

HISTORIANS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EIGHTIES

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When I received the invitation to speak to the Georgia Association of Historians, I was excited by the opportunity to address my peers. This feeling of elation was quickly followed by a growing fear that I was no longer considered a peer by my colleagues in history. Had I not abandoned the faith and the profession by assuming the position of an administrator, and with each administrative appointment accepted, descended from heaven to lower and lower levels of purgatory until I walked through the gates of hell by accepting a position as a college president?

Reflecting on my career there was some truth to this dismal tale of increasing degradation. As a history department head I maintained some purity by continuing association with the profession. As a dean of Arts and Sciences I still retained some credibility, as a defender of liberal arts. As a vice-president and dean of faculty, however, I discovered that supervising diverse college units and programs ruined my professional reputation. Now as a college president, the nonacademic concerns on a day-by-day basis predominate over academic concerns and my fall from grace is complete.

Excitement had turned to terror as I contemplated my address to those who had maintained their loyalty to Clio. Would my audience know how much administrative duties had driven me away from historical pursuits? Would I regain some respect by noting that I continued to teach as a dean and vice president and how I hoped to do so as a president? No, I concluded I had no alternative but to confess my sins honestly and plead for acceptance as a college president with an historical, if guilty, conscience. With some of the one minute managers I observe emerging as college presidents, I could be worse prepared for my current position.

The study of history provided me a valuable historical consciousness and a way of thinking which greatly assists in presidential problem solving. In our high technology culture I perceive an increasing trend to solve problems with a zero-based approach which rejects consideration of the past. The advantage of the study of history is that it teaches us of the inevitability of change and allows speculation on the causes of such change. The annals of the past focus on people and institutions and reveal to us that none has been infallible. If nothing else, from the lessons of history we learn humility and tolerance. Such an awareness does not make solutions to problems easier but it does assure a humanistic approach to problem solving. If those of you who teach do nothing more than make your students aware of this historical message, you will have significantly contributed to their education. I believe I will be a better college president because of my historical consciousness.

You and I both find ourselves in a period of rapid change which is impacting all levels of education. The uncertainty accompanying this change makes us uncomfortable and at times fearful. As an administrator I can do something I could not do as an historian, I can speculate about the present and the future.

Some historians may look at the problems of education today and conclude that the best action is to beat a retreat to

the nearest cave and hide until the storm passes. After all, this time of trouble also will pass. But the opportunities are far too great for a resurrection of historical studies to their rightful place in the curriculum to succumb to such escapism. The decade of the 1980s has been called the age of education. In recent history the general public has never expressed such concern about the status of our educational system. The result is a clarion call to restore excellence in education.

The attack on the current status of American education took the form of a series of national reports exposing educational weaknesses. These reports came in two waves. In 1982, The National Commission on Excellence in Education published A Nation at Risk, a bombshell which ricocheted throughout the classrooms from kindergarten through high school. Subsequent reports confirmed the need for reform. The response has been swift and direct. Curriculum revision increased. Teacher evaluation, student testing, and a host of other changes are being implemented. With Governor Harris' landmark education reforms in 1985, the state of Georgia is becoming a leader in the reform movement.

In December 1984, the second wave of reports began, this time focusing on post-secondary education. The initial report, Involvement in Learning, was prepared by The National Institute of Education. It offered twenty-seven recommendations to improve the quality of higher education. A major theme stressed increasing educational expectations and focused on the expansion of liberal education requirements in baccalaureate degree programs.

It was quickly followed by William Bennett's To Reclaim a Legacy, a defense of education in the humanities, and The Association of American College's report, Integrity in the College Curriculum, which declared the baccalaureate degree to be meaningless and blamed the faculty for its decline and devaluation. Colleges and universities can expect such scrutiny to be followed by a series of reforms.

How does all of this tumult over educational reforms impact history education? Its impact is direct and by and large positive. The results are already being felt.

Ernest Boyer's High School demanded a return of the perspective of history to the high school curriculum noting that "An understanding of one's heritage and the heritage of others....is an essential part of common learning." A Nation at Risk pointed out the need for high schools to graduate students informed and committed to the exercise of citizenship in a free society. To do this it recommended a curriculum which enabled students "to fix their places and possibilities within the larger social and cultural structure...to understand the broad sweep of both ancient and contemporary ideas that have shaped our world...to understand how the American economic and political systems work," and "to grasp the difference between free and repressive societies." Are these not responsibilities of the historian's craft?

