

PURPOSE AND PROGRAM
OF THE
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON LIBERAL STUDIES

The Special Committee was formed to cope with increasing threats to the basic purpose of liberal learning by searching for more effective ways of recapturing or strengthening the relevance and impact of liberal learning. It is made up of both administrators and scholars and serves as the central planning and policy body of the program.

I. The Basic Purposes of Liberal Learning

The Committee feels that the basic justification of liberal studies is to provide the kinds of knowledge and to nurture the kinds of interests, abilities and judgment that help men and women realize their more significant potentials of personal fulfillment and social contribution. This is not to deny the conviction of most scholars and teachers in our colleges of liberal arts and sciences that one fundamental purpose of liberal education is to arouse and sustain intellectual curiosity and the pursuit of liberal knowledge for its own sake. These are certainly significant potentials of personal and social fulfillment. It is to say, however, that the fundamental purpose is the more inclusive and deeper one, especially in a free and democratic society, of drawing on the knowledge and ideas that learning offers and developing from these the kinds of interest, judgment and rational power that enable us to make life more significant in all its aspects. Our primary task is not to train technical scholars but to offer a basic liberal education to all students whatever their professional future.

II. Means to Ends

We feel that attaining this fundamental goal of liberal learning depends very heavily on the range and variety of human and social understanding which liberal studies can provide, on the versatility of attack they suggest on our most fundamental problems, on the concerns they can generate for dealing with ideas and ideals, and on the competence they can develop in relating these fruitfully to the realities, attitudes and actions of life.

III. Threats to the Relevance of Liberal Education

The Committee is satisfied that serious threats to these ends and means of liberal learning stem from the growing depersonalization of education, particularly in our larger institutions, from an eroding commitment to teaching and the art of teaching and from the disproportionately heavy thrust in scholarship and education toward professional specialization and expertise and toward the preoccupation with acquiring large blocks of precise factual knowledge. This is not to deny the importance of precise thought and knowledgeable minds. It is, however, to affirm a serious imbalance between technical scholarly training as against the understanding and interpreting of knowledge and the application of knowledge and ideas to personal and social issues and actions. Our concerns are to correct the imbalance.

IV. Basic Methods -- Seeds of Ferment and Evolving Plans

Since the ways by which our minds grow in these areas of human understanding and wisdom are so complex and elusive, depending as they do on personal attitudes and individual powers and qualities of mind, we seriously doubt the efficacy, certainly at this stage, of extensive highly structured modes of attack. On the contrary such attitudes and qualities of mind grow mostly from the seeds of enthusiasms, ideas and suggestions as they arise in the give-and take of reading, thought and discussion among those most concerned, among students, teachers and educators. We doubt that much of abiding importance can happen except as there is a ground swell of such concern and effort rising through faculty and student ranks.

V. The Teachers Themselves

Such ferment has to start where education is really defined -- that is, in the hearts and minds of the teachers themselves. Our fundamental approach therefore has been to meet with groups of teachers and scholars of demonstrated ability who share our concerns, would like to do something about the problem, and are in a position to help, and who above all personify in their own scholarship and teaching the kind of commitment to teaching and the kind of liberal learning we affirm.

VI. An Exploratory and Developing Program

We have proceeded therefore and propose to continue with a definitely exploratory, flexible and developing program as follows:

A. Extend our search for faculty members, and indeed a few especially effective administrators of the type suggested. (See Appendix A for list of participants to date.)

B. Meet with groups of such persons on a regional basis for the following purposes:

(1) To recognize and encourage them in their own teaching and scholarship.

(2) To generate ideas and concerns among them for similar fermentive efforts in their own institutions in the hope that these may generate not only better and more humanistic teaching but may indeed stimulate local collaborative educational programs for the purpose.

(3) To discover how the Special Committee might be of further help to these teachers and scholars whether individually or with groups or programs in their institutions.

(4) To get ideas on how educational associations, foundations or other wider agencies might best further our cause with more far-reaching programs in these basic ways.

(5) To establish a roster of gifted teachers and scholars who might profit from or contribute to such larger programs.

(6) To keep these teachers and scholars in communication with each other through a periodic news letter, reporting new educational enterprises gotten underway.

C. The Special Committee itself will hold regular meetings for the following purposes:

(1) To appraise the results of prior regional meetings.

(2) To consider how we might best sustain the interest generated and extend it further.

(3) To consider how and to what extent the Committee might be helpful to participants in their own work and with programs they might be interested in developing.

(4) To select the most fruitful ideas and suggestions which educational associations, foundations or other agencies might adopt or support and how we might encourage them to do so.

(5) To note the special interests and talents of participants in the regional meetings for purposes of knowing those that might profit most from larger programs or participate in them.

VI. Results to Date

Results to date are not dramatic but are significant and encouraging. Most of those invited to our meetings have come. Not all have turned out to be of the quality we seek nor have all of them accepted our analysis of the situation or our basic method of meeting it. We are convinced, however, that there are a great many of the quality we seek in our colleges and universities who welcome the emergence of this kind of program and will profit from it and want to help with it. We have had instances where participants have changed their own courses in significant ways as a result of these meetings or where they have

started collective course programs in their communities. We have also had instances of efforts to start larger institutional programs.

We have received a great many ideas on how foundations, associations or other large agencies could help the cause. Many of these would be beyond the power of the Special Committee to implement and many are not consonant with our approach in seeking to extend the ferment of concern and developing programs among teachers and scholars themselves, at least of the quality and at the level that concern us. Some, however, may prove very fruitful and the Committee will try to select the most promising of these and implement them.