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COMMENTARY

The Value of a Shared Education

By Judith Shapiro | NOVEMBER 17, 2014



Gwenda Kaczor for The Chronicle

At the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, social theorists of an evolutionary bent were seeking to describe the development of societies from the simpler to the more complex. Émile Durkheim, for example, contrasted two major ways in which societies could be held together: either by mechanical solidarity (the

likeness among component members) or by organic solidarity (a division of labor that makes component members dependent upon one another).

Ferdinand Tönnies drew a distinction that has had a more nuanced history in the field of sociology, that between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Like "mechanical solidarity," the concept of *Gemeinschaft* points to what members of a society share, expressing it in a more positive way. *Gesellschaft* refers to the more differentiated networks and interactions that characterize a complex society. Tönnies suggested that a healthy society needs both forms of connection to hold it together.

Gemeinschaft and *Gesellschaft* help illuminate today's college experience. To what extent are undergraduates moving through overlapping though largely differentiated networks, and to what extent do they share experiences, priorities, and goals?

If we look at curricula, we see a trend toward proliferation. Courses and programs are constantly being added, while almost nothing goes away. Faculty members have felt a need, or desire, to have their teaching reflect the increasing accumulation of knowledge—in established fields, in relatively new fields, and in the interdisciplinary spaces between fields. This has led to a growing proportion of relatively narrow, specialized courses, creating a powerful centrifugal effect on the undergraduate academic experience.

Some institutions have held to a core curriculum throughout this period of growing specialization, a couple of notable examples being Columbia University and the University of Chicago. A number of others that have not wished to follow the path to *Gemeinschaft* quite that far have nonetheless felt a need to make the undergraduate experience more comprehensible, coherent, and meaningful. They have done so by becoming places where faculty members think of themselves not just as a community of scholars but also as a community of teachers, with communal responsibility for shaping the curriculum.

Such an effort requires that faculty members see their individual classes not as private property but as part of a common project that engages them with their colleagues. This may involve rethinking the major. It should certainly involve collegewide curricular planning that transcends the common logrolling approach focused on the interests of one's own department. For faculty members, it means discussing matters of teaching as naturally as they discuss matters of research.

It also means academic advising that functions as a high-quality tour guide, pointing out desirable itineraries from arrival to graduation and discussing with students what the journey is basically about. Improving advising involves not only the retraining of advisers but also the development of online tools that can help students meet their academic goals—an approach that is especially useful at larger institutions.

A greater focus would also be desirable in the cocurricular world of student activities, where groups and activities have proliferated. During my years as a college president, I sometimes wondered whether the number of student groups would come to equal the number of students, a process that would fall short of total atomization because of the large number of different groups to which any individual student might belong. The antidote is for students to set priorities, to decide that there are some issues so important—climate change, for example—that they belong at the forefront of attention.

A major force working against community is the premium put on individual achievement, stemming from the intense competitive pressure to succeed that many young people now experience, beginning for some in preschool. Similarly, today's emphasis on "competencies" over content can also contribute to viewing education in an overly individualized way. While it is important to be clear about what kinds of skills should be expected from a high-quality liberal-arts education, it is also important to think about the kind of collected knowledge that would give those benefiting from such an education a common basis for communication and action.

If there was once too much of an emphasis on curricular content, as opposed to the general intellectual skills to be achieved in the course of a liberal-arts education, now there seems to be too little. While we may no longer be able to agree on a particular set of works with which all educated people should be familiar, that does not absolve us of responsibility for making principled curricular decisions about the kind of material that would be most significant and intellectually challenging.

Gemeinschaft need not lead to comfort and complacency. While community is based on shared values and norms, it does not depend on like-mindedness; it should involve knowing what we most need to argue about. To be sure, there should also be room for nonconformists, for the eccentrics and fringe groups that can be counted on for unexpected perspectives and contributions.

Achieving a greater degree of *Gemeinschaft* is especially challenging because of the level of fragmentation that has come with changes in information technology. The role of the Internet in creating virtual gated communities is well known. As we go about our daily lives,

we are used to seeing people plugged into their own electronic devices, oblivious to the human beings occupying the same area at the same time. Indeed, we see such behavior even at meetings where people presumably have come together with the purpose of engaging in some common activity.

Such fragmentation is increasingly characteristic of the undergraduate experience. Its consequences include a level of informational anomie that ill prepares students to participate as politically engaged members of a democratic society. Toward the end of their book *Aspiring Adults Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa comment on how infrequently the young people they interviewed would engage in discussions of current events and political issues. The authors note a connection between that and the lack of shared sources of information, of some common experience of reading about or listening to what is going on in the world.

There is a striking moment in Ken Burns's series on the Roosevelts: People are walking down a street as the voice-over tells us that any passers-by could hear FDR's fireside chat, since all of the stores and the apartments above them would be tuned in to the president's speech. While those days may be gone, and while we surely hope not to need another world war to bring us closer together, it is perhaps not too much to hope that we can make the college years a time to build a sense of community more successfully and more constructively than we seem to be doing at present.

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