

Two Cheers for Behemoth University

STEPHEN J. TONSOR

THERE ARE MANY reasons for dismay at conditions which exist generally in higher education. Some are sound, legitimate and to the point and some arise from simple and misdirected nostalgia. The attack by certain conservatives on the contemporary university is to be expected. The "university," or better still, the "multiversity," as Clark Kerr dubbed it, is radically new and different from the institutional patterns of higher education which had existed during the century previous to the last three decades. Not since the revolutionary changes in the German university system, changes ushered in by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, has education undergone such a radical transformation. These changes, moreover, simply reflect and correspond to changes which took place in Western society as a whole. The university because it had become the cutting edge of our society showed those changes, whether for good or evil, in their most extreme form.

It is not my contention that these changes, either in the university or society as a whole, have been changes for the better. Many of them were not. However, I cannot agree with a number of my conservative colleagues that they were all necessarily bad and that the new institutions were inherently worse, educationally and morally, than the old. It is understandable, however, that those who revere the old because it is old would find these new developments distressing. They would have found the reforms of Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt equally distressing and the introduction of these ideas to the United States equally shocking. The pleasant idyll of an America strewn over with colleges and what were then called seminaries, for the most part educational backwaters where the children of the affluent served time in their late adolescence and imbibed the prejudices of their particular Protestant sect and their economic and social class, this is a nostalgic theme worthy of defense by any "real" conser-

vative. The ivory tower and the ivy covered gothic walls exert a charm which I think is quite understandable even though I believe it to be mistaken. I do not believe that conservatives ought to rest the defense of any institution simply on the fact that it is old any more than I would argue that an idea or an institution is defensible simply because it is new and claims that it looks to the future.

Let us consider, as dispassionately as possible, both the strengths and weaknesses of Behemoth University, compare it with the liberal arts college and attempt to strike some kind of balance.

We ought to begin with the fact of location. The college system which developed in America in the nineteenth century was essentially the reflection of an agricultural society. These institutions were predominantly located in small towns and they inculcated an ethos which was essentially anti-urban. Although Harvard and Columbia were located in major metropolitan centers they were the exception and in a certain sense one might argue that the University of Chicago, chartered in 1891, was the first explicitly major urban university in America. William and Mary and the University of Virginia stood at the opposite pole. It is important to recall that the University of Chicago was founded in the same years as the World's Columbian Exposition at which Frederick Jackson Turner read his famous paper on the impact of the disappearance of the frontier. The foundation of the University of Chicago marked a turning point in the direction of American higher education.

Today many of those small colleges of the nineteenth century have survived. In a sense they are the last great monuments of small-town and agricultural America. They have, however, been cut off from their natural constituency, for their student bodies are recruited from an urbanized America. They must immediately sense the unreality of an institution

which, simply in terms of geographic location, isolates the student from the society in which he will spend the greater part of his mature life.

Moreover, the geographic isolation effectively insulates the students from the cultural resources and the cultural debates of the metropolis. "Culture" is usually imported in a series of one-night stands in which the cultural pattern of nineteenth century rural America is preserved. In that nineteenth century America culture was not indigenous, was not a natural part of everyday life. It was an importation, something which came from the outside world, a kind of high-class happening. At its most provincial the multiversity, on the other hand, resembles as one of my friends remarked, an eighteenth century German court city with its own orchestra, ballet, theater and resident poet. The comparison is not farfetched, for the enormous financial resources of the university, even the provincial university, with its elaborate center for the performing arts, makes a level of cultural life possible which is, quite simply, out of the reach of the sequestered and isolated liberal arts college. I believe that geographic location and size are important determinants of the level which any institution of higher education can make available to its students. I believe that the opportunity to participate in a living culture is an important aspect of any education and in this respect I must confess that the university holds the edge on the small liberal arts college located at a remove from any metropolitan center.

There is an argument that high culture and low morals go hand in hand. Philistines and Puritans are fond of pointing out the connection between the theater, the Roman Catholic Church, monarchy, and low morals, and indeed it is quite correct to say that sixteenth century Rome was not sixteenth century Geneva. Still, the case cannot be made that Shakespeare ought to have been sacrificed to the effort to improve the morals of seventeenth century London youth. The notion that a college ought to be built, like a twelfth century Cistercian monastery, in an isolated wasteland in order to preserve the student from the contagion of the world is beneath contempt. I would like to remind you that St. Thomas Aquinas

taught at Paris in an atmosphere more praved than the conditions Russell Kirk discovered in East Lansing.

