

WHO, WHAT, AND HOW?

"Commencement," in the academic lexicon, is a time when we award degrees which signify the end of formal academic programs and launch our graduates into the larger society. It is not literally a "commencement," of course, because many of our students are simply finishing one phase of their academic careers and entering another. And in the scientific and professional worlds it is becoming increasingly apparent that there can be no end to one's education if one hopes to keep abreast of rapidly changing developments in the field.

Nevertheless, graduation ceremonies provide a time for reflection, and I would like to reflect with you on three questions. They are: (1) Who are you when you come to us? (2) What do we do to you while you are here? (3) How will you fit into the larger society once you are out?

I

We know a good deal about you when you come here as undergraduates because all schools ask their applicants for information, and because educational organizations, like the American Council on Education, then make comparative studies of students who go to various kinds of institutions.

Our figures show that ninety percent of our incoming freshmen ranked in the top quarter of their high school class, and that a far larger proportion of them than the national average would suggest expect to pursue graduate studies at either the master's, doctoral, or professional level.

We know also that far more of the parents of our incoming students have college degrees than would be true nationally.

The most recent survey shows that incoming freshmen ranked

themselves along the political spectrum as fifty-five percent "liberal," thirty percent "middle," eight per cent "conservative," six percent "far left," and one percent "far right."

Both locally and nationally, students said that the government was not adequately controlling pollution or protecting consumers. They also favored job equality for women, discouragement of large families, and abolition of the death penalty.

Interestingly, the most frequently mentioned personal objective of new freshmen, cited by eighty per cent of the incoming freshmen, was "to develop a philosophy of life." Sixty percent suggested the direction of that philosophy by saying that they wanted "to help others in difficulty."

Finally, all incoming freshmen, rated themselves "better than average" in high academic ability, drive to achieve, and understanding of others. At the same time, about half of them said that they were cheerful, original and stubborn!

From this combination of statistical data and self-analysis perhaps it is fair to say that the profile which emerges is that of bright students who tend to favor change as against the status quo, who want to help others, who say that their single greatest aim is to develop a philosophy of life, and who have very strong drive to achieve their goals.

II

If these are the students with which The University of Michigan starts, the next logical question is what do we do to them while they are here?

We know something about this, too, because many scholars have devoted great time and effort toward finding out what the impact of college is on students. One of them is our own distinguished Walgreen Professor, Theodore Newcomb, and it is on the classic 1969 study by Feldman and

Newcomb that I rely for such fragmentary information as time permits. If you want to look into the subject more thoroughly, I suggest their two-volume work, entitled "The Impact of College on Students." I would even tell you the publisher if it were not that my commission for mentioning the book is already unduly modest!

While I cannot do justice to a two-volume work in a few moments, let me tell you what they say about what happens to young people as a result of the college experience.

Feldman and Newcomb say that, with considerable uniformity in most American colleges and universities in recent decades, these changes have been occurring among students: They become less authoritarian, less dogmatic, less prejudiced. They have a less conservative attitude toward public issues and a growing sensitivity to aesthetic experiences. They are more open to the multiple aspects of the contemporary world -- and this, of course, parallels the wide range of contacts and experiences of their college years.

Having cited this general trend, however, the authors then say that the degree and nature of the impact varies with the kind of student who enters the institution in the first place. Students differ in the degree to which they are open to change -- in terms either of their willingness to confront new ideas, values, and experiences without being defensive about it, or in their willingness to be influenced by others. The higher entering students stand in either of these dimensions the greater is the impact of college.

Finally, the study concludes that college-induced changes in attitudes and values are likely to persist in the years which follow those on campus.

If we now put together the profile of Michigan students obtained

from the American Council on Education's analysis of our entering freshmen with what Feldman and Newcomb say about the impact of college on students, we ought to know something about what has happened to you in the years you have been here.

Since our entering students are bright and willing to consider changes in the status quo, and since they have a desire to help others and considerable drive to achieve their goals, it should be true that these characteristics have been accentuated here at The University of Michigan. And if Feldman and Newcomb are correct, the characteristics, attitudes, and values will persist in the years ahead.

