Recalling the Responsibility of the Professor

No nation on earth has ever placed before its people a richer cornucopia of delights with fewer restrictions on choice. But while Americans are justifiably proud of the freedom this gives them, freedom is not reducible to the many options this abundance makes possible. A person is not free, for example, simply because she sees before herself a bewildering variety of goods and has money in her pocket; that person is truly free only if she can order that variety and make it less bewildering. In one sense, freedom increases as the number of choices increase. But freedom also involves informed choice, and information together with heightened powers of discrimination actually reduces the number of choices to the few that are worthy of serious consideration. This sort of freedom is called "positive freedom" or "autonomy" to the extent that such choices are our own and not foisted upon us by someone else. It contrasts with "negative freedom," or freedom viewed simply as the number of choices available at any moment.

Unlike negative freedom, positive freedom is not given at birth. It must be achieved through effort, increased understanding, and the ability to use one’s intellectual powers; and while negative freedom is protected in our society by a variety of institutions, positive freedom is the particular responsibility of schools and academies. Unfortunately, our secondary schools have shown little interest in positive freedom over the years and it has, therefore, devolved to the colleges and universities—and the professors who teach in them—to help young people in our society become self-determined, to gain control of their own minds and make informed choices. For a variety of reasons, however, the academy has ignored this responsibility in recent years.

In this essay I will join my colleagues in this special section and consider reasons why this has occurred and suggest remedies. To do this, I shall need to begin with a consideration of the nature of higher education and then turn to some of the factors that have come between institutions of higher education and their purpose. In the end, I shall recommend several rather specific steps the professoriate should take to restore a sense of purpose to the academy.

"Education," from the Latin, means literally "to draw forth." We find this enlight-
ning, however, only if we know what it is that is being drawn forth. As traditionally conceived, education draws forth the distinctly human potential that lies within every person. This means that while educators should not ignore the particular individuals they deal with, they should concern themselves primarily with what persons have in common and what makes humans unique as a species.

According to Aristotle, to say that educators should try to draw forth our “common human potential” means that they are to be concerned with virtue (arête), which in humans requires that once character has been formed reason needs to be developed in order to make self-directed activity possible. That is to say, human potential is developed to the extent that the formulation of and adherence to a person’s own, reasonable plans or objectives arise out of good character.

Such a concern with reason is not narrow, as is commonly charged: we are speaking of the whole person when we speak of Aristotle’s “rational animal,” and “reason” is not merely “intelligence” or “learning” any more than education is mere schooling. As Scott Buchanan has noted, “Our digestion is different because we have a rational soul. Our emotions are under the reason and so are other things like perception... [1]f you are educating anybody, the channel, the medium through which you do this, will be rational.” The result, if it is achieved successfully, will be autonomy, or what Brand Blanshard once called “reasonableness.” He described it as follows:

By reasonableness I do not mean intelligence, though that may be a great help. Attila, Torquemada, and Stalin were highly intelligent men, but they were not reasonable men. Nor is a reasonable man necessarily a learned man, for learning may be present without even ordinary common sense. No; the reasonableness of which I am speaking is a settled disposition to guide one’s belief and conduct by the evidence. It is a bent of the will to order one’s thought by the relevant facts, to order one’s practice in the light of the values involved, to make reflective judgment the compass of one’s belief and action.2

In the American system, as noted above, the burden of helping students achieve the goal of reasonableness is placed on our colleges and universities. Robert M. Hutchins argued some years ago that this need not be the case, that young people in our society could achieve positive freedom before they ever reach the academy. But, with the exception of occasional programs, such as Mortimer Adler’s paideia experiments, the concern in the secondary schools has been with methods rather than with purpose over the years. Accordingly, the goal of helping young people become reasonable devolves to our colleges and universities. It is a task made more difficult as a result of the poor preparation students bring to higher education. Fortunately, “the mind itself desires to be free.... We can use no mind except our own, but the more we use it, and the better, the closer it is in its resemblance to whatever other minds have been used well. Our mind desires to be the human mind.”3

The development of the student’s ability to use his or her mind, the cultivation of reason and sound judgment, is more vital now than it has ever been. Students confront increasingly complex contemporary problems and it is not an exaggeration to say that solutions to some of these problems will affect the survival of the species. More than ever before the world needs educated citizens, people who can perceive a problem when it exists, reason to a workable solution, and take effective action. More than other societies, a democratic society requires citizens who are free in this sense.