Nor is the argument sound that only small college can maintain an atmosphere decorum and order. The experience of the past two decades emphasizes the fact that decorum is not a function of size. In the 1960's the decorum of order was quite as complete at small colleges such as Antioch as it was at Berkeley. Nor is it true that the university when compared with the small college in either the behavior of its faculty or its students is marked by singular depravity. There is no reason to believe that the propensity to sin is any greater at the University of Chicago than it is at Kenyon College, and while there may be a difference in opportunities it is doubtful that there is any significant difference in the amount of ingenuity the determined sinner brings to the pursuit of his transgressions. It has long been a matter of inconclusive debate as to whether the crimes of the metropolis are any more violent or vile than those of the countryside or small town. While I have no statistical evidence to offer it seems unlikely to me that the multiversity is any more "immoral" than smaller institutions of higher education.

It is true that in some of the remoter and more isolated colleges the quality and nefarious inventiveness of the culprit is not up to standard. Surely it requires the resources of the Harvard library and a degree of energy unlikely to be found at Slippery Rock College to enable a graduate student to steal between 3,000 and 5,000 volumes from the library as several years ago was the case at Harvard. Some time ago while on an accreditation visit to a small college in the farther reaches of the Midwest I asked the dean of the college whether there were many "hippies" on campus. "Oh! yes," he observed, "we have a good many hippies but they are what I call failed hippies." "And what are failed hippies?" I asked. "Failed hippies," he replied, "are hippies who couldn't make it as hippies anywhere else." In discussing the connection between high thought and low morals it ought to be recalled that Alcibiades was one of the small elite taught by Socrates.

Decorum and order, while of considerable importance both as ends and means to education, are not, it seems to me, of central importance to the educational enterprise. Cardinal Newman argued as I am arguing here that the virtues of the mind are other and different in nature and inculcation than the moral virtues. I believe, (and I have argued it at length elsewhere), that Newman was mistaken in asserting that there is no connection between science and virtue. Nonetheless, the moral and the intellectual realms are separate and distinct and each has a characteristic methodology. The function of education is, in the first instance, the cultivation of the powers of the intellect and not the inculcation of moral virtue. Colleges and universities have good reason to insist on decorum and order but only as a means to the achievement of a developed mind and not as a means to achieving a developed character.

Let us then make our comparisons between Behemoth University and the liberal arts college in terms of their ability to attain educational goals. It is very important to distinguish at the outset two rather different purposes colleges and universities set for themselves. Most colleges and universities insist that they both educate and school the student. The fact is that the function of education and schooling are inseparable and have always been linked. For example, it is extremely difficult to separate the "arts" of communication from the "skills" of communication. Nonetheless, "schooling" is dominated by the idea of utility, the attainment of a particular and useful end while "education" is concerned with an understanding of meaning in general and for its own sake. At its humanistic best even "schooling" constantly echoes and resonates with larger meanings, with transcendent purposes, with ultimate values, with the reach of the mind to wonder and adoration and the call of the spirit to participation. It is difficult to see how a journalist, a secretary, a dentist, a farmer is not forced every day into the most probing kinds of questions, questions raised by the inherent problems of his occupation. Now, of course, it is quite possible to divorce the world of the practical and the immediate from the realm of value

and the transcendent. In these circumstances life becomes a series of technical tricks, and death, deprived of its ultimate dignity and meaning, becomes the final technical problem. "Schooling" seen wholly in terms of technique is not greatly different from the obedience training courses given to dogs.

In every era there has been a temptation to separate utility from value. The separation is, of course, catastrophic for while it yields an immediate increment of utility it ultimately bankrupts intellectuality and life itself of meaning and purpose. Higher education has recurrently succumbed to the temptation to place utility at the center of its concerns.

