

At the University

The limits of participatory democracy

By RONALD ROUSSEVE

During my first meeting with classes at the start of a new term, as we size each other up, I present a few ground rules that are designed to acquaint students with some of my expectations (and values). One of those ground rules stipulates that there be no smoking in the classroom during our regular class sessions, although those students who are periodically seized by an irresistible urge to "light up" may certainly leave the classroom to satisfy their craving and then return to the group setting sans cigarette. This arrangement is designed to keep the classroom atmosphere as free of polluted air as possible while protecting the rights of both non-smokers and smokers alike.

At the beginning of the current fall quarter, following my customary presentation of this ground rule (and the rationale upon which it is based), a student seriously asked, "Can't we vote on that?" I wasn't quite prepared for that query, but did manage to reply to the effect that not every determination needs to be "legitimized" by majority vote and that the justifications for some behavioral regulations are self-evident!

As I reflect on that incident and the notion that majority sentiment is the ultimate criterion that should be appealed to in choosing all priorities and directions, I am struck by the magnitude of some of the distorted perceptions about the University's operational character. So-called "participatory democracy" has limited applicability in the realm of serious higher education. And those who espouse an uncritical attitude of "egalitarian democracy" in the effort to resolve all of the issues confronting the University run the risk of weakening the structure that must prevail if credible and responsible higher learning and professional preparation are to be advanced.

In a recent article in *The Humanist*, Paul Kurtz, Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, raised the question, "Shall the nature of the educational process be determined by rigorous standards of intellectual excellence, or chiefly by the consumer students themselves?" This question is not a gross misrepresentation of some contemporary trends.

Witness, for example, the weakening (if not the outright abolition) of prescribed curricular components in the programs of study offered in many sectors of American higher education today.

I suggest that one idea is not necessarily as good as another; that the student is not always the best judge of what is good for him or what he ought to learn; that the development of disciplined, critical intelligence and professional mastery cannot be fostered except within a framework of fundamental substantive content; and that the fallacious extension of the notion of participatory democracy to all the affairs of formal education, unless checked, could lead to a progressive vulgarization of the essentials of liberal education.

The university simply cannot be "all things to all people," and in the discharge of its special responsibilities there are times when those who are best qualified to judge must prevail. To quote Kurtz: "Do experience and training mean nothing, and the world of an educator who has devoted his life to education equal that of an incoming freshman who hates math and would rather experiment with drugs? In my view, the faculty should be largely responsible for running the university or college, sharing some responsibility with students and administrators..."

It is, of course, all to the good that American higher education is now seeking to better convert into practice the cherished democratic principles of equality of opportunity and functional relevance. In so doing, however, the university should not compromise its undergirding principles, its minimal standards of intellectual excellence, or its rightful functions as a social institution. Indeed, to do so would be ultimately self-defeating not only for the larger society, but for the individual student consumer as well.

A clear-cut case in point concerns ethnicity and some of the curricular innovations which have surfaced in recent years in response to demands that American education give visibility to an alleged "black mystique" in its instructional offerings. Now while it is a matter of record that I have supported with considerable vigor the legitimacy of carefully conceived enrichment programs in ethnic studies, I also contend that some of the "learning

experiences" which we in academia have passively permitted to emerge in this area of the curriculum can only be classified properly under the rubric of an educational charade!

But lest I be charged with exaggerated overstatement, perhaps the following recent comments from Jack L. Daniel, Chairman of the Department of Black Community Research and Development at the University of Pittsburgh, will serve to corroborate the observation that we have indeed unwittingly allowed some of our contemporary black American youth to drift into the self-defeating quagmire of non-values: "As Black Studies are developed we must make sure that we do not create foolishness. Specifically, we must not create a safe retreat for students who are afraid or too lazy to take statistics and research methods and, therefore, take classes where incompetent teachers say that research methods are irrelevant. We must not create a 'local pub' in the disguise of a Black Studies department or program where people come and talk about how funky they can get, how beautiful their body odor is, how many cute and fantastic ways they can use obscenities to mean everything from love to hate, and debate such issues as whose hair is the nappiest, whose gala is best wrapped, and who has the loudest voice and the best military dress to scare the white man the most."

"Black people do not need individuals who will use something called oral tradition as a reason not to turn in their term papers. We are in great need of people who will write the new textbooks that our children so badly need."

How unfortunate it is that during the past six or seven years, some American educators, thrown asunder by the faddish "ideology of ethnicity," have seemingly lost sight of the essentials of education in a democracy. The central purpose of American education is the development of the power to think critically. Education for responsible freedom will also enable a person to judge, to evaluate; it will provide the knowledge resources by which value preferences are chosen as the developing individual is liberated from valuelessness, stupidity, meaninglessness, inhumanity, irrationality.

Consequently, American educators must maintain a certain "critical distance" in response to the rhetoric of those who clamor for the opportunity to mount their own (largely autonomous) courses in racial consciousness. Not to do so on the basis of another naive capitulation to the popular appeal of participatory democracy is to run the risk of defaulting on our professional responsibilities as resourceful faculty personnel in a complex modern society. To put this observation in unmistakably clear terms, we live in and must achieve what personal fulfillment we can within the current reality of an American society that is described as competitive and meritocratic. Within such a societal context, racial ideology should be subordinate to marketable human competence. Accordingly, the education of contemporary black Americans should foster that quality of intellectual power and responsible personhood which will enable ever increasing numbers of black people to compete successfully for positions across the full spectrum of occupations in our complex meritocratic society.

In short, the effectiveness of American colleges and universities in efficiently promoting the development of men and women who have disciplined intelligence, a mature sense of responsible interdependence, and socially useful professional competencies can be seriously weakened by an uncritical acquiescence to the notion of participatory democracy. And while I am prepared to debate this contention with others here at the University of Oregon, I would, of course, resist any effort to resolve the probable divided opinion on this matter by "submitting it to a vote!"

Incidentally, I support with enthusiasm the co-governance proposal that will soon be presented to the general faculty here and hope that it will be adopted. Still, in my view, not every conception of participatory democracy is fully compatible with all facets of the life of a university, and I shall probably continue to reject the suggestion that students in my classes be granted the liberty to settle the questions of smoking privileges and content priorities by majority vote.

Rousseve is a professor in Education and CSPA.

Letters

Saying it all

I would like to congratulate Paul Hass on a truly fine letter of rebuttal to Bruce McDonald's outrageous commentary concerning rally squads. Mr. Hass, the last sentence of your November 12th letter, and I quote—"If it weren't for the aesthetic pleasure some of the female cheerleaders provide during dull spots in the game, the rally squad would be long gone by now"—says it all.

Vickie Middleton
Elem. Ed.

Verbal vomit

Having endured just one of Prince Paul Charming Wallulis' blatantly infantile, pseudo-vitriolic attempts at satire (one really can't take such verbal vomit seriously!), one won't even bother to refute his "facts" because they are merely that: facts only to those as "brainless and indecisive" as himself.

Descending to his own childish emotional plane (one wouldn't want him to miss the point!): He knows what he can shove up his ass! (Heavens—Sodomy!)

S.L. Hammond
Junior, Business Administration