The goals of higher education have traditionally been bound up with the liberal arts. Aristotle coined the term “art,” which
involves “knowledge of universals” applied by “practical reason” to concrete problems of the \textit{polis}, or civic community. Western tradition, for the most part, has followed this usage.

The trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music comprised the original seven liberal arts formulated during the Middle Ages. These seven arts have proliferated until now. The liberal arts include all those subjects within humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences that free the mind from enslavement to inclination, habit, and passion through the application of principles and increased understanding. This is the current interpretation of what Aristotle meant when he characterized the liberal arts as “knowledge of universals” applied by “practical reason.”

We should recall that despite their practical application, the liberal arts are not “techniques.” They do not focus on “know how,” as does so much of what is currently taught in our colleges and universities. The liberal arts liberate the human mind by enabling it to make informed choices and, through a knowledge of theory and principles, understand why such choices must be made. To see what this would mean in a concrete case, one need only imagine a reasonable person, as Blanshard describes that person, making an important practical decision—such as what politician will get his vote, what social agencies he will support, how he should decide on a local referendum, whether he should boycott a local bank that exploits women, or even a seemingly frivolous decision such as what new car to buy. To the extent to which that reasonable person is also autonomous, he or she will be able to resist hucksterism, coercion, and intimidation; recognize exaggeration and prevarication; determine what is fact and what is not; and distinguish between an opinion that is supported by evidence and argument and one that merely feels comfortable.

A democratic society must presume that its citizens are capable of reasonable actions. By way of developing that capacity, therefore, it becomes the responsibility of certain institutions in a democratic society to prepare young minds for citizenship—reasonable action in the political sphere. This is where the goal of higher education and the requirements of a free society overlap. As Sidney Hook has said, a commitment to democratic rule is “at bottom a belief in the educability and reasonableness of [persons].” Therefore, confusion of purpose within the academy affects all members of a free society; the liberal arts must be defended against those who would reduce education to childcare or vocational training (or both), and the academies to way stations that provide the latest soporifics to a community in constant agitation. But, it would seem, this is precisely what has occurred. Why is this? What has gone wrong?

To answer these questions we need to separate factors that operate on the academy
within its own walls from those that operate from the outside. Regarding the latter, we need only mention that the single, clear role of the academy in our society has become confused as a result of the weakening of the family and the church as effective social institutions. The academy is now expected to solve every problem, to be all things to all people, and this exacts promises from the academy that it cannot possibly hope to deliver. But even if this were not the case, confusion abounds within the walls of the academy itself on the part of those who should be clearest about what it is they do, and it is to this confusion that we shall now turn.

There appear to be three major problems that cause the current confusion of purpose within the academy: (1) over-administration; (2) overspecialization; and (3) diminished concern with education per se. I shall examine each in turn.

Members of college and university faculties have probably always complained about the number of administrators, and they probably always will. In recent times, however, the situation has taken an alarming turn. Academies of higher learning in America are currently overrun with people whose role is not central to the purpose of education but who, nonetheless, seek to legitimize their positions within the academy by carving out territory and fortifying it with a barricade of jargon. This includes droves of minor administrators and so-called "nonteaching faculty" in areas such as student affairs, housing, counseling, employment services, drug rehabilitation, affirmative action, minority recruiting, and "learning resources" (read: "remedial learning"). This turn of events results directly from the social demands placed upon the academy as a result of the collapse of other viable social institutions, as mentioned above. What we need to note here is simply that the drain on scarce resources and the limited energies of those who take their task seriously cannot help but weaken and fractionalize the central purpose of education.