Writing of the medieval schoolmen in his book, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1961), Christopher Dawson noted, "Nevertheless, though the example of Dante shows that the new philosophical culture was capable of the highest literary and aesthetic achievement, it must be admitted that the advance in philosophy and science was accompanied by a decline in general literary standards of Western education. The substitution of the study of Aristotle for the study of the Latin classics which took place in the Arts course in the medieval university included a serious set-back for the cause of humanism which Professor Gilson has termed *'vexil des belles-lettres.'* This tendency was foreseen and combated by the greatest English scholar of the twelfth century, John of Salisbury, in his long polemic against the Philistines. In his view everything depends on the 'sweet and fruitful marriages of Reason and the Word' which is the source of human civilization, and without which men become brutalized and the city degenerates into a herd of human animals. It is true that his enemies are not so much the Aristotelians as the clerical utilitarians who were intent on using education as a means of getting on in the world; and there is no doubt that this type was common enough in the medieval universities. The sudden growth of the new schools in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was a sort of intellectual gold rush and produced an extraordinarily vital, disorderly, tumultuous democracy which resembled the society of the mining camp

rather than the disciplined life of the modern university.”

I have quoted Dawson at length only to enable you to see that it has all happened before, indeed, that this dehumanization of education constitutes the recurrent and single most important problem of higher education.

It is not the case, however, that utilitarianism is the exclusive or the particular problem of Behemoth University. Liberal arts colleges are as caught up in the enraptured worship of the relevant and the useful as are universities. It is well to point out that even some “conservative” colleges base their philosophy so completely on utilitarian economic theory and its supposed ability to solve human problems that they become caricatures of even the rich utilitarian diversity which exists at Behemoth University. It is simply wrong to suppose that even right-minded liberal arts colleges have necessarily solved the problem posed by the utilitarian bent of our culture. Unless the liberal arts college has thought out a coherent educational philosophy which places humanistic values at the center of its concerns it is in no respect, *per se* to be preferred to Behemoth University. On the other hand, size alone does not militate against a sound humanistic education. We must be very careful to look at the content rather than the forms of higher education, and it is one of the perennial failings of those who call themselves conservatives that they are fixated on forms rather than content.

The book is an essential aspect of any education. In certain respects books are more important than teachers. That is in part because humanistic education is today and always has been the exploration of a tradition. Great teachers are important but the book is the *sine qua non* of humanistic higher education. There is, I am aware, a good deal of debate as to whether liberal arts education in the humanistic tradition ought to be an education in a few or in many books. The famous Willmoore Kendall, I am told, was fond of saying large college libraries were unnecessary. “After all,” he quipped, “a student can read only one book at a time.” I think that remark typical of the Philistinism which surfaced from time to time in the

personality of Willmoore Kendall. While it is essential that the educated man know a few books very well and that he be in command of the profound formulations of the human condition and know the classic landmarks in the development of the tradition it is simply nonsense to say that a few books, even a few great books, are adequate to humanistic education.

Some years ago I was speaking with the great Eliseo Vivas about the thrill of discovery of a great poet I had not previously read. In this case the man was a novelist and I described how I had read novel after novel with a kind of intoxication and insatiability. Eliseo remarked that one of the tragedies of growing old was a loss of that sense of adventure and discovery in literature. I have thought much about that conversation and I believe that there is always more to a living culture than any man can know or master. Surely it is not Faustian to believe that there are joys of the mind not contained in the corpus of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, perceptions of humanness not found in Shakespeare and Milton, and political philosophy which goes beyond John Locke and the Federalist Papers. Whatever the merits of a “great books” curriculum it tends to narrow and reduce the rich grandeur of human experience and thought. My own most enduring experience in undergraduate education was the opportunity to read widely and at will. I began my reading in a good liberal arts college library, I read omnivorously through three years of army service, and in my last two years of undergraduate education the resources of one of the great libraries of the world was at my command.

One can make some important judgments about the quality of education in any college or university by a visit to the library and a visit to the college or university bookstore. Great universities are the possessors of great libraries. Great universities are surrounded by good bookstores and antiquarian bookshops. The university and college bookstores of great universities and colleges carry something more than texts, supplies and paperbacks which pander to the lowest common denominator of popular taste. Behemoth U. will in all likelihood have a good library; the demands of accreditation will

require it. It may even have a good bookstore. After visiting a good many liberal arts colleges I cannot say the same of them, though to be sure there are many exceptions to this observation. For the most part the college library, even when it is adequate, is often underused and the college bookstores are almost uniformly dismal. I have the impression often in visiting small liberal arts colleges that books are unimportant.

