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The Harvard Committee Approves...

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The Harvard Committee Approves . . .

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The Harvard Report, "General Education in a Free Society," with its emphasis upon the importance of discussion and debate activities, should give some comfort to forensic directors whose efforts, so frequently, meet with criticism.

It is a report that we might all profitably read despite the harsh criticism made of it by members of the Speech fraternity. You may recall that Dr. W. Norwood Brigrance published an article in the April, 1947, edition of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, in which he referred to the Harvard Report as one,

" . . . characterized by the limitations of the Harvard institutional mind,"

and also charged that the Committee's attitude was one of,

" . . . shocked acceptance of the present, a resentment that we are living today instead of yesterday."

Both characterizations, I believe, are unfair. In the first place the Report is not a product of the so-called "Harvard Institutional mind." The Committee called into conference one hundred men and women from all walks of life to collaborate in the task of evaluating the American educational scene. Industrialists, High School Teachers, Labor Leaders, Clergymen, College Presidents, Military Officers, and a host of others were consulted. Every stratum of society was heard and their ideas, I am sure, were considered in the final conclusions drawn. Certainly the final judgment is one that reaches far beyond the "Ivory Towers" of the "Harvard Institutional Mind."

Moreover, I sensed no desire on the part of the Committee members to escape the unhappy present. The truth is that they were intensely interested in the contemporary world, sought every means possible to come to grips with present day problems, and repeatedly declared that training in speech and forensic activities was essential in any curriculum that endeavored to train youth for life in a free society. In the words of the Report,

"We certainly want more than mere bookishness and skill in the manipulation of concepts. The fruit of education is intelligence in action, the guardians of the State must be full blooded individuals as well as trained minds."

Of particular interest here is the Committee's insistence that speech and forensic activities be encouraged. In confirmation of that statement and in the interests of brevity I submit the following excerpts from the Report which I think fairly, if only partially, reflect the thinking of the Committee in this respect.

ON COMMUNICATION

"Communication is that unrestricted exchange of ideas within the body politic by which a prosperous intellectual community is secured. It is a matter of sharing. In a Democracy issues are aired, talked out of existence or talked into solution. Failure of communication makes for a breakdown

of the whole democratic process."

"Since, however, much talk is designed to mislead, effective communication depends not only upon the possession of skills such as clear thinking and cogent expression but on moral qualities as well."

ON HIGH SCHOOL SPEECH EDUCATION

"Everyone in high school should have courses that will teach them how to think and how to express themselves. Do not daze them with abstractions for they think perceptually for the most part. Make increasing appeal to the senses, clothe ideas with warmth, have discussions, movies and plays."

ON FORENSIC ACTIVITIES

" . . . school forums, debating societies, current affairs clubs, discussion groups, and mock political conventions have value that is enormous and to them our society owes a great debt. . . . They acquaint our boys and girls at an impressionable age with some of the vital relationships and obligations of social life. We believe, indeed, that their importance will be greater in the future. . . . It is only when the student faces the actual difficulties of governing by democracy that he begins to appreciate the complexities of a free society. To learn to resist pressure, to discover the power of a minority, to have free speech used against one, to prescribe rules and then abide by them, is training of the first order for democratic living. . . ."

ON EVIDENCE

"Our big job is to train men and women to make objective and disinterested judgments based upon exact evidence. They must be taught to uphold both tradition and experiment, study the past and be open for new ideas for the future. They must learn to reconcile this necessity for common beliefs and traditions with the equally obvious necessity for new and independent insights."

ON THE WHOLENESS OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

"When teachers look only to scholarship and students look only to proficiency in activities the wholeness of the man is lost. General education, we repeat, must consciously aim at these abilities, effective thinking, effective communication, and the making of relevant judgments."

To be doubly sure that I had not misconstrued the meaning of the Report, I wrote to each of the twelve members of the committee, asking them for their individual opinions. I received answers from nine of the twelve committeemen; and here, too, in the interests of brevity I present some excerpts from a letter by Dr. John H. Finley, Vice-Chairman of the Committee, a letter which, I believe, expresses with reasonable accuracy the sentiment of the other respondents.