The key question then becomes: How will you fit into the larger society?

III

On first analysis, it would appear that you ought to fit into the larger society very well. You start out with many advantages. You were among the roughly half of your high school classmates who went on to higher education of some kind. And even in that group you were among the most talented.

You are now emerging with a degree from one of the most prestigious universities in our country. You have contacts far beyond those of the average member of your age group. The fact that you persevered to the degree is an indication of your motivation and your drive.

In short you have all the prerequisites for success as it is normally measured.

But eighty percent of you said when you came here that you wanted to develop a philosophy of life, and along that general line, sixty percent of you said that as a life objective you wanted to help others.

In your years on campus you have frequently declared your concern

for a peaceful world, for the mitigation and amelioration of racial strife, for an improvement in the lot of the poor, and for things which would make the life of the individual more meaningful. If these things are to continue to be important to you, a realistic assessment of the larger society, both at home and abroad, is necessary.

First of all, there are no simple solutions to difficult problems. Let me illustrate: About six months ago the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations published an 818-page volume filled with statistics about the "have" and the "have-not" nations of the world. In commenting on that volume, the New York Times said:

"The gap between have and have-not nations is steadily widening according to data made available here today;

In countries where shortages of food, housing and industrial production make life most difficult, the rate of production is keeping just a bit ahead of the sharp rise in population.

In contrast, in the developed countries, where the growth of population is significantly less, much higher industrial and agricultural production is providing an increasingly better standard of living."

Dr. John Hannah, the former President of Michigan State University, and now the Director of our national government's Agency for International Development -- better known to most of us as A.I.D. -- confirmed the growing gap between the have and the have-not nations when he spoke before the Economic Club of Detroit, and in the same speech he added the ominous note that two-thirds of the people on this earth still live in the less-developed countries.

As if economic troubles were not enough, one thinks of the

generations of distrust and suspicion which continue to make of the Middle East one of the world's tinder boxes; of the quagmire of conflicting political ideologies which make even communication difficult; and of the vastly different cultures in the far-reaches of the globe which leave us uneasy when we transcend the boundaries of our respective countries.

War and peace, in the real world, tend to be elusive concepts, more likely to be contained than wholly eradicated, and more likely to be frustrating than wholly satisfying to the individual who decides to give his life to the great cause of solving this problem.

Apart from the fact that the problems which concern you are not capable of simple solutions, there is the fact that progress can often be made only in exasperatingly slow steps. We see this in an area such as racial conflict. All the good will in the world will not suddenly eradicate generations of intolerance, suspicion, and neglect. Nor are racial or ethnic conflicts peculiar to our country. One need only travel abroad, in almost any direction, to see such controversies.

It is of small comfort to the one who is discriminated against that progress is being made, and that some day, probably beyond his life-time, equality may finally be established. It follows that the worker in the vineyard of racial harmony will frequently take two steps forward, only to find himself being pushed at least one step back. A lifetime in search of racial equality will often end, as did the lives of the knights who sought the Holy Grail, without complete success.

The eradication of racial conflict is much like the abolition of poverty. Its solution lends itself much more to sloganeering than progress. It is tempting to say that if only people would work the rest of us would not have to support them. It is easy to brush aside the fact that there are large numbers of people who cannot work, and that we find it difficult to provide enough jobs to keep the willing applicants busy.

Beyond the complexity and unyielding nature of so many of the world's problems lies yet another dimension. It is measured in terms of cost, a substantial part of which you must bear if you want to move forward.

We find ample illustrations of this in the State of Michigan. During our most recent election, one of the major issues was the proposed constitutional amendment on financing of elementary-secondary public education. The idea, strongly supported by the Governor, was to reduce reliance on local property taxes for school financing, and to shift the primary responsibility to the State. The purpose of such a move was to "assure equal and quality educational opportunity for all students." Thus operational costs for the elementary and secondary schools would be paid for by the State, and local property taxes could be used for enrichment of specialized educational programs.

The proposed constitutional amendment was defeated. Perhaps there were good reasons.

