

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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The House of Education Needs Overhaul

The Theory Behind Simon's Rock

Elizabeth Blodgett Hall
Bard College at Simon's Rock

EDITORS' NOTE: *Elizabeth Blodgett Hall wrote "The House of Education Needs Overhaul" in the summer of 1967 at the request of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). It was published by NAIS that fall and circulated to the Association's membership of over 800 schools in the United States and abroad. The substance of that article embodying the theory behind Simon's Rock is reprinted here. In pursuit of cross-program collaboration and dialogues, the editors invited [responses to Hall's article by early college leaders](#) for the first issue of Early College Folio.*

I.

While every other structure in the United States has been replaced or remodelled as modernization required, the House of Education has remained unaltered. It is a jerry-built affair, with floors or levels added haphazardly without regard for structural integrity. Children enter at the bottom and emerge at the top prepared, presumably, to enter the adult world. When a grade school education was no longer enough for the majority, a high school was superimposed. Then the four college years. And, finally, the graduate school. By implication each higher level is more important than the lower with teachers' salaries and tuition fees, where they exist, ascending the stairs with the student. By implication, too, the higher the level attained by the student the more important his worth as an individual. Hence the race to the top and the growing tendency to emphasize competence in stair-climbing at the expense of individual development and the true relationship of process to the goal, that all students should be matured along the way and made ready to take their places as adults in the adult world.

The structure is not sound because the concept is unsound. The keepers of the House have been commendably concerned with every activity engaged in at the various levels—the pre-school child, reading readiness, the relation of ability to performance, the special needs of both the "gifted" child and his euphemistic counterpart the "exceptional child," the overhaul of social studies curriculum, the "new math," the proper place of the arts, the impact of new advances

in science on the teaching of science, the problem of the “two cultures,” new techniques for teaching language, the value of testing, counseling and guidance, and so on. But the shades have been drawn in the rooms along the way.

The interest of an individual cannot be gratified until he has met requirements in a field of study for which he has no aptitude. A “good solid average” is more advantageous than the development of a particular excellence. In short, the race to the top has put even the most earnest and conscientious teacher in the position of appearing to suggest to his students that the end of education is to be better than your neighbor rather than to do the best that your talents make possible, and that the urgent world of now is a world to which they cannot belong until they have completed their education.

The House of Education needs overhaul, particularly in that portion of the edifice which serves the intellectually competent who have mastered the Three R's but are still not in a position to make a commitment as to the way in which they will spend their lives. These are the “middle years” of our educational sequence and, as that sequence is now ordered, they span the last two years of high school and the first two years of college. These are the years of the “teen-ager” who can, if he is sufficiently affluent, bright and alienated, become the “hippy.” And these are the years when physically mature human beings want most of all to be treated like adults so they can act like adults. Instead, because of their very brightness, they are treated like children because of our insistence that they need more preparation outside the main stream of adult life, behind the shaded window. We are wasting their time and their talents. And some of the most able, outraged by what they see as our perfidy, are forming a subculture which, because it is denied an outlet for its idealism in effective action, tends to be nihilistic in character and may not be able to transmit to succeeding generations the wisdom sifted from the past.

It is proposed here that an effective overhaul can be accomplished by opening the whole plan of liberal education, content and format, as it is commonly offered to students now in the four-year sequence after high school, to the student who has completed the tenth grade. It would provide an opportunity for liberal education along the lines of the student's interests and abilities, free of the invidious comparisons which beset the student in competition with his fellow in a “preparatory track.” It would involve him in the world of now, which is his urgent concern, and impose upon him an adult responsibility for the views he holds by fostering in him a capacity for considered judgement on those matters which, above all, he wants to judge. It would give him time to determine whether he is in fact an intellectual who should pursue further formal education for the learned professions or an able mind that is more likely to be congenially situated in less scholarly pursuits. And, finally, it would recognize that, while not yet ready to commit himself concerning the place he will finally take in the adult world, he is in physical fact an adult and should be treated as such in order that he may assume adult responsibility for his powers.

In the farm economy of our forebears children were turned into adults as soon as arms could carry a load of wood or a pail of water. There was no such thing as a “teen-ager” or even an adolescent in any but the physiologically descriptive sense. Adult responsibility was imposed on the young as soon as possible. “Too soon” is bad, but “too late” may be just as bad. Today, as always, boys and girls are capable midway through high school or earlier, of begetting children. They are physically adult. But we are telling them that they cannot be adult in other ways for another ten years at least. They protest and we protest. “Don’t trust anyone over 30!” Why should they? We have given them no focus for their drive other than their idealistic goals. We won’t let them work. It might cost others their jobs. Furthermore, the sophisticated employment which we want our bright offspring to undertake presupposes years of training. If becoming an adult takes that long, they won’t wait. In any case the goal is often unattractive. Who wants to become a “cog” in a huge industrial machine? And there is always the chance that military service will have finessed the future before then anyway. Without a program for replacing war with peace and hate with love, what action remains other than protest, the expression of a corrosively contradictory state of mind which hates everybody who doesn’t love everybody else? This is as they see it.

We are denying youth the opportunity to be adult, if being adult means assuming adult responsibilities. If years are required for the training that will permit the intellectually competent to undertake the productive employment most suited to them, then those years should be ones in which they are required to take responsibility for their thoughts as well as their actions. Physical maturity is reached early. The basic skills of learning have been mastered by the intellectually able during the first ten years of formal schooling as it is now conducted in Grades One through Ten. Forthwith a liberal education should be provided for young adults instead of a preparatory program for teen-agers.