Recent data regarding this phenomenon are astonishing. A report by the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, cited in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, indicated that during the years between 1975 and 1985 the increase in full-time faculty in this country was 5.9 percent. During that same period, the increase in the number of administrators was 17.9 percent, and the increase in the number of "other professionals," presumably support personnel and non-teaching faculty, was 61.1 percent.

Someone once said that the reason the railroads are in trouble in this country is because they have forgotten that their business is to move passengers rather than trains. The situation is quite similar in institutions of higher learning across the nation: running the institution, including introducing new programs and hiring functionaries whose roles are obscure, has become an end in itself. This phenomenon is little more than the most recent consequence of what Jacques Ellul dubbed "the technological imperative," referring to the inversion of the proper relationship between means and ends. Put simply, the technological imperative dictates that the means to given ends become ends themselves, while attention to ends, why it is that something is being done, ceases altogether. The key word in a technological society is "efficiency." Ellul made the point rather vividly in 1954:

> Technical progress today is no longer conditioned by anything other than its own calculus of efficiency. The search is no longer personal, experimental, workmanlike; it is abstract, mathematical, and industrial. This does not mean that the individual no longer participates. On the contrary, progress is made only after innumerable individual experiments. But the individual participates only to the degree that he is subordinate to the search for efficiency, to the degree that he resists all the currents today.
considered secondary, such as aesthetics, ethics, fantasy. Insofar as the individual represents this abstract tendency, he is permitted to participate in technical creation, which is increasingly independent of him and increasingly linked to its own mathematical law.7

At the time Ellul was writing his book, the technological imperative was already operating in the realm of education as "teachers' colleges" were evolving rapidly with curricula focused almost exclusively on considerations of methods, with no concern for goals. The current problem is not new; it is simply getting worse.

Overspecialization, the second factor mentioned above, is also not new, and it is also getting worse. The irony here is that this phenomenon was born and nurtured within the academy itself without pressure from society. Be that as it may, overspecialization has made it increasingly difficult for members of college and university faculties to share any sense of common purpose. As a result, it is virtually impossible to get faculty volunteers to teach basic "general education" courses, or to deal in a systematic way with questions of how to order and integrate the curriculum. The sad fact is that members of college and university faculties are not prepared to discuss these issues as professionals. Often, they cannot. The resulting fragmentation of knowledge further widens the gap between the ideal of liberal education and what passes for education within the academy.

The problems associated with overspecialization may go back as far as the 1930s, when Harvard College introduced the elective curriculum. In all likelihood, however, the elective curriculum was an inevitable outcome of the granting of Ph.D.s in narrow fields that produced specialists whose main objective was to turn out more specialists. Michael Polanyi noted the problem in the sciences in 1957 when he wrote:

The organization of scientific progress is determined, in the first place, by the fact that modern science is so vast that any single person can properly understand only a small fraction of it. The Royal Society has eight sub-committees for the election of Fellows, each of which has a separate field of research alloted to it. One of these fields, for example, is mathematics; but individual mathematicians are further specialized and are competent to deal only with a small part of mathematics. It is a rare mathematician—we are told—who fully understands more than half a dozen out of fifty papers presented to a mathematical congress.... Adding to this evidence my own experience in chemistry and physics, it seems to me that the situation may be similar for all the major scientific provinces, so that any single scientist may be competent to judge at first hand only about one hundredth of the total current output of science.8

If we consider that this comment was made over forty years ago, we can compound the problem in the sciences and then apply it, pari passu, to the social sciences and humanities. From this vantage point we need not look far to see why a great many faculty members are unable to find common ground on which to discuss the critical issue of general education with their colleagues. Instead, it has led to the promotion of specialized disciplines at the expense of broader educational concerns, the expansion of major requirements, and an ongoing battle to increase the numbers of major students within departments. None of these concerns has anything to do with education per se and yet they are of central importance to many who set the academic tone.

