Commentary:

Debunking the scientific university myth

By John Tiemstra

That much heralded manifesto of educational reform at MIT, the Rodgers Report, now is 14 years old. It is too bad that its real subject is administrative reform, but that is what one would expect of a document produced without any serious student input. The only proposal of any substance would add to the institute yet another office full of paper-shufflers to frustrate faculty and students in search of new educational modes, a concept almost laughable at an institution already plageried by a wide student-administration gap and an overextended budget.

The report leaves untaoched the concept of the technical institute, or rather, the "university polarized around science" (yet terminology with today's negative connotations of polarization). Perhaps the committee didn't feel that the concept needed any consideration. In spite of the lip-service the notion still receives here, MIT long ago recognized the institute-of-technology concept for what it is; a nineteenth-century perversion of the great medieval institution of the university. It was born of mankind's first romantic involvement with machines. We are older and wiser now.

The scientific university starts with the assertion that science and technology in their pure, pristine forms can be studied in isolation from all other human endeavor. This simple fallacy is later compounded by those who are educational products of such an environment. They deny the legitimacy of other areas of inquiry. They are products of the parochial university where the scientific method is the only paradigm and all of the students pursue science for science's sake.

This university is dead, but the myth lives on. Yes, the "humanities" are legitimate, but somehow undergraduate education in those disciplines is not. Undergraduates at MIT cannot major in linguistics or psychology or art. If they major in music, history, or literature, they are saddled not only with the (for them) irrelevant Institute requirements, but also with the necessity of carrying a heavy minor program in a probably unrelated field. Short of abolishing the program altogether and thereby losing many good students and teachers, the Institute could do no more to discourage serious work in the humanities. Major programs in the social sciences are very light, to the point where they offer barely adequate pre-professional training, and again the Institute requirements are largely to blame for discouraging students from even considering MIT for undergraduate education in these fields. Oh, I know about the Institute's "humanities" requirement. But how is it supposed to take seriously a course that expects to survey "The Western Tradition" in a mere nine units a semester? The whole list is full of make-work subjects with small credit unit values that most teachers and students seem to think of as nuisances. And how could it be otherwise when budding engineers, self-selected on the basis of the Institute mythology, are forced into subjects where they are not really expected to perform?

The Institute is also supposed to be committed to encouraging the personal development of its students. Yet the prevailing mythology and some of the structure of the place encourage the sort of perversion pride Tech tools take in their machine, Science has the only priority, teaching is the only virtue, and the incredible cultural homogeneity of the student body is supposed to be a good thing.

The school wants to round out its students, but it does it not by diversifying the interests and backgrounds of its student body. No, instead it adds more watered-down culture to the humanities requirement. The technical institute relies on its classrooms where the true university facilities grow by encouraging diversified personal contacts.

The Institute recognizes that financial independence is a necessity for the liberal university. But it can't seem to bring itself to sever its relationships with the quasi-industrial organizations on its fringe or squelch its eagerness to have its faculty do sponsored research, though it keeps promising to do both. Washington sneezes, and MIT catches cold. A whisper in the President's ear about science makes the front page of The Tech. In spite of years of protest about war involvement, the Institute's Fiscal-like administrations are still eager to sell the soul of the university to the highest bidder, it variably the Devil.

What to do? First, develop a consistent modern, and sensible theory of education and the role that universities play. Make it explicit. Second, examine the structure of education - curriculum, requirements, recruiting, hiring, financial, housing - and put the theory into practice. Make good use of the institution's traditional strengths, but don't be afraid to bolster its traditional weaknesses. I know it can't all be done overnight, but a lot of it can.

We must finally lay to rest the myth of the scientific university.

(John Tiemstra is a first-year graduate student in the Department of Economics. He received his bachelor's degree in economics from Oberlin College. - Editor)

COMMENTS

The Tech seeks articles of opinion from all members of the MIT community on topics of immediate or long-range concern. While articles on scientific and technical subjects are welcome, papers that only present detailed technical discussions without either personal commentary or an examination of the subject's non-scientific impact will not be accepted. No unsigned material will be accepted, nor will articles which can be construed as being libelous.

Submissions should be no more than two thousand words long (one word being considered to be five typewriter characters; two thousand words is approximately nine pages, triple spaced, fifty-five characters per line) and should be typed, triple spaced. They should be accompanied by the author's name, address, and phone number.

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