RECENT MOVEMENTS FOR CO-OPERATIVE RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES

PAPER PRESENTED BY DEAN EDWIN GREENLAW OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

The purpose of this paper is to present information concerning recent tendencies toward co-operative research in the humanities, to point out the significance of this movement, and to enlist the support of the institutions represented in this Association. In the National Research Council the humanities are not represented. Yet the aims of that Council apply to workers in philology, history, and the economic and social sciences as well as to workers in pure and applied science. Like the scientists, they feel the need for bringing together scattered workers, for surveying the fields of research in order to secure intelligent and concerted attack, for securing support for special projects and recognition of the significance of research, and for co-operative work, not only in projects too large to be handled by individuals, but in the publication of the results of investigation. The thirteen divisions of the National Research Council include co-operative investigation in the sciences and also such general fields as federal, state, and foreign relations, research extension, and research information. The results of research are printed accurately and with due regard to lay intelligence in the newspapers; fellowships and grants are secured for individual workers; attention is given to finding promising material in undergraduate classes and directing able young men to the opportunities and rewards of scientific research. Recruiting the ranks, enlisting financial support, and impressing authorities with the fact that the university is not only a transmitting but a generating agency in its relation to knowledge, are evidences of the stimulus and value of the National Research Council in the field of science.

p13576

It is not less essential, I think, that we should recognize the need for similar co-operation among scholars in the subjects known as the humanities. Indeed, the case may be made even more emphatic. The inherited tendency of so-called education is to limit its field to the transmission of existing knowledge in fixed form. The universities of Europe, founded in the Middle Ages, had this for their function; in spite of criticism from the time of Francis Bacon to the present, changes have been hard to make; the curriculum has progressed by the addition of new subjects rather than by organic change. It was the academies of the seventeenth century in Italy, France, and England that fostered specialization, and the movement had its inception outside the universities and incurred the active opposition of governing bodies. The Invisible College of 1645, parent of the Royal Society, was a research council devoted to the advancement, not merely the transmission, of learning.

The first point, then, is that not only the humanists themselves, but the universities also, may take a leaf from the experiences of organizations for the promotion of scientific research, from the Invisible College and the Royal Society down to the National Research Council. The bi-fold function of the university is widely recognized: its duty to transmit to the new generation the accumulated learning of the past, and the duty to make additions to learning. The danger is that we shall assign to the humanities the first of these functions and to the sciences the second.

The second point is the disparity, in popular appeal, between scientific research and research in the humanities. While it is true that the greatest scientific discoveries have been in fields seemingly remote from immediate practical application, and that the true scientist works in order that he may capture some secret of nature rather than to discover a source of profit, the fact remains that the large dependence of commerce and industry upon scientific research supplies an enormous stimulus. It is relatively easy to secure grants in aid of scientific investigation, to secure publicity for the results, to secure attention of university authorities and consequent promotion. Furthermore, this field appeals to young men who are gifted in research because of concrete methods, immediate application, and the rewards that certainly follow initiative and persistence. Not only college faculties but private research laboratories offer careers. In comparison with these attractions, the field of the historian and philologist seems limited. It is more difficult to attract to these pursuits men of the highest gifts. Yet no one will admit, I think, that the historian and the philologist should be restricted, for their active work, to the endeavor to communicate to their pupils what is vaguely called culture, relegating their research to the category of harmless fads calculated to appeal to a gentle and eccentric curiosity.

While the next point that I wish to make affects the sciences as well as the humanities, it applies with peculiar force to the subject in which I am seeking to enlist your interest. It is the problem of isolation. Granted that we have, through the graduate school, secured the right attitude toward research as one of the highest functions of the university, and granted that we have succeeded in attracting able men to a life of investigation, the problem of the future of these men is one of great difficulty. Research positions are rare, even in the largest institution. So much university teaching is elementary in character, the classroom hours and conferences require so much time, that the young scholar, unless he is an extraordinary man, finds little to induce him to continue the work which he began during his period of initiation. If he goes to a smaller institution, he finds even less inducement to continue investigation. College activities and faculty committees are apt to absorb the little time that remains. Even the stimulus of being in the same department with scholars who are actively engaged in investigation may be wanting through slender library and laboratory facilities, and the lack of the companionship of research men may develop an indifference that grows into atrophy. There is immeasurable waste in the process. We train men in the method of research; we inspire them with a belief in its importance and with a desire to become pioneers in some field of knowledge; then we quench the spirit. The result is that altogether too much of our so-called productive work is immature, belonging to formative years, the period of apprenticeship. After the doctorate, perhaps an article or two may be written and published. A promotion comes, and there is no further stimulus. Of a progressive and constantly increasing mastery there is too little or nothing.

In this failure to attain maturity the isolation of scholars in institutions far removed from the great centers is a formidable factor. The remedy, once more, has been found at least in part by the scientists. Testimony is not wanting as to the inspiration and help that the National Research Council has brought to its members who are teaching in small departments in colleges where only heroic spirits can keep alive the passion for investigation. Those whose work lies in the fields of philology and history are in even greater need of this professional solidarity.

Co-operative research, then, is an essential in the humanities as in the sciences if we are to solve the three problems that I have named. By this means we shall gain a sense of direction and intelligent attack, stimulus to original work, proper emphasis upon that important function of the university which has to do with the advancement rather than the mere transmission of learning. By it we shall cultivate the professional spirit that will attract able men. And, finally, through it we may overcome more surely than in any other way the evil of isolation, the loss to learning which results from the preposterous limitation of the period of productive scholarship to the three years' preparation for the doctorate and the short period during which a man is seeking his first promotion. Some indication that these ends are in process of attainment in the humanities as well as in the sciences I propose now to set forth.

A very good example of the possibilities of co-operative research in the humanities is the development, in recent years, of the group system of the Modern Language Association. There are at present thirty-five research groups, made up of scholars interested in as many different fields of investigation. At the annual meeting of the Association the greater part of the program time is assigned to these groups, with the result that the meet-

ings have been completely transformed. A group meeting may attract from fifty to one hundred and fifty auditors. Many of the groups have their own membership lists and issue bulletins for members during the year. Research information is distributed, together with lists of topics that are being investigated in various universities, calls for help, and information on topics in which members of the group are interested. Moreover, some of these groups are enlisting the co-operation of historians and philologists. The Medieval Latin group, for example, has established relations with members of the American Historical Association, the classical associations, and the American Philological Association, and has issued a printed bulletin with the names of scholars investigating various phases of medieval culture and the subjects on which they are at work. The American Council of Learned Societies is aiding in this work, constituting a research council, and plans are under way for the further development of this co-operation. Various other illustrations may be given, such, for example, as the conferences, in London and New York, of American and British professors of English, or the co-operation of universities with the Modern Language Association for the reproduction, through rotographs, of manuscripts and early printed books.

I have time only to set down a few observations suggested by these various movements. The stimulus and encouragement gained by individual workers is already noteworthy. The increasing tendency toward breaking down the barriers that separate the classics, for example, from modern philology, or both from history and philosophy, cannot fail to benefit scholarship. The publication of research information has already made great progress, and will doubtless be extended. Some universities, for example, are publishing annual reports of research in progress, and these supplement the group bulletins spoken of a moment ago. Furthermore, inter-university relationships through visits of scholars who give short intensive courses in fields in which they are specialists, visits by students to other universities where work in some special field is under way, greater freedom of communication through correspondence, co-operation through loans by libraries—all these are important aids. If these various movements and others like them continue to grow, one may expect to see the organization of a national research council for the humanities, perhaps with headquarters at Washington, comparable in usefulness to the scientific organization that has been in existence for the last six years.