shall have for its primary concern, not the vocations, but the manhood and the womanhood of the oncoming generations. That was the traditional concern of the American college of liberal arts, and that is the forgotten concern of every college today which has not, above the divided aims of its secondary and divided function, the single aim of a primary and unifying function.

The concern of the college is a concern with the personality of the student, with the development of all his abilities—physical, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and cultural—and with the integration of these abilities in a unified life. Every institution within our educational system should have some regard for the development of all

these abilities; but by tradition, and by virtue of its exceptional opportunities, this should be the specialized concern of the college.

The educational task of the college is not exclusively an intellectual one. It is that, of course. The average high school graduate needs to be taught how to use his mind. He must learn how to analyze and dissect ideas and problems. He must also learn to think constructively—and to relate and integrate, to coordinate and synthesize. These learnings are easily acquired in this scientific age. But his intellectual training must not stop there. He needs not only to think dispassionately but also to think passionately. His imaginative powers need to be stimulated and disciplined in creative activity. And his insights and appreciations need somehow to be deepened and broadened.

The educational process involves not only the intellect but also the emotions. The college should therefore be concerned with the student's emotional life in all its aspects, in its aspirations and its longings and its various moods. It should awaken in the student an emotional response of personal and purposeful loyalty to the high ideals and significant meanings of life. The most effective power for the organizing and integrating of a life is a purpose for which to live. A significant purpose furnishes both of the two great needs of the emotional life: incentives and controls. The college is under obligation to provide for these needs.

And it has at hand an instrument equal to its task. For the college has ever been the guardian of the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. It is the privilege of the college to receive immature high school graduates into its care and to reveal to them the sovereignty and the everlasting reality of these ideals. Far from being the cloistered ideals of an academic community, these ideals touch the whole life of the individual and the whole life of humanity. Moreover they give to whatever they touch, significant meaning and purposeful direction. It is for this reason that it seemed legitimate to say of the aimless college graduate, whom we left all dressed up and with nowhere to go, that her greatest need was not of vocational training but of idealism.

The revealing of the nature and the sovereignty of the ideals of truth, goodness and beauty, and the awakening of a response to them, is not a privilege that can be quickly fulfilled. It takes time. It requires study. It needs an environment of detachment. It is

best accomplished in a community of free and inquiring minds. It could not have a better setting than the college affords, nor a more promising group to work with than the youthful undergraduates in our colleges.

It should be obvious that the "detachment" from the world which is here commended is a detachment of environment and not of interest. The first step away from idealism was taken when the colleges lost a vital interest in the world of humanity outside their walls, and both cultivated and affected an attitude of academic isolation. The college student should know what is going on in the world and what the desires, purposes, passions and prejudices are, which underlie the activities on the surface of the world's life. He should know about the significant institutions and social enterprises of mankind and what makes them significant. He should know something about the great problems which confront men in their group-relationships as racial or national or economic groups. His detachment from these affairs should be a detachment from the passions and prejudices involved in them, and not a detachment of his personal interest in them.

Through his deeper understanding of the meanings which underlie the surface relationships of human lives and the outward appearances of things in the physical world, and through his deeper understanding of his own life, the college student should be prepared to take his place in the life of the world as an interested, intelligent and serviceable participant.

The measure in which a college can prepare its students for this more intelligent participation in the world's life is intimately related to the subject-matter of its courses of study. The second step away from idealism was taken when the colleges began to increase and diversify their courses of study in subservience to the future vocational needs of their students. The more closely the colleges related themselves to the activities on the surface of the world's life, the less concerned they became with the meanings which lie below the surface. And yet, these deeper meanings were once the chief concern of the American college.

The traditional function of the college is still its highest function—the transforming of the student's personality by a process of education which is essentially idealistic. In its endeavor to fulfill this traditional function, the college of today has the advantage of a

deeper knowledge of the nature of personality and of its various and intimately related elements. The college of today will therefore be no less concerned with the development of the student's physical and emotional life than with his spiritual and intellectual life. It will regard each student's life as a whole and will be concerned with his whole development.

It thus appears that the divided intellectual programs of the college, and also its often detached program of physical education, may all be included in one comprehensive program which has a unified and a unifying purpose. That purpose may be stated in a few words as: the enlarging and the unifying of the student's personality, both for his own sake, and for the sake of his serviceableness to society.

This transformation of the student's personality must not be imposed upon him from the outside. It must come from within as a personal achievement, which the college should inspire, encourage, and guide, but which it cannot impose. All the energies that are needed for this transforming process are latent in the student's own life. All the incentives that are needed to motivate the transformation are latent in the needs of his fellow men. It is the privilege of the college to liberate these energies, to interpret these inciting needs, and to prepare the student, through the disciplines of its ideals, for his participation in the turbulent life of a world which needs all that he can put into it of strength, intelligence, and character.