



Competitive Model of Intellectual Achievement No Longer Viable in Higher Education

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In the olden days — say, the late nineteenth century — American academic scholars held a dualistic understanding of their role in society. They had inherited a model of reality that can be traced back in Western mentality through the Christian Middle Ages to the Platonic dualism of Greek Antiquity. According to this model, "spirit" was separable from "matter;" ideas were separable from their appearances in the world; the quiet life of the mind was separable from the noisy business of the world. American academics translated this spirit/matter dichotomy into the opposition of intellectual work and practical work.

The opposition of intellectual work and practical work begat all sorts of related oppositions: scholars and businessmen; intellectuals and politicians; basic education and applied education; basic research and applied research; the humanities and the sciences; scholarship and public service.

For humanities scholars, the less practical the intellectual work was, the more prestigious it was. Study in the "liberal arts," which only the well-to-do could afford in the late nineteenth century, prepared individuals not for the workplace but for their own pleasure. Education generally was discussed from the viewpoint of the individual.

Of course, while academic intellectuals were looking down on people involved in our society's practical work, politicians, businessmen, and laborers were making fun of academic intellectuals

for living in an “ivory tower” and not “the real world.” Even the phrase “That’s academic” came to mean “That’s irrelevant.” But that was in the olden days. Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the dualist model has become obsolete.

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When we look at education from the viewpoint of society, the opposition of basic education to applied education begins to disappear. Although universities still distinguish between technical courses designed to train people to do specific tasks and other courses designed to train people to think critically and to write, the latter courses no longer are the privilege of the upper classes. Our society no longer automatically accords more prestige to intellectual work

than to practical work. And public universities — in particular, land-grant institutions — are actively engaged in public service. We have come to see the interdependence of differently trained people and the need for us all to work together.

About twenty years ago I put a cartoon on my office door that showed a couple looking up at a large marble sculpture of five people at a table. The man was saying to his wife, “There are no longer any great men, just great committees.” I thought the cartoon funny, because as a literary scholar I considered intellectual work to be a private matter, done by an individual alone in his or her office. I admired great individualists. I viewed committee work as work done only when compromise was necessary. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I held a competitive model of intellectual achievement. That model belonged to the nineteenth century. Now I think that “great committees” is the way to go. To make good citizens of the world in the twenty-first century, universities need to teach students to be “great committee” members.

We are living through the most profound transformation of the world’s social order that has ever taken place. Nobody alive in the year 2000 will be unaffected by globalization. The emergence of global markets and transnational corporations is creating economic interdependence among all of the world’s nations. Pollution of our atmosphere and our oceans is forcing collaboration on environmental protection among politically diverse cultures. Computers, through the internet and the web, ignore national borders in providing instant communication among individuals and groups situated great distances from one another. Multinational corporations employ citizens from many different countries. Global television is showing everybody how everybody else in the world lives. And jet travel mingles us all together.

Real-world problems no longer can be solved by individuals working alone. Real-world problems require cooperation among people with different talents, different training, different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and different nationalities. They require "great committees" of individuals who can contribute something valuable to the solution of the problem and, at the same time, respect others different from themselves for what they can contribute. In "great committees," the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The interaction of knowledgeable and capable individuals with different perspectives produces ideas and solutions to problems that individuals acting alone cannot produce.

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So how should colleges and universities prepare students to be "great committee" members in this period of planet-wide cultural, political, technological, conceptual revolution?

These are the skills that I believe constitute a good education:

- communication skills: the ability to write well, to speak well, and to read critically;
- research skills: the ability to acquire information from a variety of sources, including the World Wide Web, and to analyze it;
- familiarity with a foreign language: the ability to understand and use a language other than one's native language, and thereby to develop respect for cultural differences;
- familiarity with computers;
- an acquaintance with science and an appreciation of nature;
- a body of knowledge: a field of specialization, which may be basic research, applied research, a profession, an art, a trade, a craft, or a technical skill; and,
- perhaps most importantly, the ability to cooperate, which brings with it with an appreciation of diversity — racial, ethnic, ideological, and national diversity, as well as diversity of abilities and skills.

The appreciation for all kinds of work is actually prerequisite to cooperation. Without appreciation for the many enterprises in which human beings around the world are engaged to make their living and improve their community, individuals will not be "great committee" members. Colleges and universities can foster such appreciation by arranging events and establishing programs that bring students from distinct areas of study into working relationships. Team-taught

interdisciplinary courses that bring together faculty from diverse fields of inquiry, such as the sciences and the humanities, demonstrate to students the value of intellectual cooperation. Symposia addressing important social or ethical issues that bring together academic intellectuals and nonacademic professionals demonstrate the fruitfulness of links between "the ivory tower" and "the real world." Programs, such as those in land-grant institutions, that join faculty and students with industrious and creative people across the state and around the planet, demonstrate the opportunities we all have to make a better world.

In the twenty-first century, "great committees" will be required in the United Nations to solve international and intercultural disputes. "Great committees" will be required in transnational environmental agencies to address problems of planetary environmental degradation. "Great committees" will be required in multinational corporations, in the communications industry, in the computer industry, in national and local governments around the world, in schools and colleges, in science, in medicine, in law, and in engineering. "Great committees" will be required in cities, in neighborhoods, and in rural communities.

The members of the "great committees" will come from the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and the professions. They will be academics and non-academics. They will be men and women. What will distinguish the "great committees" from the not-so-great committees will be not just the skills of their members but also their members' capacity for cooperation.

To make a better world we do indeed need "great committees," committees with both men and women. "Great men" no longer suffice. ■

About the Author

Betty Jean Craige (Ph.D., University of Washington) is University Professor of Comparative Literature and director of the University of Georgia Center for Humanities and Arts. She is author of *American Patriotism in a Global Society* (1996), *Laying the Ladder Down: The Emergence of Cultural Holism* (1992), and *Reconnection: Dualism to Holism in Literary Study* (1988). She is the recipient of the University of Georgia Alumni Society 1994 Faculty Service Award and the Association of American Colleges 1989 Frederic W. Ness Book Award. At the University of Georgia, where she has worked since 1973, she has served as Interim Head of Comparative Literature (1997-99) and has won awards for teaching and research.