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What Are Professors For?

The character of undergraduate education in this country has changed. Large classes and the use of television, films, and programmed instruction have tended to make teaching impersonal and mechanical. This trend has been accompanied by increases in enrollments and decreases in faculty teaching loads. In 1940 college enrollments totaled 1.4 million; in 1964 they totaled 5.0 million and were still increasing. In 1940 teaching loads of 12 hours a week were common; today a 6-hour load is not unusual. Faculties have not increased sufficiently to compensate for these developments.

Undergraduate education has changed for another reason. In 1940 most professors considered teaching their most important function. Today they often look upon research, administration, public service, or private professional practice as paramount. As a consequence of these developments, undergraduates have fewer personal contacts with professors, who at the same time have less of themselves to give when such contacts occur.

The time has come to ask, "What are professors for?" The professor's primary activities should be teaching and research, with the priority in that order, but with research a close second. His primary role should not be administration, public service, or private professional practice; if anything must be jettisoned, those functions should be the first to go.

The professor's principal function is more than lecturing. If transfer of information were enough, society could dispense with most professors, and education could be almost completely mechanized. The professor's most important role is to provide various forms of guidance for the students. As a result of his university experience, a student should be motivated to pursue continuing scholarship throughout his life; he should acquire a sound value system and the capacity for independent thought. We know that motivation and taste can be fostered by close association of professors with students. There is no evidence that television and programmed instruction are adequate substitutes for human contact.

The present-day tendency is to delay the opportunity for meaningful interaction between professors and students until the student reaches the graduate level. This is a bad mistake. The crucial formative years for most students are the last year of high school and the first 2 years of university. If a student has not become motivated before he reaches graduate school he is unlikely ever to become so. Failure to become motivated early lessens the effectiveness of the learning process. When a student does not know what he is in school for, he is half-hearted in his studying and easily distracted. Moreover, he is deprived of what should be a wonderful experience.

The realities of the present make it impractical for us to return to the "good old days." Television and programmed instruction are here to stay. We must discover and utilize better means of providing guidance and motivation for the undergraduates. The problem is not insoluble. Many students require stimulus from only one professor to change their outlook. Even a few excellent lectures can provide the spark. A very important idea to convey is that the faculty cares and that the undergraduates are important people worthy of the best.—PHILIP H. ABELSON