The Academy IS Political

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by
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It is my charge to respond as a practitioner, a person who has had to live with the practical side of higher education, to Professor Aiken's thoughtful paper. As an educational practitioner, my comments are not really philosophical criticism. That task I leave to Professor Hook.

I agree with some of Professor Aiken's conclusions. That is, I accept the view that the university and all of its constituent parts are political. They always have been and they always will be, in varying degrees.

The first university at Bologna in Italy was made up of students who formed themselves into 'nations'. Each of the 'nations' was in reality a small guild which elected its own officers. Each of the nations established its own Bursar and set rules for the professors. The professors were the people who were thought to possess knowledge and, in many cases, owned or had written a book from which they read to the students. The students set the speed at which the professor was permitted to read in order that they could take notes. They fined him if he didn't read at the right speed, if he did not appear on time, if he left early, or if he did not show up for class. The fining procedure was simple to enforce. He just wasn't paid. From such student universities have come many of the Mediterranean and Latin American universities of our day.

The northern European universities started on a very different basis, with the masters in charge at Paris and at Oxford. The masters controlled the lives of students and often the relations with the surrounding town. Some of the masters seceded from Oxford when they couldn't establish their own rules and moved to Cambridge to establish a new university. Most of the early colleges in the United States were established in the northern European tradition, by people educated at Cambridge (all but William and Mary which was established by Oxonians) with the masters in firm control of all facets of student life and learning.

The importance of stressing these points lies in the fact that we are what we have come from, and these institutions developed on a political basis. To consider a current equivalent imagine that some Brockport students and faculty are unhappy because rents are considered to be exhorbitant, parking fees are expensive and the food is bad. Now let us assume that the students move to nearby Holley, and tell the professors that, if they want any pay, they had better come too. Discussions then would be held with the officials in Holley and officials in Brockport, in order to decide whether the college would move or stay. That's the way it used to
happen. Such action obviously was political in nature, involving both student rights and faculty rights. And it has been political ever since.

My next point is that most of the ultimate power in a political institution such as a college or university resides in the people who provide the money to support it. Today, students provide only a very small part of the funds supporting an institution. Tuition goes up and up but seldom provides funds which defray more than half the total costs. In a public institution of the State University type, students pay a low proportion of the total institutional costs. Therefore, they have very little to say about what services are provided. And it will be that way as long as the basic costs are paid from other sources.

Within the college and university, there are groupings of varying forces. First, is the Administration and the Trustees, the people in the American system who are charged with operational responsibility and have the necessary authority for operational decisions. As Professor Aiken said so very cogently in his paper, these people do not exercise their formal power very often. As a matter of fact, appointments to State Universities often are formalized months after a person has been placed on the payroll. Salary, of course, goes on just the same.

Second, power, in many cases, has been allotted to the faculty as an organized body, in certain restricted areas. The third group, students, traditionally have had very little power, even over their own student associations. In the last ten years a major change has occurred, in that students now are being recognized either as an advisory power or, in some cases, as part of the organized groups on the campus with determining power. These groups have been allotted certain rights and responsibilities by the Trustees acting for the citizens who pay the money to support these institutions. This is a very important change. Twenty-five years ago, I studied the influence of organized student opinion on the college curriculum. Students had a great deal of de facto power but no single faculty member or dean would admit that they had any recognized and real power. Within the last ten years there has been a definite change. Restrictive faculties, in the main, have slowly agreed to accept student influence.

As an administrator, I’ve had an advisory committee of students most of the time. I know few other administrators with such groups and some fellow-administrators thought me a fool. But in my experience it proved to be a most useful approach to solving institutional problems. Such advisory committees now are being formalized in colleges and universities all over the United States. Student violence, deplorable as it truly is, clearly has had this effect on the governance of colleges and universities; their political structure has been changed.