Unfortunately, the problem remains. The quality of education in Michigan's elementary and secondary schools varies widely. More money is not the only answer, for we know that money alone will not automatically equalize education. But there is a level below which support cannot fall without a serious deterioration in quality. Somehow, that problem must be met.

We are all aware of the impending disaster in the Detroit schools. Whatever the cause, the fact is that the Detroit schools will close unless there is a significant injection of funds from some source. And while the Detroit situation may be more dramatic than most, there are other cities and outlying areas in the State with severe financial problems. The local property tax appears to have about run its course in school financing. Are we really prepared to allow school systems to go to pieces rather than assess ourselves more to pay for them?

Topping off all these obstacles in the path of lives which will enable you to serve others is the fact that the very progress of your lives will tend more and more to isolate and insulate you from worrisome problems, and to dull your willingness to face them.

In the years immediately after graduation, when your student idealism is still at its peak, you will be establishing your families and seeking a firm foothold in the structure of the society. You will feel peer pressures to improve your economic status, and your dollar requirements will, as in Parkinson's law, rise to meet whatever income level you achieve. This success, and all of you are likely to be successful beyond the average, will tend further to insulate you from the more difficult and intractable aspects of life. In this frame of reference, rationalizations which now appear defective will tend to be more and more appealing.

The politician who tells you that no increase in taxes is needed in order to finance the additional service obligations which you are simultaneously demanding will be appealing to your pocketbook, if not to your intellect. The social analyst who insists that the "welfare mess" can be resolved by removing free-loaders and loafers from the payroll will be making sweet music even if your lingering memories remind you that serious students of the problem say that this would make but a fractional change in the nature of the problem. Racial conflict will be easy to blame on radical activists who will be exploiting an existing situation rather than creating trouble where none existed. Frustration and anger on both sides will then shortly divert attention from the real issues.

Conclusion

Perhaps I have already spent too much time in analysing you and the society which you are about to enter. Let me now try and pull it all together.

Both our statistics and your own self-analysis on entry say that you are highly intelligent, that you are open to new ideas and change, that you want to help others, and that you have a very considerable drive to achieve your goals.

Studies of college students say that the impact of college is greater if the students are willing to confront new ideas and experiences, and if they are open to them.

So you came here with minds and personalities best able to take advantage of the experience and opportunities.

What are you going to do with what you are? If you accept the idea that man is the architect of his society, you now face both the larger society and the moment of truth.

You enter the society in a very advantaged position. You are intelligent, you are well educated, you have a broad spectrum of contacts, you are mobile, and you are known achievers.

What are you going to do with all of that?

You will, as your life and career progress, accumulate the material things of life. In fact, you will grow more and more attached to them. Your circumstances are likely to insulate you from direct contact with the problems of the less fortunate. It will be easy to adopt some of the myths which surround the disadvantaged and the unfortunate, and to be convinced that they really could deal with their own problems if they only would.

Is that what is going to happen to you? Is that all there is to this experience and to what you brought here? I hope not.

In March of 1968, when I was inaugurated president of your University -- and some of you were here -- I expressed the hope -- the ardent desire -- that Michigan graduates would be wise, tolerant, compassionate, civilized human beings, and that this University would have among its objectives the development and strengthening of those qualities.

It is easier to package knowledge than to package humanity. We know what kind of courses to give and resources to offer to produce competent scholars and practitioners in linguistics, physics, law, engineering, medicine, or mathematics. We know a good deal less about teaching and enhancing the qualities of tolerance, compassion, and the responsibilities of the educated citizen. I hope we have made a contribution.

What you do with what you are will test to some degree whether we have succeeded. What the larger society becomes will test what you are.

We are the architects -- we, the really quite minute fraction of humankind with the overwhelming proportion of advantages -- we are the ones who can, if we will, accept the responsibility.

How will you adjust to the larger society? I do not know. But I remember that in the last year of his life Bobby Kennedy made an enormous impact upon young people when he paraphrased George Bernard Shaw as follows:

"Some people see things as they are and ask, 'why?' I see things that never were, and ask, 'why not?'"

I wish you good luck, success, and the fulfillment of your dreams as you leave the University.