" . . . Certainly the Committee conceived

of general education or, indeed, of any proper education, as fostering a student's ability to think accurately and to express himself clearly both in speech and writing. We kept recurring to this growth in inner powers as the main point of all education. Yet in practice we were so obsessed by the diversity of objective knowledge and by the conflicting claims of the many fields of knowledge that we ended by concerning ourselves chiefly, not with the growth of the student's inner powers of thought and speech but with ways of finding some common ground in objective knowledge. Hence we finally came to two ways of defining general education: as fostering inner powers, and as simplifying the confusions of outer facts. Rightly or wrongly we gave our chief effort to the latter."

" . . . These two ways of looking at education, though to some degree in conflict, must, of course, be finally reconciled. . . . We felt, as regards English composition, that a man will write best who is as concerned with content as with form. Hence we were inclined to think that English composition should be fostered not only in English courses but in courses in the sciences and social sciences. Whether this reasoning could apply in training in speech I don't know. It obviously could apply insofar as speech is felt to cover discussion

on an argument. It could conceivably apply also insofar as you encourage your people to speak on subjects in which they have become interested through other courses. The belief that a person's powers of thought and expression will best be fostered by study of the MAIN FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE IS THE CENTRAL BELIEF IF THIS REPORT."

I believe the Report was fair, realistic, and entirely in sympathy with the work being done in the field of speech and forensics. We have an important assignment before us; and if we accept as our working premise the central belief of the Harvard Report, namely, that a person's power of thought and expression will best be fostered by study of the main fields of knowledge, we can achieve much and we will get the continued support of those who seek to keep our educational program dynamic and up to date.

Quarterly Journal of Speech—April, 1947. "1946—Year of Decision." W. Norwood Brigrance.

Report of the Harvard Committee—"General Education in a Free Society." 1945. Harvard University Press.

Letters—From members of the Harvard Committee: Robert Ulich, Benjamin F. Wright, George Wald, I. H. Richards, John H. Finley, Leigh Hoadley, Byron S. Hollinshead, Raphael Demos, W. K. Jordan.

Forensic Programs and Dynamic Democracy . . .

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Surveys conducted in 1947 indicated that the number of students participating in collegiate forensics had returned to prewar levels,¹ and reports on the 1947-1948 season marked a new high in both interest and activity. In the midst of this upsurge, we may inquire as to what forensics are doing for and to the student, and ultimately for society. As we find ourselves in a season of squad meetings, practice sessions, tournaments, and post-tournament lamentations, it may be well to inquire if our forensic programs are developing students who want to make democracy work as well as enjoy its blessings.

The broad potentialities and objectives of our work have been clearly and effectively stated.^{2 3 4 5} This article makes no original contribution in that area. It seems more appropriate that we should concentrate our efforts on fully understanding these objectives and then translating them into action. If we feel any sense of responsibility for training people to meet the demands and challenges of our contemporary society, we must seek to develop those activities contributing to such an end. Since the relative importance of the specific demands and challenges will vary, we must consider certain of those characteristics necessary to truly effective citizenship at any level or time. Because our immediate concern is function rather than philosophy, for the present let us outline a list with which the forensic

director may work.

In the first place, effective citizenship requires a high degree of intellectual activity, flexibility, and objectivity. If our citizen is possessed of such habits, we may feel more confident that he will succeed in recognizing, analyzing, and interpreting the import of local, national, and international problems. But such thinking must rise above the level of mere mental gymnastics, and as a second point it is equally vital that our citizens should feel a concern for the impact of these issues on his nation and on other nations, and on his generations and on future generations. He must recognize the dynamic nature of the social order, and seek to effect improvements. Thirdly, he must recognize the necessity of subordinating special and limited interests to the general welfare of the group and/or community. He must feel a responsibility and even a compul-

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2. Ewbank, H. L., Speech Contests as Educational Techniques, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, pp. 187-196, 1936.
3. Baird, A. C. Debate and Discussion in Post-War Service to Democracy, *The Gavel*, 27: 20-21ff, No. 2, Jan. 1945.
4. Cortright, R. L., A Balanced Forensic Program, *The Gavel*, 27:22-23ff, No. 2, Jan. 1945.
5. Buehler, E. C. President's Page, *The Gavel*, 26:51-52, No. 4, May 1944.