

Review Articles

General Education

General Education in a Free Society; Report of the Harvard Committee, with an introduction by James Bryant Conant. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1945. xix, 267p.

In the winter of 1942-43, James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard University, appointed a committee of twelve members from the faculty on general education in a free society and secured an appropriation from the Harvard corporation of sixty thousand dollars to meet the expenses incurred by the committee in the conduct of a study of general education. *General Education in a Free Society*, published in the summer of 1945, embodies the results of the investigation of the committee.

The committee, under the chairmanship of Paul H. Buck, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, was drawn from the faculties of arts and sciences and of education and was directed not so much to make recommendations for general education in Harvard College as "to venture into the vast field of American educational experience in quest of a concept of general education that would have validity for a free society."

Charged with this duty, the committee set about its work and, in the course of its prolonged, careful study, secured assistance from many members of the university and of the faculties of other colleges and universities and from representatives of other educational organizations at various levels of education.

The report of the committee is presented in six chapters under the following headings: I. Education in the United States; II. Theory of General Education; III. Problems of Diversity; IV. Areas of Education; the Secondary School; V. General Education in Harvard College; and VI. General Education in the Community.

Facts with which the committee had to deal were the tremendous growth in enrolment in secondary schools and colleges during the twentieth century; the corresponding expansion of the curricula of the secondary schools and colleges; and the wide range of abilities

possessed by individual students—all pointing to the desirability of the provision of a kind of education by means of which all students, whether rich or poor, of high mental ability or low, book-minded or hand-minded, whether terminating their formal studies in the secondary school or continuing them through college and professional study, should acquire certain skills and common methods of learning and common points of view, appreciations, and understandings of such a nature as to enable them "to think effectively, to communicate their thought clearly, to make relevant judgments, and to discriminate successfully among values."

Since the individual is destined to live his life as a member of a free society or democracy, it was considered essential that his general education should be directed to the development of the good man, in order that he may become a good and useful citizen of a democratic society. In this sense, Chapter II, which deals with the theory of general education, is the most important of the six, since it defines general education as contrasted with special education, describes its nature, and makes clear the function it is to perform in a democratic society.

The third chapter analyses the great differences among individuals in ability, background, and point of view and poses the question, "How can general education be so adapted to different ages and, above all, differing abilities and outlooks, that it can appeal deeply to each, yet remain in goal and essential teaching the same for all?" The answer to this question is provided in the fourth chapter for the secondary school and in the fifth chapter for Harvard College. In these chapters, man's need for knowledge relating to his physical environment, to his membership in society, and to his own inner life is considered, as well as the specific contributions that the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities respectively may make in supplying this fundamentally essential knowledge. The suggestions outlined for the secondary school can be adapted to the needs of a wide

variety of schools and would go far in securing unity of attitude and points of view of students at the secondary school level regardless of differences in abilities, environment, economic status, and other characteristics. The suggestions for Harvard College take the form of definite curricula that require (1) the pursuit of a given number of courses in general education not previously offered and (2) the modification of other courses previously given that will emphasize general education as well as special education, to which they have heretofore been largely devoted.

For the secondary school student, whether with high intelligence or low, whether book-minded or hand-minded, whether pursuing terminal courses or going on to college or entering a professional school, a procedure is outlined which, it is believed, will insure the development of the abilities to think, to communicate thought, to form relevant judgments, and to make judgments that are appropriate to the good citizen of a free society. For the Harvard College student, if the faculty adopts the proposed curricula, there will be less freedom of election in the area of general education than there has been in the past and more emphasis in other courses, in the areas of concentration and specialization, upon those aspects of the subjects which will promote general education. For the adult student in the community, most of his study, both formal and informal, will be rich in courses in which general education will play the dominant role.

President Conant, in commenting on the report in his "Introduction," characterizes the first four chapters as "the product of a study unique in the history of American education." He also considers the report unusual in that while it involved a dozen members of the faculties of arts and sciences and education, it represents the unanimous view of the group; it is not based on compromise.

Whether or not the study is unique may well be questioned, particularly by those who have contributed to the preparation of *General Education: Its Nature, Scope, and Essential Elements* (W. S. Gray, editor, 1934); *General Education in the American College* (Alvin C. Eurich, chairman, 1939); *General Education in the American High School* (B. Lamar Johnson, editor, 1942); *Education for All American Youth* (Educational Policies Commission, 1944); *Design for General Educa-*

tion (American Council on Education, 1944); and *On General and Liberal Education: A Symposium* (Association for General and Liberal Education, 1945). The studies by these groups, and the even earlier study by the faculty of the University of Chicago that led to the setting up of the curriculum of the college, have dealt with many aspects of general education and have contributed to the clarification of the ideas presented in the Harvard report. In fact, the curriculum of the college of the University of Chicago has long been primarily concerned with general education very similar to that recommended by the Harvard Committee. Controversy over the term "liberal education" and the A.B. degree to which the Chicago curriculum leads, has obscured somewhat the fundamental character of the training which it has provided at the secondary school and college levels, through its general as well as its special courses. Fortunately, the Harvard report has avoided the controversial elements that have been associated with the Chicago plan and that have obscured somewhat its highly significant values. Furthermore, the report is written with such clarity and such freedom from educational terminology that it carries conviction as to the adequacy of the analysis of the problem considered and of the soundness of the proposals presented for the promotion of general education in the future.

The study is both significant and timely and it will greatly influence education at all levels in the future. It points out soberly and with convincing logic the fact that in the modern world, ushered in by the atomic bomb and V-J Day, some means must be found by which every citizen of the United States shall gain an understanding of his heritage and of what his duties as a citizen are. This can no longer be left to chance, except at the peril of all that America has thus far held dear.

The potential value of the study for the librarian is great, whether public, school, college, or university. The report sets forth the objectives of general education with a directness that will enable him to understand one of the major goals of present-day American education. Consequently, he can organize and administer his library in such a way as to increase the contribution that it may make to the perfection of American democracy.—*Louis R. Wilson.*