II.

There is a four-year span here when youth should become acquainted with the whole range of human inquiry--man in relation to his physical environment--man in relation to his fellow man or social environment--and man in relation to the world of his own creation, his music, art, religion, literature, and philosophy. These are the middle years, before vocational or professional training, for finding out about oneself and what one is interested in and able to do, without regard for what one has to do for a living. These are the years for a liberal education, a four-year sequence for students who have completed the tenth grade.

1. **ACADEMICALLY** the program would be organized as is the traditional college program, with opportunity to concentrate, or do the major portion of work, in one area of the liberal arts while distributing the balance of studies in the other areas.

2. PEDAGOGICALLY the emphasis would be on inquiry along the lines of the student's interest and on the development of those arts and habits deemed essential for the liberally educated of any age.

“...for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness.”

William Cory Johnson, the 19th century master at Eton, who thus defined what was to be accompanied during these middle years, was fired for his views. His superiors might have decided differently had they been subjected to the intemperate judgement of a 20th century youth whose “preparatory” education does little to moderate the violent effects of the emotional stimuli delivered to him continuously via the mass media.

3. CONTENT would focus on the present and the search for the past for explanation. Relevance to the contemporary of which the young adults is a part, and to the future which is his urgent concern, would be the determinant.

4. STRUCTURE would endeavor always to cultivate in the student an awareness of the effect of his individual actions upon himself and others. This does not mean the permissiveness which fosters self-centeredness and a view that the rule of law limits rather than protects individual freedom. It does mean granting to young adults the adult's freedom of choice accompanied by effective teaching as to the nature of the consequences for which the students as adults will be held responsible. Too few adults have the courage to handle powerful, head-strong young people in this way because the consequences invited by a free choice of action are often ones we would prefer to avoid. The temptation is strong to lock the young adult in restriction which will save him from harm and us from embarrassment. But the young adult of today, with his affluence and far-ranging automobile, will not stay locked up. And even if he could be thus restricted, he would fail to learn what he had been saved from and would invite the consequences later when no one was near to counsel or help. Better now, and early, to teach youth that the freedom of maturity lies not in the absence of restrictions but in the privilege that comes from having, through competence and responsibility, won the trust and respect of others. The subtlety of this distinction is not learned in a few lessons. Repeated experience is required under tutelage before it is understood that self-restraint insures personal freedom by obviating the imposition of restrictions by others.

III.

Such a program, by giving young people between the ages of 15 and 20 a

chance to practice adult responsibility, should result in early maturity. It should permit the identification, well before age 20, of the individual's particular talents and interests, the greater development of those talents and interests that have been identified, and an earlier appreciation of the fact that excellence is of many kinds. It should also promote an understanding that liberal learning has no end because the search leads more often to further questions, and that its satisfaction lies in the development of a disciplined mind that is able and free to pursue the quest throughout a lifetime.

If, by age 19, the average age at which students would finish such a program, this much has been learned, young people would surely be better able to practice effectively and responsibly the almost total independence which is theirs anyway now, whether we like it or not, at that age or before.

To begin with, the critical choice of what to do in the years immediately ahead could be made on the basis of a knowledge both of self and of the alternatives. As it is now we ask them in effect at age sixteen, when we introduce them to college admission procedures, whether they want to go to college or not. At this time they neither know what "college" is all about, nor do they know themselves. In any case it is a "phony" question, so recognized by them and accepted as further evidence that the older generation lacks integrity. We do not really offer them a choice because we want them to go to college and deny them alternatives. Which of them is going to opt for staying at home with the parents!

If, instead, their liberal education could be given to them sooner, then, at an age when many college sophomores are still wondering who they are and rebelling against frustrations, a valid choice could be made. Some would decide to press on toward the professions via the completion of requirements for graduate school. Others would decide to enter specialized training in the arts or vocations. Still others could terminate with a bloc of work completed and credit established with an Associate of Arts degree. Of these many might return to formal education later in life, an option that may become increasingly popular as we live longer in better health with more leisure time. Meanwhile a respectable option, far preferable to the expedient of "dropping out" part way along the present four-year college span, is offered to those who wish for the time being at least to "quit school." A way out could thus be provided for those who want to "try something else for a while" since the doors to both paid and volunteer employment are open to those of nineteen as they are not to those younger.

Finally, the way would be open for a long overdue attempt at distinguishing clearly between liberal and vocational education. If the years in question, the four years ensuing upon tenth grade, are years to be spent by the intellectually competent in freely searching for an understanding of self and others, then they are the years for a liberal education to be spent without regard for what one must do later to earn a living. At ages 16, 17, 18, and 19 this is possible because there is still time ahead for specialized, or vocational, training. But our present system wastes the opportunity by catering to the competition for ad-

mission to college. The college freshman, thus “prepared,” finds himself further detained from free inquiry by the necessity of “prerequisites.” By the time he is finally liberated to inquire freely in line with his interests and aptitudes the future is pressing hard upon him and he is, in all probability, thinking of his education primarily as a means to job preferment with his courses and associates to be chosen accordingly. While granting that the liberally educated person is probably better at any job he undertakes because of his liberal education, it can be argued that the person whose education is overshadowed throughout by material considerations, from academic credits to cash advantage is not going to be liberally educated.

ELIZABETH BLODGETT HALL (1909-2005) was the founder and president emeritus of Bard College at Simon’s Rock. Hall opened the school, then called simply “Simon’s Rock,” in the Fall of 1966. Today, Simon’s Rock operates as the only four-year college in the United States specifically designed for younger scholars.