The Georgia Board of Education and the University System of Georgia responded to such reports and announced jointly the implementation of a precollege curriculum in 1988. It will require all high school students to complete a unit of American history and a unit of world history to qualify for admission to any of the thirty-three colleges and universities of the University System of Georgia. Such actions offer encouragement that history will be restored as a general requirement in high

school.

At the baccalaureate level, the dismal status of historical studies was revealed in William Bennett's study of the humanities. He reported that, "A student can obtain a bachelor's degree from 75% of all American colleges and universities without having studied European history, from 72% without having studied American literature or history, and from 86% without having studied the civilization of Greece and Rome."

It appears the interest in history at the college level has been reduced to students earning a yellow pie for history in the popular game, Trivial Pursuit. Yet, as with the reports on the high school curriculum, the studies of the college curriculum are also calling for a return of the discipline of history as a requirement in the general education of students seeking college degrees. Historians are being offered an opportunity to lead a movement for the restoration of a meaningful history education at all educational levels.

The pressure to restore history to an important place in the general curriculum is gratifying - but are historians in a position to respond to this challenge? I have my doubts when I look at the current status of the profession.

All recent national studies on education focused on the disarray in the existing history curriculum or history's absence from the curriculum altogether. The responsibility for these conditions is being placed on the faculty. We do not have to look far to find the teachers who abandoned the standards and requirements we cherished by yielding to student demands for relevance in the 1960s. As college teachers of history we have been blamed for the current confusion in the curriculum. The Association of American Colleges' report on the baccalaureate degree declares, "The development that overwhelmed the old curriculum and changed the entire nature of higher education was a transformation of the professors from teachers concerned with characters and minds of their students to professionals and scholars with Ph.D. degrees with an allegiance to academic disciplines stronger than their commitment to teaching or to the life of the institutions where they are employed." We have long cast blame elsewhere for our problems and now are told the enemy is us!

If the faculty are to blame for the current malaise of history education, then the programs which educate historians should be questioned. The doctoral programs which prepare college teachers of history must not be performing this task effectively. Teacher education programs in history must not be preparing their students for their responsibilities either.

Finally, in the realm of scholarship the reliability of historical publications has been placed in jeopardy by the controversy surrounding Professor David Abraham's The Collapse of the Weimar Republic. Dr. Abraham has admitted that he was careless in the documentation of his thesis that big business was collaborative in bringing Hitler to power. His chief critic, Dr. Gerald D. Feldman, asserts that the circumstances are much worse and he accuses Abraham of misquoting, misattributing and even making up documents. Which side you take in the matter does not remove the doubt this case raises concerning the reliability of historical scholarship.

The conditions of the history profession I have just described explain why historical studies earn so little respect today. We can play Rodney Dangerfield, and constantly cry, "I

don't get no respect." To do so will not gain us what we seek. To recover our esteem we must reassess our commitment to our profession. Cowed by the decline in historical studies over the past twenty years, historians appear too paralyzed to act effectively. It is essential to restore pride in our profession and in ourselves as proponents of it. If not, we should abandon our commitment to historical studies altogether.

What is your commitment to your profession? Ask yourself if you are one of those teachers who brightens the classroom the minute you leave it? If you have a case of burnout, remember there once had to be a flame burning brightly to reach your current condition. Refresh your memories of the joys of teaching. As a student what did you seek most from your teacher? High on your list must be the teacher's respect of your work. Have you forgotten what it was like to be a student? The chemistry which usually works best in the classroom is based upon that mutual respect which evolves between teacher and student. If you are incapable of initiating such esteem, you are failing as a teacher.

Such personal reassessments are important today and should extend beyond teaching to your responsibilities to scholarship, to service and to your overall personal performance. Try to remember why you entered the history profession. Was it the subject matter alone? I doubt it. You were no doubt influenced by some inspiring teachers and scholars. I had three, including one in high school who brought history alive with her focus on the people who made history. There was also one in college who shared with each student his love of the discipline and its meaning. There was one in graduate school who stimulated the creative abilities of those he taught. They were each different in style and personality yet they all had in common a love of the discipline and a desire to share this with students.

Beyond a personal reassessment of your professional commitment you should assess the problems of the history profession and work together to correct them. I have identified earlier three problem areas, scholarship, teacher preparation, and the curriculum. I shall offer some directions for addressing each.