This tendency to focus attention on narrow disciplines is closely related to the last item on our list of concerns and may stem from the same deeper causes. It is the diminishing concern among members of college and university faculties over matters that do not affect themselves directly.9 This phenomenon has been mentioned by Bruce Thornton in his essay printed above. What
concerns us are such things as job security, protecting territory, and guaranteeing political correctness. Let us discuss these in order.

The fact that members of university faculties are on the average older than they have tended to be in the past is a matter of historical accident. However, taken together with the consideration that many institutions of higher education are involved in a struggle to survive and jobs are difficult to find and hold on to, the fact that there are more older faculty members now than ever before does at least partly explain the current worries over job security. These worries, in turn, partly explain the lack of energy and attention to the things that should matter most to students. Some years ago, Gabriel Marcel warned us that “as soon as a preoccupation with security begins to dominate human life, the scope of human life itself tends to be diminished. Life, as it were, tends to shrink back on itself, to wither.”10 The tendency of interests to become narrow and long-range concerns to shorten, of “life shrinking back on itself,” surfaces everywhere in the effort to protect territory or areas of special interest and concern to faculty members themselves. Evidence of this is not hard to come by.

One of the more interesting examples occurs in a recent Carnegie Foundation study of the preparedness of students entering college. The study showed that members of diverse academic areas agreed that students generally were “seriously unprepared” for college. This assessment was confirmed by faculty members in virtually every academic department—except those in education departments, which is to say, those departments that are turning out the teachers of these students. Three-quarters of the college professors surveyed indicated that students with whom they have “close contact” are seriously unprepared in basic skills. The percentage of professors agreeing with this claim was as high as 80 percent (in mathematics) while the percentage of professors in education that agreed was only 50 percent. This is clear evidence of a group protecting its territory and raises profound questions about the willingness of these people to even consider issues of first importance to their students.

To make matters worse, the academy has recently given birth to cadres of zealots who view themselves as guardians of what is commonly called political correctness. These people are convinced that the liberal arts tradition, as they understand it, is reeking with the stench of sexism, racism, and class privilege. Not only do they refuse to defend that tradition, they attack it at every turn.11

In the face of this agitation and preoccupation with matters of secondary importance, the liberal arts struggle to find a place at the table. If there were other viable suggestions about what to substitute at the core of higher education the problem would not be as serious as it is. But none seems forthcoming, and none will as long as the issue of purpose is never raised in the first place.

As Professors Thornton and Lawler have noted in their essays, the situation is grave, indeed. Career academics have become “company men” (and women), more concerned with their own well-being than that of their students. They do not, for the most part, perceive themselves as preservers of culture, and those who would preserve that which is brilliant and best in Western high culture are dismissed by their colleagues as “out of touch.” The barbarians are no longer at the gate; they are within the walls—and they have rank and tenure.

Clearly, the gap between the ideal of liberal education in a democratic society and the reality we see today grows ever wider. The question is what, if anything,
can be done about it? I shall suggest a number of steps that would help to remedy the situation and in doing so I shall invoke a rather simple principle: the academy must once again focus attention on the ideal of liberal education as the attainment of positive human freedom.

With this in mind, and recalling the three major causes of our current malaise as specified above, we can begin by noting that the number and function of nonteaching faculty and administrators ought to be re-evaluated with a focus on the central purpose of higher education. That purpose, I have argued, is to help young people achieve positive freedom in the fewer than 2000 clock hours allowed for that purpose in four years of college—which is about the same amount of time a student will work in their first year after graduation.

The major effort to realize the purpose of a liberal education occurs, if it occurs at all, in the classroom. Accordingly, academic programs and standards must not be allowed to suffer in order to accommodate the latest trend in education or to hire personnel whose place in the academy does not seem remotely connected with liberal education. This is not to say that institutions of higher learning ought to be insensitive to such everyday matters as social injustice or the concerns of its graduates to find employment after graduation. Nor is it to say that those within the academy should not continue to rethink the question of purpose and make changes that will accommodate the students' real needs. It is simply to say that we must never lose sight of the fact that the most vital need of every student is to become an educated person. All else is secondary.