Of course I am aware that there are wide differences from campus to campus and that tendentious generalizations are extremely dangerous. This past spring I was privileged to have a very close look at a small university. I was delighted to observe in the university bookstore the absence of text books. The students in nearly every course actually read real books. Moreover, the university bookstore was a genuine bookstore and not an emporium of the artifacts and the cultural residues of a trash-oriented society. Moreover, this healthy situation existed alongside a library which by any standard would have to be judged inadequate.

My point is that books are essential to higher education and that as like as not Behemoth U. has more of them and uses them more intelligently than Hickory Corners' College, though once again no absolute judgments can be made.

Another very important factor in the assessment of educational resources is that of faculty quality. What about teachers and teaching? Surely in this respect the small liberal arts college with its intimate classes and its close attention to student needs possesses enormous advantages over Behemoth U.? On closer examination, however, we shall discover that these supposed advantages lose something of their weight.

Does it really follow that because class size is small the quality of instruction is automatically improved? Numerous studies and the personal experience of many good teachers will not support this assumption. There is, however, an obvious upward limit, and the lecture hall at Behemoth U. filled with 2,000 glassy-eyed students is an instance where the limit has been reached and passed. Still, it is arguable

that an auditorium filled with 2,000 students may learn a great deal more from an original, creative and challenging mind than will a class of 20 which sits at the feet of a dullard. The fact is that most of the truly original and creative thinkers in our society are not attracted to teach in small liberal arts colleges. I can think of hardly a single determinative intellectual in the past two decades who has taught at a small liberal arts college. This is as true of professors who describe themselves as conservatives as it is of those who call themselves liberals. It is instructive to check the institutional identification of the professors discussed in George Nash's recent book, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. It turns out that they have been or are now overwhelmingly faculty members at Behemoth U. Why is this the case?

It would be easy to reach the conclusion that it is the case simply because the university can command the resources of the society; because university salaries are higher than those paid at small colleges and that university teaching loads are lighter. Perhaps it is also because opportunities for and support of research is so much more available at major universities than at small colleges. There is some truth, of course, in all these explanations. Still, I know a great many truly distinguished men who are paid surprisingly poor salaries at Behemoth U. and who remain gladly because of something our dean likes to call "institutional identification."

I suspect the real reason for this loyalty is the fact that the great universities are the places in our society where the action really is. It is here that the great arguments are made, the intellectual encounters take place and new knowledge is discovered and its implications developed. There are certain universities in America; a handful to be sure, where, as Robert Nisbet observed to me, "one can feel the crackle of intellectual excitement." One may deplore the direction of much of this thought as I do. Nonetheless, it is at these determinative universities that the battle for tomorrow is taking place. What genuine intellectual wants to live in the stifling atmosphere of an ivy-covered ghetto?

The great failure of our major universities, as I have frequently described it, has been the failure to welcome intelligent heterodoxy. The university, in spite of its professed ideals seeks uniformity and conformity. It is in those schools such as the University of Chicago in which there has been a persistent quest for intellectual nonconformity that the most important intellectual achievements of our society have been made. It is important for professors to be able to talk, argue with and learn from their colleagues. The life of the mind is not an introspective monologue. I suspect that my conservative colleagues are aware of this and that the attractiveness of debate more than anything else accounts for their presence at Behemoth U. How disappointing then that Behemoth fails to countenance and foster genuine debate. That debate must always take place in spite of established positions and against the grain of academic politics. However, the record of the small liberal arts colleges is even more dismal.

And no doubt good professors are attracted by the availability of good students. This factor is very important for those professors who spend a great deal of time in graduate instruction. Not every mammoth university attracts or even bothers to identify potentially good students. Still there is such a thing as a desire for high quality students on the part of some of our best universities. This, of course, is equally true of some of our best liberal arts colleges.

Does a distinguished and creative faculty make a real difference so far as the student is concerned? Perhaps the dedicated mediocrity on the part of faculty which one so often encounters in the small liberal arts college is what students want and need. The extinct volcano, the academic free-loader, the professor who retired early and who is held in place by tenure is a well known figure on every college and university campus. Often his presence is the consequence of the inability of the administration to make hard decisions. On the campus of the major university these mistakes can be discretely hidden and the damage minimized. On the small college campus the extinct volcano may be one sixth of a particular department, who year after year successfully discour-

ages students and makes his particular discipline the laughing stock of young minds brighter than his own.