Our scholarly integrity has been questioned by the Abraham case; our professional standards must be reaffirmed. It may be time for the American Historical Association, with the encouragement of organizations such as yours, to join the national associations in psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology and set ethical standards for professional conduct and provide a means for enforcing them. In the meanwhile, it behooves each historian involved in research to reaffirm personal ethical standards of conduct.

The preparation of teachers of history is in need of careful study and reassessment. Our doctoral programs in history must reassert a tolerance for and commitment to teaching, the first task which usually confronts a graduate. To do otherwise is to face the academic suicide of our discipline. I fondly recall the opportunity I had to work with Dr. Louis Gottschalk, the distinguished French history scholar and former president of the American Historical Association, when, as department head, I employed him as a visiting professor. His most frequent admonition to our faculty members was for them to relish the pleasure of sharing with students,

especially freshmen in the civilization courses, the joys of historical study. He insisted we must put our most experienced and our best teachers to that most important task of teaching freshmen surveys. That advice seems more suited to the 1980s than it did fifteen years ago.

In preparing history teachers at the baccalaureate level, it is our responsibility to assure that each graduate has the characteristics necessary to become a good teacher and has received the content courses necessary to guarantee a breadth of historical knowledge. We must resist the encroachment of education methodology courses at the expense of history content courses.

After restoring meaning and commitment to our roles as scholars and teachers, the problems of the history curriculum need our attention. Restoring history to the required curriculum where it has been abandoned is the essential first step. Fortunately, in the University System of Georgia the core curriculum requirement of all baccalaureate degrees demands twenty hours of social sciences and prescribes history as one of these requirements. At my institution, for example, ten hours of European civilization are required of all bachelor's students and most baccalaureate degrees require at least five hours of American history as well. Such conditions make the task in Georgia somewhat easier.

Other curricular problems are more diverse and localized. Starting with the survey course in high school or college we should explore how we can make this course the most informative, thought provoking, and interesting course in the general education curriculum. There is no reason for it not to be! The course should also be related to other general education courses and discussions with colleagues teaching other basic courses would help reassess this relationship. Your conference program describes a session on "history across the curriculum" which may well be addressing this relationship. In the future your organization might also explore the relationship between high school and college history surveys.

The bachelor's degree is under attack for its failure to have structure and meaning other than to guarantee employment for each instructor and to assure that each instructor's narrow research specialty is afforded a showcase. If these really are the prerequisites for curriculum development, we may have learned why history enrollments are declining and majors are decreasing. Search out those history programs which are successful and research why magic exists there. By all means, review your curriculum's expectations of students. Do you need to restore a senior thesis? Are students exposed to historical research methodology? The worst thing to do is to lower your standards or inflate your grades. Students know where quality in education exists. Admittedly a few students will try to avoid academic rigor, but do you seek these students in your program?

At the graduate level we must assure that our students have been prepared for their scholarly as well as their teaching responsibilities after graduation. The curriculum must guarantee that those seeking teacher certification in history possess the necessary teaching skills and historical knowledge to prepare students to meet the challenges of college. Complaining about students being poorly prepared for college may turn the spotlight upon you for preparing their

teachers poorly.

We face one additional problem, a generation of students obsessed with career goals. Most perceive the study of history as not preparing them for a career. Our young students who are possessed with the ultimate quest for the American dream with its stress on materialistic rewards may, as Arthur Levine speculated, find themselves sailing first class on the Titanic. One major need for graduates today is the ability to cope with the challenges of rapid change. It has been reported that in the United States, an adult may be expected to change careers on an average of five times during a normal lifetime. As I noted earlier, the study of history does prepare one to understand and deal with change. As you also know it is a discipline which prepares a student for many careers in scholarly and applied history fields, in teaching, in nonprofit organizations, in public agencies, and in private corporations, large and small. We have never found the necessity to promote the study of history. The time has come to do so and to do so without embarrassment.

Today in history, April 12, 1861, the Civil War began with the firing on Fort Sumter. April 12, 1985, is the time for historians to declare war on ignorance of our discipline. As soldiers, your first volley should be aimed at educating your director, principal, or president about the value of history. He or she may well be in shell shock and vulnerable to attack with the present conditions of education each faces daily. If your strategy and tactics are carefully planned you may win a major battle. It could be the beginning of ultimate victory. Clio will be proud of you, if you succeed.