In addition to resisting the temptation to siphon off resources that are barely adequate to serve the purpose for which the academy exists, there are a number of specific steps that would help to restore that sense of purpose. For example, the certification and accreditation programs that are mandated by external agencies and which sometimes tend to overwhelm undergraduate education need to be carefully monitored. There are practical reasons why institutions of higher education feel bound to find acceptance with professional agencies. But as a matter of principle the imposition of strictures by groups of narrow specialists outside the academy is clearly antithetical to the purpose of a liberal education. If accreditation by these agencies cannot be avoided, the requirements should be added at the end of the completion of the baccalaureate requirements and should not be allowed to encroach on what is of first importance.

The problem lies not only with external agencies, however. As has already been mentioned, far too much emphasis is placed on undergraduate major requirements, without asking what these requirements have to do with the purpose of undergraduate education. It is not clear, for example, what the proper relationship is between positive human freedom and, say, a major in business administration, chemistry, philosophy, electrical engineering, or theater arts. In some cases the relationship seems remote, at best, but it is highly doubtful that a major, any major, can realize the goals of liberal education by itself. Accordingly, there should be guarantees that major programs be kept at reasonable maximums to allow for a balance among electives, major courses, and general "core" courses at the undergraduate level. Such a balance would appear to be a necessary condition for realizing the goals of a liberal education—the sufficient condition being the proper selection of those courses. Such a balance would require a maximum of 48 semester credits (64 quarter credits) in a major, with another 48 semester credits reserved for electives from an approved list.
of courses that will challenge students to use their minds. If it is considered necessary to increase the number of major credits, those additional credits should also be added at the end of the completion of the ordinary baccalaureate requirements. In other words, they are secondary to the central focus of a liberal education and should be treated as any other specialized requirements.

Another step toward halting the tendency of majors to become inordinately important, and to protect students from proselytizing by major advisors, would be to require that students work with academic advisors in disciplines outside their major field, especially in their first two years. Indeed, educational goals would be more nearly realized if students were not allowed to declare a major at all until their junior year. In any event, assistance from non-major advisors would be a step in the right direction. If there are technical questions advisors need to ask about unfamiliar disciplines, they can phone a colleague in that discipline.

In this regard, the issue of advisement in colleges and universities that allow students to take elective courses should be addressed in conjunction with the question of purpose. It is absurd on the face of it to simply hand a 19-year-old college sophomore a class schedule and ask him or her to choose courses, willy-nilly, that will further the goals of a liberal education. If students are to make informed choices among electives they must already know what those courses attempt to teach, but if this were true, they would not need to take those courses in the first place!

Nonetheless, faculty members are reluctant to give advice outside their own disciplines—for reasons we have already considered—and students are frequently left to grope in the dark and take courses that their friends recommend (for various reasons) or which fit into a free hour in their schedules. Faculty responsibility in the education of young people, we should recall, is to certify that the baccalaureate degree their institution confers, upon their recommendation, is a mark of a process that has been completed to their professional satisfaction: the person who graduates is presumably an educated person. In this regard, faculty advisement in the realm of elective courses is of central importance, certainly as important as the selection of core courses and the determination of major requirements. Advisement must be, to a degree at least, paternalistic.

This does not mean that faculty members should sit students down and tell them what to take. The truth lies somewhere between that and letting students fend for themselves, and it relates directly to the acquisition of positive freedom that we have discussed throughout this essay. Students must be assisted in learning how to make informed choices among electives as a part of the process of acquiring autonomy. That is, the advisement process itself should be a part of the process of educating students. Students should select courses with one eye on their individual interests and the other on their general needs as young people who hope to become educated. Like it or not,
faculty members must assume responsibility for the latter. One hesitates in this egalitarian age to say that professors "know best," but, surely, they know better than their students. The ideal of advisement should be to achieve a mentoring relationship in which students' needs meld with their interests and desires and express themselves in informed choices made by the students themselves with professional assistance.\textsuperscript{12}

These are items of major concern, but several other items suggest themselves as ways to restore a sense of purpose to the academy:

(1) Increase "core requirements" to at least one-third of the undergraduate load for both the B.A. and the B.S. degrees, and stress the need for articulating in a coherent fashion the interrelatedness of core courses. These courses should not merely be introductory courses to recruit academic majors. Focusing on the relationship that ought to exist among required courses will force faculty members to come to grips with philosophical issues about the nature and purpose of education, which may open some lines of communication and increase awareness among members of faculties that disciplines other than their own also have strengths.