Nor is it true that the quality of instruction or the availability of the professor to the student is uniformly lower at Behemoth U. than at a small college. Some major universities such as my own have distinguished teaching traditions even though these traditions exist in spite of a lack of rewards and encouragement. The professor is available to the students. There are a wide variety of honors programs and courses, colloquia and individualized programs of study. In fact, I have the feeling that there is far too much pandering to the student in an effort to adjust learning to what the student believes he needs. Much does depend upon the initiative of the student but it cannot be argued that student initiative is not important even on the small campus.

Finally, there is the matter of curriculum. It is in this important matter that I believe the university is weakest. We now stand at the end of about twenty years of curricular decay, and most schools, both colleges and universities, have embarked upon a reform of the content and method of their undergraduate programs. Clearly some liberal arts colleges which have kept their curricula intact and have maintained structure and standards in their instructional program are clearly superior in this respect to some universities where literally anything goes. But one cannot say that in this respect the small liberal arts college is uniformly superior to Behemoth U.

There is a great need for educational statesmanship particularly at our major universities. Priorities must be assessed and resources allocated in terms of some coherent vision of what a humanistic undergraduate education is. Even at the level of graduate instruction there must be a growing awareness of the importance of values and moral responsibility in the professional and technical fields. I applaud the efforts of colleges and universities to deal with these needs. Meanwhile, it is possible for the student to construct for himself a program which will provide a humanistic liberal arts education. The courses are available and deans are only too willing to offer new courses

should students indicate a desire for them. The main problem at Behemoth U. is in sorting out the welter of courses and professors and in making the right choices.

It should be remembered that the decay of liberal arts education in the last twenty years had taken place largely as a response to student demand and the misperceptions of society. The restoration of curricula and standards will come only if the students and the parent society demand it.

Some historical perspective is useful in these matters. Higher education has oscillated between the free elective system and the highly structured curriculum. We are now at the end of another of those great pendulum-like swings. It is increasingly clear that some common body of knowledge about the historical and cultural tradition and some ability to discuss with sophistication and act on the perception of value and the needs of political life are necessary in every good society. How best to ensure this kind of education at the undergraduate level is an open question and I believe that there are a number of strategies for dealing with it. Different institutions will develop different answers and I hope that these answers will be grounded in the great strength represented by particular religious and secular world views. While I believe that debate and pluralism are an essential aspect of intellectuality I also think that these differences are most fruitful when they develop within a context of a larger agreed consensus. There is a difference between debate and babel. At many schools, liberal arts college and university alike, there is a confusion of tongues and an absence of that minimal agreement which makes discourse and communication possible. It is often overlooked, for example, that while our society is pluralist in the large sense, that pluralism is based upon certain widely shared beliefs. One of the most pressing tasks of our society is that of bringing into self-conscious awareness those areas of fundamental agreement and shared experience upon which our society is based. The multiversity, (a nice name for Behemoth

U.), secular in tone if not in fact, has been of little assistance in the development of consensus or even in the enlightened debate of values. The liberal arts college has not done much better. Too often the liberal arts college has simply adopted the standards and the method of the university. The one great advantage of the university is the opportunity for the student to find a wide variety of values represented and to discover courses in which the fundamental questions are asked.

In the best of all possible worlds undergraduate education would take place within the context of a university. That program of undergraduate education would be able to avail itself of the enormous resources of the university. Faculty, libraries, museums, theaters, orchestras, all would enrich the studies of the undergraduate. Not the least among these advantages which the context of the university would offer is the opportunity to hear and to meet the best and most creative thinkers of our era; visitors who have come to give a lecture, a performance or a course at the university.

But in the best of all possible worlds the undergraduate program would be distinctively different from graduate and professional training. It should develop in the student some systematic knowledge of the cultural tradition and the shared historical experience of the Western world. It should provide the student with the essential linguistic and mathematical skills to enable further study and clear communication and understanding. But finally, and most importantly, it should raise systematically the question of values and meaning and explore the dimensions of what it means to be fully human.

Very few schools today offer such a program. There are liberal arts colleges which do achieve these goals. There are students who will best find fulfillment in the more familiar and contracted atmosphere of the small school. I submit, however, that Behemoth U. is more likely to provide the rudiments of such a program than most liberal arts colleges. And so I say, "Two cheers for Behemoth U.!"