At the same time, the violence which has brought a measure of poli-
tical recognition to students on so many campuses, also had led to restrictive reaction from some of the political bodies which control and support these institutions. Professor Hook will deal with some of these aspects in some detail. But I would like to emphasize, just as strongly as I possibly can, that as a result colleges and universities will not be depoliticized. Quite the opposite, they will be even more “political” and “politicized”. The publics that pay the costs of college and universities, both private and public, have and will react strongly. At the same time that students are getting more power on the campuses, the administrators and the senior faculty members are being required by boards of trustees to take what is called “a firmer stand”.

How is this call for a “firmer stand” enforced? By the removal of money support. For example, for the first time in over thirty years, the University of Indiana has had its budget cut. It actually decreased this year. What has happened? Normally an institutional work-load increase is accompanied by additional financial support. Additional students were admitted at the University of Indiana last year, although the budget was about one million dollars less than that of the year before. A similar thing happened at the University of Iowa. A similar thing now is happening in California. The public is taking political action through its legislators to control the institutions, as a result of the same student actions which have brought them (the students) a larger political voice in the local management of colleges and universities.

With regard to the problem of liberal education, I have to take issue with Professor Aiken. General education began during the period between the end of the first World War and the end of the second World War but not as a result of efforts of a military-industrial complex-establishment. The Harvard Report on General Education in a Free Society was signed and strongly espoused by some of the most distinguished people on the Harvard campus, including Evan Richards, Arthur Schlesinger, and Professor Aiken’s own colleague, Professor Demos. General education was not an attempt to indoctrinate young people to the point of view that other countries are more wicked than the United States. It was really designed to provide a liberal education, a general education for free men in a free society. I won’t say that it didn’t have some unforeseen consequences, or that all who signed the report probably would sign it today. We are twenty-five years more experienced and our perspectives have changed.

In conclusion, I would add that from the beginning of the records of man every society has attempted to provide food, shelter, clothing and protection from predators or it didn’t continue to operate. Along with these necessities, most societies have developed a faith in an unknown of some kind, and have subscribed to a set of ideals which transcend problems of
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...survival. As the complexity of life and of social organizations has increased, improved technology and excess productivity have allowed more time for reflection by more members of society on the unknown and on social ideals. But until the very recent past it has been only a limited few for whom this time has been provided.

In America, basic needs keep growing and absorb much of the excess productivity. Things that nobody would have anticipated in 1945 at the time of the Harvard Report are now considered to be basic needs. How many of you get along without television? It is a critical part of contemporary communication. In 1946, it hardly existed. Technology has made excess productivity available and simultaneously speeded up the process of increasing our basic needs. This excess productivity allows more and more of our youth to stay longer and longer in school, to learn about our culture, our liberal or general education. It wasn't too many years ago that ninety-five percent of the population of the United States could not attend college. We're approaching a day when a large majority of our population will succeed in achieving some form of post-high school higher education. A very interesting political question is: What is the higher learning and how much time can we provide out of our tremendous productivity for everybody to have a chance to be liberally educated? What is the process? When all the children of all the people are participating in post-high school education, the proportion of the total cost in terms of excess productivity beyond the necessities of life will be so great that everybody will be questioning it. And when the taxes paid for this education, both hidden and overt, are so great that they consume close to half of the gross national product, the issues will be so political that there will be instantaneous and continuous response from all political agencies concerned.

It is important to preserve as much autonomy and as much freedom as we possibly can for the American college and university within the political system with which we work. Such autonomy and freedom will be less evident to the degree that there is violence on the campuses. Violence is contrary to the American democratic dream of a rational method of approach. And if, as Professor Aiken says, the academy, the college and university community, diverse as it is, has parts which consciously obstruct the operation of that form of government which our people maintain, the academy will be in very dire straits.

Intellectual criticism must continue to be the hallmark of the university. Violence and physical obstruction are not part of our academic way of life except in times of great social stress. When the social stress diminishes, hopefully violence will also. Personally, I hope that violence and obstruction due to social stress will decrease. The support that is needed to bring to black people, Mexican-Americans, and Indians an op...
portunity for higher education equal to that which white Americans have recently come to enjoy, is going to require every bit of financial and moral support that we can secure. It is clear that our institutions are political and have a political base. A nonpolitical, depoliticized college or university has never existed, and there is even less chance of one existing in years to come.