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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. See also page 1709, *Science*, 29 December 1967. **ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE:** Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE-6-1858.

University Response to Social Needs

The violence and lawlessness on some college campuses obscure the general student demand that universities devote more energy and attention to the pressing problems of the moment. The students who are not engaged in strikes or sit-ins nonetheless do object to the emphasis placed on certain forms of research and scholarship.

Students are appalled by the energy expended by faculty members in doing seemingly trivial things. They note how often research involves reducing and limiting a problem until it is small enough to be reported within the pages of a single journal article or book. They believe that a professor devotes himself to some tiny sub-area because he seeks to gain recognition within his lifetime as a leading authority.

We remind students that scientific progress evolves by this very process of reduction, that new knowledge stems from the work of thousands of persons and many tiny discoveries. Great men of science have made great breakthroughs only as a consequence of enormous amounts of work done previously.

The academic setting provides rewards not for good intentions but for completed work that adds to knowledge. And attacks on large problems seldom yield definitive results. Those few who have dealt successfully with large-scale problems are esteemed. However, the likelihood of a young professor's attaining this status is remote. When he tries, he gambles with his future academic position.

Our students point to the tremendous effects of organized concentration on a problem. For example, they note that the first nuclear reaction was produced by massive expenditure of money and effort and that our space program thrives when huge numbers of people devote their energies to it. They ask us to direct the energies of professors toward truly critical problems—to find peace, to eradicate poverty, to attain universal civil rights.

Students can see within our society no institution other than the university capable of launching the attack on the problems that must be solved. They consider it a defect when our courses present subject matter within a disciplinary rather than a problem-oriented framework, and when we do not assign problems for study to the faculty or do not require that they join together to cure the ills of our society.

The choice of research strategy is especially difficult in the social sciences, where one finds very few examples of great benefits accruing from research unrelated to major problems. Breakthroughs with enormous multiplying effects observable in the physical sciences are unlikely or, at least, have not yet occurred. To learn more about a given social phenomenon it seems almost inevitable that we must study it directly.

It is clearly within the capability of the university to assume an expanded role in dealing with society's problems while assuring that the modes of attack are in accord with scholarly values. We can review the objectives of our programs of graduate education, reorient our textbooks, and restructure introductory courses to attract students who can apply our knowledge and techniques. Departments in our universities can manage to emphasize problem areas while maintaining solid subject orientation. We can recognize, reward, and establish as models those of our colleagues brave enough to tackle the major problems of the real world and smart enough to find how to do it. If our students, by their protests and dissents, stir us to speed this process, we shall be in their debt.—KENNETH E. CLARK, *Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York*