

Pasta with a side order of philosophy, please

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Times Higher Education Supplement, 2004 (20 August): 14

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By Robert J. O'Hara

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The collegiate ideal of academics sharing dining and housing with students is inspirational, says Robert O'Hara

Research and common sense tell us that university life outside the classroom is as important to a student's education as time spent under formal instruction. Of 168 hours in every week, fewer than 18 are "contact hours."

What about the other 150? If students are to have the kind of deep educational experiences that integrate learning with life, can faculty members afford to ignore all this non-contact time? They cannot and should not.

But is it the job of academics to oversee the rest of a student's week? Don't most universities look after student welfare through an array of offices and divisions of housing, student affairs and campus activities?

They may. But even at their best these non-academic units cannot perform the integration that makes university life and learning a seamless whole.

And at their worst, breakdown in non-academic support services can do harm.

A student at a university in North Carolina, which advertised a staff of "caring professionals" to look after student welfare, complained that in university housing "it is not uncommon to get up in the morning after receiving little to no sleep to find the hall vandalised and floor covered with beer, blood, glass and other filth."

That student was getting an education, all right, but it was not the one the university's marketing brochures promised.

When we treat higher education as an industrial process to be managed instead of a human process to be cultivated, we produce pathologies such as those described. The cure for these pathologies is decentralisation and far more faculty involvement in matters of student welfare. And this decentralisation must work along collegiate lines. Although the historical roots of collegiate organisation are to be found in Oxford and Cambridge

universities, the corporate independence of Oxbridge colleges is not likely to be reproduced elsewhere. But there is a growing trend in US higher education to create decentralised residential colleges more along the lines of the colleges at Durham University than at Oxford, and this trend holds great promise for the improvement of student life.

Decentralised, cross-sectional, faculty-led societies of a few hundred members who share dining, housing and recreational space can provide undergraduates with a rich and integrated educational life, a life in which, as one of my students said: “I can discuss philosophy while stirring my macaroni.” Because these non-Oxbridge colleges remain units of a central institution, they can preserve many of the financial efficiencies that are wanting in corporately independent colleges.

The first universities in the US to adopt this kind of organisation were Harvard and Yale, and this led to an unfortunate perception that decentralised colleges can be created only at wealthy institutions.

Regrettably, many observers in the US, and I suspect in Britain, have been unable to see beyond the walnut panelling and stained glass to the real educational objective: the creation of intellectually rich and cohesive student communities.

Fortunately, the trend towards collegiate organisation in US universities is becoming manifest not only at the Harvards, Yales and Princetons, but at institutions such as Truman State University in Missouri, Murray State University in Kentucky, Binghamton University in New York and the University of Central Arkansas. Enlightened leadership, not comparative wealth, is the determining factor, and the students are better off for it.

The benefits are being recognised outside the Anglo-American sphere as well. In Mexico, the Universidad de las Americas is establishing a system of residential colleges within itself, taking its inspiration from Yale.

And in Germany the International University Bremen is being established along collegiate lines, taking its inspiration from Rice University in Texas.

The writer Cotton Mather (1663–1728), reflecting on the first institution of higher learning in the American colonies, acknowledged that while it might have been possible simply to rent buildings and offer lectures, the New England government thought it important to have students “brought up in a more collegiate way of living.”

The broadening of access to higher education in Britain and the US in the past 50 years has been in every way to the good. But the inhumane centralisation that came hand in hand with that broadening has done much damage to student life. By returning to a more collegiate way of living, we can repair that damage and give students the rich experiences they deserve.

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