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The University and Student Dissent

There are a number of ways of viewing the present crisis on the campus. For a relatively senior teacher, one of the more painful ways is to regard it as evidence of an almost complete failure of communication between teacher and student. For the more one listens to the student activists, the more it becomes clear that they have developed a picture of the modern university completely different from the one held by the senior faculty. The students tend to identify the university with everything they dislike about modern society—its elaborate and "suppressive" regulations, its indifference to moral and esthetic values, its preoccupation with bits and pieces of life to the exclusion of overall purpose or meaning. Worst of all is the apparent role of the university as a supporter of the military industrial complex through its engagement with weapons research and its "complicity" with such military enterprises as the ROTC and the draft.

The senior faculty, on the other hand, loves the university as the inheritor and transmitter of the great tradition of individual freedom and of the liberating belief that disinterested investigation of problems will ultimately lead to their solution. Far from seeing the university as collaborating with the nefarious purposes of society at large, they see it as society's most significant critic.

In spite of all the talk, however, there is really not much of a generation gap about such fundamentals as freedom, love, war, and race prejudice. The gap involves the methods to be used in achieving the desirable and avoiding the undesired ends. At one extreme are those who believe that the large problems must be attacked all at once and as a whole. To many of them, moral fervor about the ends and purposes replaces a pedestrian concern with objective methodology. At the other extreme are those who disclaim any concern for the ends to which their discoveries are put and who view any prior commitment as a dangerous impediment to detached investigation.

About both of these attitudes there hovers a kind of self-righteousness that does not lead to the best classroom teaching. If the radicals are too self-satisfied about their moral commitments, conventional scholars may be dangerously smug about the magnificence of their detachment from human concerns. As scientists we might in fact be more effective teachers if we began by admitting that we too are against war, poverty, and hate and that we really went into science, at least in part, because it offered the best available means of overcoming these evils. Our seeming failure to grapple with the big problems all at once is not a sign of indifference or lack of commitment. Rather it stems from the perhaps deplorable but still undeniable fact that the scientific method has achieved almost all its successes by breaking big unmanageable problems down into little, controllable ones.

These views are sure to be unwelcome to those who feel that reforms which fall short of immediate total revolution are nothing more than "little finky changes" unworthy of men of virtue and vision. It may be, however, that the survival of universities that include the right of student dissent depends on the transmission of our belief that the only revolutions worth having come as the slowly accumulating sum of those same "little finky changes."—ROBERT S. MORISON, *Director, Division of Biological Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York*