

GOALS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE: ***A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE***

By Betty Howard

What sets Christian education apart from education in a secular setting? The most obvious response would be the study of religion. But this is not the whole answer. Many secular universities have departments that teach religious history and philosophy. Christian education goes beyond mere discussion to integration. It seeks to achieve "the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers."¹

Accomplishing that harmonious development in the educational climate of the late-20th century

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requires Christian educators to reexamine the goals of the undergraduate experience.

It often seems that today's career-driven students would rather be credentialed than educated. In an era of information explosion, many students demand training to acquire specific, salable job skills.

The information explosion has led students to believe the only way to deal with the world is to segment it. Christian educators must combat this narrow view. To help students achieve integration and harmonious development, education must first show them how to process information.

The educator must then demonstrate ways to integrate disparate bits and pieces of information into a harmonious whole.

And finally, educators must respond to student demands for career training. They must not limit their teaching to providing salable job skills, but rather must teach students to apply a broad base of information to real-life situations.

Processing Information

In order to cope with the explosion of knowledge in almost every field of human endeavor, we must develop ways of processing information that keep it from becoming unmanageable. Information systems—and people—are vulnerable to information overload. If educa-

tors do not rethink their philosophy on disseminating facts, the day may come when educational systems become so swamped with knowledge that students are exposed to confusing, perhaps almost random bits of the total sum of knowledge.

Unless we find new ways of dealing with the information overload, the very means of collecting, processing, storing, and disseminating information will likely become clogged.

Educational systems must concern themselves with economy of learning. The increased amounts of information available and the accelerating changes in society will also require a great deal of learning to be squeezed into a limited time. We need to find ways to integrate human and technological instructional capabilities. We must *synthesize complex fields of information* while freeing students from tasks at which they are relatively inefficient, such as storing and retrieving information.

Change is occurring at an accelerated pace. Even the *nature* of change is changing. New knowledge does not merely pile on top of old knowledge. It *alters* the old knowledge. A person's job changes not only because a machine can help him do the work faster, but

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also because machines now do tasks that were not feasible using people power. Increasingly, the learning one acquires at one stage of life will likely prove inadequate for a later stage. Because of this, education must provide young citizens with the necessary learning skills to deal with learning situations all through their lifetimes.

Integrating Facts

Organization of knowledge is becoming as important as facts. We cannot rely on learners to supply their own organization. Schools must teach students how to classify knowledge, while encouraging flexibility and creative thinking.

Undergraduate education must emphasize the development of learning skills. The information explosion and the accelerating pace of change may militate against colleges being able to transmit all necessary facts.

Schools must seek to develop broadly educated specialists. The high level of technology that society will attain in the next few decades will require technical training of many citizens. Decisions in business, education, and government will demand both technical knowledge and a grasp of the "big picture." The world's increasing population density, the complexity of society and technology, the speed of communication, and the intricate organizational patterns of modern institutions will require broadly educated citizens.

Education must also emphasize *human relations*. In a very real sense, modern communication and transportation have created a global community. Communications satellites illustrate dramatically the possibilities of instantaneous transmission of events and ideas. The "town meeting of the world" is a reality.

Applying Information to Real-Life Situations

Schools and colleges should progressively involve their students in making decisions about their educational programs, so that ultimately each learner controls his or her own education. Learning will

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no longer be limited to a particular time or place but will become a lifelong process. Therefore, each person must have, in addition to learning skills, the ability to recognize and plan for his or her own learning needs.

An educational system that makes choices for its students without involving them in the decision-making process will probably produce docile, indecisive robots. Every human being must learn to make decisions; the most logical starting point for this is an educational program.

Education must provide a way for individuals to discover purpose in their lives. Many of the traditional influences that shaped people's lives have less impact on society today. For example, the family's influence has diminished because different generations often live far apart, and because marital relationships have been redefined. The church is experiencing growing (or in some areas, shrinking) pains. In the future, work may not be as powerful a controlling force in people's lives, as shorter working hours and nontraditional locations for doing work become more common.

To remedy these losses in guidance, people will have to depend more heavily on their inner resources. Their purpose in life will be more nearly a product of their own efforts than of traditional influences. As a result, they will have to learn new ways of integrating the values associated with family, church, and work into their lives.

Education must help people learn to break down the dichotomy between work and play. In order to accomplish their goals, educated persons will have to see work and play as part of a total life plan; work will be play because it is enjoyable and challenging; play will be work because it is meaningful rather than simply time consuming.

Shortened work hours and increased leisure time must be consid-

ered in constructing one's life plan. Escaping from work merely to have more time to fill with entertainment is neither constructive nor satisfying.

Social and Philosophical Implications

In addition to helping people learn to process, integrate, and apply information, education must help them to develop appropriate attitudes.

Society, that faceless monolith that is really us, forces patterns of behavior that are inimical to individual development. Discrimination, whether based on race or on tradition, is still wrong. The woman who is discouraged from entering a male-dominated occupation is as surely a victim of discrimination as is the black or Hispanic trying to enter a white-dominated profession. Society also loses, since it may be deprived of the benefit of the excluded person's best talents.

The educational system can help overcome discrimination by preparing individuals to realize their potential. However, it must also help society to accept the best of each individual.

Developing an Educational Philosophy

All teaching is based on some kind of philosophy—a set of assumptions and values which, whether consciously thought out or not, influence the teacher's role in the classroom. A philosophy of education is important because it determines what textbooks we select, how we structure our curriculum, and how we relate to students.

According to one thoughtful observer:

At present, opinion is divided about the subject of education. People do not all take the same position about what should be learned by the young . . . whether their studies should be mainly dedicated to the intellect or to moral character.

While that might sound like a comment from the editorial page of a recent newspaper, it came from a work titled *Politics*, written by the Greek philosopher Aristotle 300 years before Christ. Obviously, the exact role of the school in develop-

ing the child has long been in a subject of debate.

Christian schools share with secular institutions a commitment to teach the three "R's"—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. However, Christian education has a broader and higher aim than simply to provide facts. It also addresses such educational goals as *respect, responsibility, and relationship skills*.

Reactions to recent reports on the deplorable state of American education, however, have the potential for undermining a commitment to the harmonious development of the whole person. Unless we read carefully the recent rack of excellence reports, we may mistakenly assume that they urge schools to get back to reading, writing, and arithmetic, and forget all other areas of development. However, these reports do express an underlying commitment to the concept of developing the whole person.

Conclusion

Shaping the future may be the most important role for leaders in the educational enterprise during the rest of this century. Imaginative planning and vigorous action are imperative to maintain a viable educational system in this era of information explosion. The Seventh-day Adventist Church must have an educational system shaped in a purposeful manner, or it will, by default, be shaped by accident, tradition, or the random forces of the environment.

Seventh-day Adventist schools must continue their commitment to the spiritual, social, physical, and moral growth of students—as well as their intellectual development. Our educational system must similarly commit itself to the development of students who have a sense of responsibility, who respect themselves and others, and who can relate effectively to other people and to society. We must never abandon their commitment to these important "R's." □

REFERENCE

- ¹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 13.