(2) Reward teachers for becoming involved in planning and teaching core courses through incentive pay or released time from teaching. The faculty unions should make this a priority.

(3) Eliminate "publish or perish" at the undergraduate level. Tenure and promotion should not be tied to publication in narrow, professional journals; it should be tied directly to success in the classroom, which can be measured more reliably than most critics would like to admit. The other dimension of this precept is to reward good teaching of core courses as well as courses within specific disciplines with pay increases and public recognition.

If Arnold Toynbee were writing today he would doubtless warn us that our civilization, like those before it, is entering a "time of troubles." In this regard, the term "crisis" is heard on every hand, and overworked though it is, the term does seem to apply to higher education at least. This has been made abundantly clear by the other contributors to this special section. The role of preserver and transmitter of high culture that the academy has played since the Middle Ages is being seriously questioned in the apparently inexorable move toward cultural pluralism. Further, as we have seen, the academy itself suffers from confusion of purpose, coupled with a disturbing unwillingness on the part of those responsible for education to raise the question of purpose in the first place.

The measures suggested in the latter portions of this essay may seem outmoded. But the times are out of joint and the academy is floundering in the midst of a turbulent society that makes demands upon it that have nothing whatever to do with its central educational role. It is essential, therefore, to rethink the question of purpose and regain a clear focus. My suggestion is that we must begin by recognizing, minimally, that a democratic society has more real need for reasonable citizens than it does for accountants, engineers, school teachers, or Ph.D.s. If the academy is to accomplish anything worthwhile in the years to come, all other demands that have been placed upon it must stand and wait their turn.

Notes

1959), 79. 4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Alpha. The use of the term "art" instead of "science" implies that such knowledge of universals has a predominantly practical import for Aristotle. Reason is therefore to be regarded as "practical reason" and thought is the application of principles to action, or what Aristotle called "practical wisdom." The liberal arts, therefore, are directed toward making persons of action rather than philosophers. 5. Sidney Hook, *Education and the Taming of Power* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1973), 310. A great deal of Hook’s criticism of Robert Hutchins’s position on issues in higher education arises from a failure on Hook’s part to grasp what Aristotle meant by "virtue." 6. "Big Increases in Academic Support Staffs Prompt Growing Concerns on Campuses," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 28, 1990). 7. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Trans. John Wilkinson. (New York: Vintage Books, Inc. 1964), 78. 8. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University Press, 1962), 216. 9. This may seem a bit of an overstatement, and data are admittedly hard to find to corroborate it. Some evidence does exist, however, in the wide usage of anthologies in undergraduate education. The popularity of books that contain highly specialized articles from professional journals raises serious questions about their appropriateness at the undergraduate level and the motivation that leads to their selection in the first place. As suggested here, the problem seems to me to be a part of a larger, cultural problem, which I have termed "inverted consciousness." (See my essay "Our Hatred of Values," in *Modern Age*, Summer 1985, 242-249.) 10. Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1969), 59. 11. This movement is cause for alarm among those who care about the restoration of purpose to the academy. For extended comment, see my latest book, *Rediscovering Values: Coming to Terms with Postmodernism* (M.E. Sharpe, 1997). 12. In this regard, recall Locke’s discussion of "paternal power" in which he warns that "to turn [a person] loose to an unrestrained liberty before he has reason to guide him is not allowing him the privilege of his nature to be free, but to thrust him out amongst brutes and abandon him to a state as wretched and as much beneath that of a man as theirs." *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, Section 63.

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