The Student-Faculty Relationship | editorially speaking

There is a rich and revered tradition, celebrated in colleges and universities around the world, that leads faculty members to shield and defend their students from all oppression, real or imagined, save that imposed by the faculty member himself. For centuries this tradition has assured students a measure of immunity from the law, a certain respite from responsibility and the opportunity to sow a few wild oats—including in rare cases some of an intellectual variety.

Faculty members have been well rewarded for their paternalism by the unquestioned loyalty and fanatical devotion of their students. Not a few faculty members have exploited this devotion unwisely, some in filling impressionable young minds with a completely unworkable brand of idealism (. . . Aristotle says you cannot be a man and obey the law. . . Which will it be?)—an idealism probably harvested in frustration from cloistered fields sown in wild oats. Others have exploited student devotion by what has been termed a "subtle discounting of the teaching process." Despite this, faculty influence with students remains at a high level so that at least at this interface the generation gap appears to be a minimum.

Now that the students, having been terrorized by excessive competition, disillusioned by the older generation's consistent failure to practice its beliefs, and flushed by successes in wielding power against organized authority, have escalated a puzzled uncertainty into a crusade to re-examine or reconstruct the entire basis for society, faculty attitudes toward students and their interactions with them may be in need of some adjustment.

There can be little doubt that the students are dead serious about their crusade. The activists among them are not merely performing in a vacuum of self interest. They have the support and empathy, though perhaps not the agreement on methods or even on basic philosophies, of the overwhelming majority of college students. The common goal is to transform the world into the kind of place their parents and early teachers led them as youngsters to believe it was. So strong is their conviction that we doubt they can be stopped short of major positive accomplishment or crushing, permanently-embittering suppression. Their inexperience and sheltered view of reality make the latter considerably more likely than the former.

Nevertheless it is a good deal more than youthful impatience and immature idealism that drives today's students to choose demonstration over apathy, destructive symbolism over denied rights, and moral principle over patriotic passion. Anarchy and violence are not their goals; nor are these their preferred instruments of expression. Ironically, they have learned no viable alternatives.

Yet while our society cannot ignore this youthful voice of conscience and can no longer delude itself with visions of its own moral affluence, neither can it accommodate anarchy and violence. To flourish it needs the responsible support of all and especially the best effort of its intellectuals. Most students recognize this and would welcome a mechanism which assures early implementation of essential social changes. But though the sickness approaches epidemic proportions, no mechanism has appeared. In the view of many thoughtful students time seems to be running out.

And it is running out also on the patience of constituted authority which has ample reason to believe that permissiveness is the enemy and that the law was made to claim priority over the judgment of the individual. In the view of the authorities, students will just have to recognize that the world is a long way from being what they want it to be and that changes can come only slowly and at great sacrifice in human resources.

Authority can easily win in its tragic struggle with young campus intellectuals, but the price of victory may be a good deal higher than most of us would want to pay. There must be a better alternative. Perhaps it lies in better guidance of the students by the older group they most respect.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that students need more from the faculty than is provided at most institutions. It also is difficult to avoid the idea that in this period in history the top priority at colleges and universities must be the education of the undergraduate—an education that features a continuing interaction of the finest older minds on the campus with the finest younger minds in a relationship that blends the most enduring of traditional knowledge with the brightest of vital new ideas into what surely will form the direction of the society for the future.

The discordant sounds heard on the campus today are largely, but not entirely, the cries of troubled citizens for help. And they echo not only the sickness of the American society but its strengths, its spirit, and its hopes as well. They seem to be sending a special message to the professors. WTL