

March 13, 1944

Dean H. K. Newburn  
College of Liberal Arts  
Schaeffer Hall

Dear Dean Newburn:

The heaviest charge laid against the liberal arts college is the lack of integration of knowledge in the education of the youth. You are of course aware of the extent to which departments have multiplied, the extent to which courses have flowered so profusely. The centrality of knowledge has been shattered on the rock of specialization. The advantages of specialization are very great and not to be denied. But the tragedy is that we have become the victims of our success in specialization. The movement to restore the centrality of education and to assess subjects in terms of the long view of education is necessary and wholesome. The correction of a decentralized program is the very essence of the problem of the Steering Committee in providing a schedule of basis courses.

There is hardly an academic subject which has not been affected and whose future is not endangered by the continuing force of specialization. New intellectual disciplines have gradually emerged, gathered their strength, and gone forward to push from the curriculum one traditional subject after another or to reduce it to a minor role. The classical languages have been shorn of their strength. Modern languages bravely struggle against the pressure. Mathematics is deemed of lesser value. Perhaps History as such will be forced to give way to afford space and time for new fields of knowledge.

Every subject should be called upon to justify by valid reasons why it deserves a place in the curriculum. And that judgment must be based upon the value inherent in it in relation to the education of youth as the final product. It has happened that new subjects, eager to find a warm place in the curriculum sun, elaborate unduly upon the validity of their particular subjects. Not always content to argue for the significance of their subject per se and in relation to education as a whole, they press against traditional academic subjects. History as a basic field has been subject to certain criticisms and pressures. In the light of this tendency we cannot stand aloof and trust that the dignity and validity of the field are alone sufficient

to guard its place in the basic core of studies. It is with some embarrassment that we feel forced to express our views.

The Social Sciences within four or five decades have risen to a dominant place. We do not deny their significance; indeed we frankly acknowledge their rich contributions. They have a method, an approach, and a content of distinctive value. We quarrel not with the important niche they have been allotted in the core area. On the other hand it so happens that some of the social scientists rate History as such as a subject of low value. It may be said that this Olympian arrogance merits no attention. It is not worth the dignity of a direct reply, but it is necessary to point out that it has its supporters. Small in number as they may be, they are very vocal and the movement even in its inception has dangers for the future.

Indeed, there are some who say that History as such is hardly a residuum. It is argued plausibly that the development of an area of human activity can be taught competently only by scholars especially trained in a particular field. For example, the history of art by one trained in it, religion by the priest, culture and civilization by the social scientists, and so on. Again it is a point of view not to be taken lightly. Such being the case, History as such has slight reason for existence as a field.

Very recently newer subjects have emerged and insist upon a recognition in the core area commensurate with their importance. The several branches in the School of Fine Arts urge their subjects with valid reasons. Religion follows. Looking to the future one is inclined to ask where the procession will end. With equal validity an argument can be made for the importance of Human Behaviour in the core area as one of the most powerful forces in molding the trends of society. Man in relation to geography could well follow. And even as we wrestle to provide a certain measure of integration we are perplexed by a strong movement toward further specialization.

The Social Sciences have been awarded a place in the core area. Literature is honored with a division. A division has been created to accommodate the Fine Arts. And the great question has been where to place History. Literature is a special phase of historical evolution. The same may be said of the Social Sciences and the Fine Arts. The special subjects, each in its own way contribute greatly to a knowledge of history. The historian will appeal to them to explain special phases in order to set the evolution of society into a comprehensive panel. But it is clear that the unfolding of the great human drama cannot be understood by interpreting it in terms of a single set of factors. The conclusion draws itself that History cannot be drawn within the orbit of any one special intellectual discipline. It would

seem that in providing divisions for special phases such as Literature, the Social Sciences and the Fine Arts, the one subject which provides a synthesizing discipline has a hard time finding a home. It would seem that the purpose is to reduce History to a contracted status in order to provide time and space to accommodate specialized subjects.

In considering the case of history as a field of importance we do not approach the matter in a subjective spirit. We are not primarily concerned with the question of numbers likely to enroll in history in the core area. As in the past so in the future we will have plenty of students attracted by the importance of history and by the competence of teaching. Our one concern is the validity and significance of history in terms of the long view of education and the manner of the product the college sends out into life.

And to know the contemporary scene the student must be able to see the unfolding of society in its historical perspective. The past is tremendously in men for we are the creatures of the past. More things are predetermined in life than are not predetermined. Out of the past has come patterns of life, traditions, ideals, law, religion, system which has given society what measure of stability it has. And we cannot ignore with impunity the past which has made us what we are today. The present cannot be understood by divorcing it from the past. And until the historian integrates the special strands of history and interprets the present in the light of historical perspective we can have no adequate comprehension of society in all its unity, diversity and complexity.

The great desire today among the youth is to see things in terms of present realities, as if the past is dead. But certainly it cannot be sound social living to live contemporaneously or to make a new philosophy every day. It is of the greatest significance to trace the continuity of history in all its complexity through the ages for we are in a very literal sense the heirs of the past. At the same time to interpret the forces of mutation which have modified the old order to meet changing conditions. And through all this the historian must try to understand all the forces of humanity which in one way or another determine the course of civilization.

History has significance not only in the perspective of time but also in space. It can be well illustrated by the rather exclusive concern with American culture. In the realm of history it has been the custom to explain America chiefly in American terms. In the thinking of Americans they have been restricted in their outlook by the horizon of their own culture. Certainly

this is not a free mind and a liberal education. The mind of youth should be brought into touch with other cultures and made to see how his own culture has been influenced by others. Many factors help to differentiate one culture from another. To envisage the interrelations and interactions of various cultures is a corrective to provincialism and the essence of a liberal mind. A core course in history as already proposed would enable the student to understand the contributions of Europe to the making of American civilization and what America has given to the shaping of Europe. Certainly in these days a student should have a sound knowledge of his own country as a product of independent evolution and an understanding of the relation of America to a world brought into a sensitive integrated order. Provincialism in culture and a restricted outlook do not go with a liberal education.

Very sincerely yours,