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THE STAFFING OF INTERDEPARTMENTAL COURSES, ESPECIALLY IN THE HUMANITIES

C. LOWELL HARRISS in his recent article¹ calls attention to a significant aspect of undergraduate education—the staffing of interdepartmental courses. Although I agree in large part with his suggestions for the immediate staffing of such courses, one of his observations should be questioned:

It seems impractical to revise graduate education to provide for training of such personnel; although preparation on a graduate level would be advantageous, the size and uncertainties of the market are seriously limiting, and the requirements of graduate education are already great enough to absorb all the time and effort the normal student can devote to it.²

Many institutions have been experimenting for almost a quarter of a century with interdepartmental courses designed for general rather than special education. Shoemaker, for example, has observed:

Between 1928 and 1942 fifty-seven colleges have instituted courses or programs in which, in varying designs and combinations, literature, music, art, philosophy, and history have been brought together as “separate condensed survey” or more inclusive humanities programs.³

A cursory examination of present curricular trends reveals that more and more colleges are introducing programs of the type outlined in *General Education*

¹ “Note on the Staffing of Interdepartmental College Courses,” *SCHOOL AND SOCIETY*, 64 (1946), pp. 285-286.

² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

³ F. Shoemaker, *Aesthetic Experience and the Humanities*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1943, p. 155.

*in a Free Society*⁴ and *A College Program in Action*.⁵ It seems to me rather certain, therefore, that interdepartmental courses of some type will not soon disappear from the curriculum; in some, perhaps many, cases such courses will be retained permanently. Since it is planned that most of these interdepartmental courses will be required of *all* undergraduates, the number of instructors necessary for the staffing of the courses will be large—as large, for example, as the number of instructors required for freshman English. It is also to be expected that many students who find interdepartmental courses stimulating will desire to continue their studies in a broad and unified program, with the purpose of preparing themselves as instructors in such courses. If graduate education, however, continues to follow the often highly departmentalized pattern of certain institutions, many prospective teachers of interdepartmental courses will be needlessly forced to interrupt their interests in order to meet specialized graduate requirements. In light of the almost certain demand, therefore, I see no reason why immediate consideration should not be given to the revision of graduate education so that an adequate supply of competent teachers may be available as soon as possible. Unless a steady supply of excellent instructors is soon available, the educational loss will be irreparable.

Mr. Harriss himself admits that our educational system is largely responsible for the dearth of competent instructors:

. . . he [the prospective teacher of interdepartmental courses] must have far more than an elementary command over the subject matter of all fields of the course.

⁴ *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1945.

⁵ *A College Program in Action: A Review of Working Principles at Columbia College*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1946.

Such persons are rare. They are not the normal product of our educational system.⁶

The problem of staffing the interdepartmental courses, therefore, cannot be divorced from the program of the graduate school. Many instructors have long felt that the type of graduate training offered in certain areas is in grave need of alteration. Many teachers of literature, for example, will agree with Borgese's observation that specialization has long ago reached a stage that is dangerous for the humanities.⁷ Many teachers of literature have had experiences similar to those of Borgese who has found students specializing in French literature absolutely ignorant of Italian literature and students of Italian literature possessing no knowledge of the *Aeneid*.⁸ Graduate training, then, in certain areas needs to be improved, especially in the direction of broadening the scope of certain requirements which will make it necessary for students to be reasonably competent in selected aspects of more than one discipline. Since, in the opinion of certain scholars, revision is necessary in graduate training, irrespective of the needs arising from the demands for teachers of interdepartmental courses, further revision should not be difficult. Whether, for example, the course is to be a course like Harvard's "Great Texts of Literature"⁹ or Columbia's "Humanities A,"¹⁰ the competence of prospective teachers would be enhanced if a graduate program were to be provided which considered the needs of prospective teachers of such interdepartmental courses.

⁶ Harriss, *loc. cit.*, p. 285.

⁷ G. A. Borgese, "Symposium: 'A New Kind of Teacher,'" *The Humanities Look Ahead*, Stanford University, Stanford University Press, 1943, p. 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

⁹ *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1945, pp. 205-207.

¹⁰ *A College Program in Action: A Review of Working Principles at Columbia College*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1946, pp. 105-110.

In the light of the above observations, it is possible that Mr. Harriss has underestimated the advisability of providing for desirable personnel by means of a revised graduate program. The revision of graduate education and the development of a program that will bridge conventional departmental lines might not only improve the instruction offered by the individual disciplines but might also make available in the near future a steady supply of competent instructors for interdepartmental courses.

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