
COLLEGIATE TIMES

My Soul Longs for Plato, Ritchie Valens

By U.S. Secretary of Education William J. Bennett

When I arrived at college as a freshman some time ago, I had definite ideas about how to use my four years of higher education. I was resolved to play a little football, and I wanted to major in English in order to become sophisticated, land a good job and make big money.

But because of my college course requirements, I found myself in an introductory philosophy class, confronted by Plato's *Republic* and a remarkable professor who knew how to make the text come alive. Before we knew it, my classmates and I were ensnared by the power of a 2,000 year old dialogue.

In our posture of youthful cynicism and arrogance, we at first resisted believing that the question of justice should really occupy our time. But something important happened to us that semester as we fought our way through the *Republic*, arguing about notions of right and wrong. Along the way, our insides were shaken up a bit. Without quite knowing it, we had committed ourselves to the serious enterprise of raising and wrestling with great questions. And once caught up in that enterprise, there was no turning back. We had met up with a great text and a great teacher; they had taken us, and we were theirs.

Every student is entitled to that kind of experience at college. Good courses should shake you up a little, expel stale opinions, quicken your senses, and animate a conscious examination of life's enduring questions. Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence indicates that this is simply not taking place at enough of our colleges. That fact is becoming increasingly obvious.

Proof of this is the extraordinary reception given to the University of Chicago Professor Allan Bloom's new



book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Although I must say that I dissent from his views on rock n' roll, this is a brilliant and challenging book. It contains a devastating critique of, and moving lament for, contemporary American higher education. And for most of the summer, it has been at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Our Universities, Professor Bloom asserts, are too often hostile to serious thought; no longer are they places where the transmission, criticism, and renewal of intellectual traditions are assured. "The University now offers no distinctive visage to the young person," Bloom asserts, nor a set of competing visions of what an educated human being is.

If Professor Bloom is correct--and there is every reason to believe that he is--then something has gone terribly wrong on many American campuses. Students are not getting the education--the experiences, the challenges, the true opening up to man's achievement and life's possibilities--that they deserve.

As a student, you can do something about this. The first thing you can do is get a copy of Allan Bloom's book, and read it. Think about what he has to say. Ask yourself some hard questions about your college or

university. And ask those same hard questions of your professors, faculty, and administrators.

If you're not satisfied with the answers you get--if you're not satisfied with the education your school is providing--resolve to get a good education anyway. Fortunately, at least a few good allies can be found on almost every campus: good teachers, serious friends, and good books. In selecting courses, don't be afraid intellectually to bite off more than you can chew. Seek out the best teachers, those who can stretch the limits of your knowledge and bring life to the subject at hand. Take advantage of those teachers in class and after class.

In the end, regeneration of our universities will come from within. Only those within the academy can rescue the academy. Students can play a part. Students can demand that colleges live up to the promises in their glossy catalogues. This will benefit you, and it will be a service to those who follow in your path.

So read Bloom, think hard--but also have fun this year. And in this one respect, feel free to act contrary to Bloom's advice: feel free to listen to a few, or more than a few, rock n' roll classics along the way. This summer, as Allan Bloom's book was number one on the best-seller lists, the Los Lobos film soundtrack to *La Bamba* was topping the *Billboard* charts. Take it from a former rock band guitarist, from a soul that will not cease longing to hear Ritchie Valens and Buddy Holly just one more time, that rock n' roll and a good education are not incompatible. ©

Editor's Note: *Collegiate Times* is a syndicated column published by a the Collegiate Network, a league of provocative campus publications including *Oregon Commentator*.