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ABSTRACT

The paper advocates a closer working relationship between classroom teachers and the university faculty in the following areas: (1) teacher preparation for the classroom at the undergraduate level; (2) revision of some of the graduate training in history to focus more on pedagogical concerns, along with the content of history; (3) greater awareness and involvement at the university level in such initiatives as the Advanced Placement Program, the John Hays Fellows Program in the humanities of the '60s, and the National History Day Program; (4) an understanding by the university faculty of the reform initiatives underway in the local schools; and (5) participation in the discussions regarding the content standards of history. (EH)

The Role of Higher Education In Enhancing History Education In The Schools

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ENHANCING HISTORY EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS.

Henry R. Winkler 1/7/94 (American Historical Association Annual Meeting).

Let me start with a confession. I am uneasy with the title assigned to me. I would not have chosen it because it seems to imply--a bit vaguely to be sure-- that we in higher education have dependable answers to the problems of teaching history that can somehow be transferred to the work that goes on in the schools. I would prefer to explore how we in the colleges and universities and our colleagues in the schools can work together to further the improvement of our common enterprise. There is clearly a crisis in the teaching of history when relatively few of our secondary students have only the vaguest notions about the American past and the world outside the United States is almost an unknown territory. No longer is it enough for us in higher education to complain loudly about the preparation of our students and then sit back to assume that complaints coming from employers and professional schools about the preparation of our students are somehow wrong-headed and uninformed. What then might be done?

In the first place, where college and school people need

desperately to work together is in the preparation of teachers--and at every level. Too many historians, I think, for too long a time have done little but squirm uneasily when confronted by the various challenges to the teaching of our subject. Somehow we have taken it for granted that students can be taught how to be scholars, but have assumed, without really testing our assumptions, that the ability to teach is a gift, not something that can be communicated in any systematic fashion. Many historians have been woefully ignorant themselves of what constitutes good teaching. They have drawn support for their reluctance to probe the question from apparent failures in the professional training of elementary and especially secondary teachers. If education with a capital "E" has in the past wasted time with elaborations of the obvious--so the argument has gone--then surely we should not repeat the same mistakes as we increasingly take over the preparation of teachers of history for the schools.

We have developed an elaborate mechanism to prepare students for a career in scholarly research, but clearly, if so much emphasis is placed in our profession upon our role as teachers, then surely our training programs must be modified--by expansion or by substitution--to take into account the simple fact that virtually all of us teach--while relatively few do serious scholarship beyond the PhD. A modest contribution to the teaching of history at every level might be made by an equally modest revision of some of our graduate training. Lionel Trilling was perhaps right when he suggested that "the teacher's allegiance is

to the subject, not necessarily the student," but the student has every right to expect--and often the expectation is disappointed--that the teacher's commitment should also be to communicating our subject with clarity, with sensitivity, and occasionally, one might hope, even with grace. And surely it is time that we helped prospective teachers at every level to understand how differently different students learn and how the inflexibility of many of their teachers is an impediment to any real learning. Substantive historical training combined with pedagogical know-how--not a bad goal for any of us.

What that substantive training should include is of course a crucial question. There is little use in expecting school teachers to teach areas of history in which they themselves have only had the most meager of preparation. How many of our undergraduate curricula do more than pay lip service, for example, to serious study of world history? And if we, despite all the alarm about the neglect of Western history, still teach very little but Western history, how can we college and university teachers complain about the lamentable ignorance about the rest of the globe with which our students come to us? To be sure, every issue of our various newsletters contains an account of one small experiment after another in which there is some form of collaboration among professors and high school teachers. In Philadelphia, our own Perspectives (Sept. 1994) tells us, twenty historians from twelve colleges and universities have joined with twenty high schools teachers from public, parochial, and independent schools to examine

ways to teach world history in universities. They are putting into practice the two-way exchange that I spoke about earlier. What we need, however, is many, many more such ventures. We need, in other words, to be raising more questions about what we in higher education are doing as well as inquiring into what goes on in the schools.

At the same time, if we in higher education are to be of any use to the teaching of history in the schools, we are going to have to know a great deal more about what goes on there--and not just as interested parents or grandparents. If I can speculate from my own experience over almost a half century, most of us in higher education have been quick to criticize the preparation in history of the students who come to us, but few have been willing to take the time to do anything about it. Colleagues like the Philadelphia twenty or, to make it personal, like Peter Stearns--
a distinguished scholar and administrator who has also made significant contributions to the teaching of history at every level-- are few and far between.

Take a look at three of the major school initiatives dealing with history, either alone or in parallel with other studies, in the last forty years. My choices would be the Advanced Placement Program started in the fifties, the John Hay Fellows Program of the sixties, and more recently the National History Day Program. In each case a few college and university historians have been involved, but the numbers have been miniscule and, as often as not, awareness even less.

The Advanced Placement Program is one of the great success stories in American secondary education. It started from a tiny base. In European History, Tom Mendenhall of Yale, Kenneth Walker of Goucher, and I were the first committee, I was the first chief reader, and as I remember it we had 59 examinations from all over the country to consider. Gradually the program expanded and by now has gone far beyond our fumbling efforts to find ways to cooperate in order to enrich the educational experience of some very good students. It has become a central pivot in the secondary education of our time. In both American and non-American history, the relatively few college people who have participated--in preparing and evaluating examinations, in discussing approaches to particular areas of exploration--have discovered that they often learned as much from the school partners as they contributed--and that together they were again and again able to strengthen their mutual understanding of the interconnected task in which they were engaged. In one way or another, more of us in higher education need to be involved with such programs, both for the health of what we do at the undergraduate level and for the contributions we can make to the schools.

Some of you no doubt have seen the front-page story on Advanced Placement in the New York Times of December 28. It points out that in various ways many colleges and universities are rethinking their relation to the AP program. As undergraduate curricula have been modified and modernized, and as AP courses have proliferated--a consequence of the success of the program--

historians have taken the time to know something about the program, let alone work with it. Here again I would suggest that there is much to be gained--for all concerned--from greater knowledge and greater involvement.

Why, then, spend so much time in a brief talk devoted to the future going over the missed opportunities of the past? Part of it, of course, is the occupational habit of our profession, but much more pertinent is the plea that we not let the opportunities of the future also pass us by.

In a recent piece in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Nov. 16, 1994), Stanley Katz, the distinguished president of the American Council of Learned Societies, urges us in the colleges and universities to pay attention to the reform movement in the public schools. "At their best," he writes, "those reforms have been based on advances in cognitive psychology and on a thorough rethinking of the organization of school systems. The markers of success for this process are new 'standards' for the areas of knowledge to be covered in specific subjects and various tests of 'outcomes,' to measure how much students have learned." He goes on that for us in higher education to follow the lead of the schools will require tackling issues that we have frequently tried to avoid, including how to teach a diverse range of students more effectively, how to convert our research on learning into solid assessment measures, and whether indeed we need to consider "national standards" for higher education. On all of these issues the answers are by no means clear and we have a great deal to learn

some institutions believe that many of the school offerings no longer parallel their work at the college level. All the more reason for more college people to be involved with school people in jointly exploring what can and cannot be done and in making sure that able students don't pay a penalty for the negligence of their elders. A practical suggestion. The latest issue of Perspectives ran an Educational Testing Service advertisement seeking "consultants"--readers--for the exams in American and European History. For those who respond, I can almost guarantee that the rewards will be far greater than the honoraria offered to participants--and they will be helping to shape the school-college relationships we seem to have lost in so many ways.

Or consider a somewhat more recondite initiative, the John Hay Fellows Program in the humanities of the sixties. The basic building blocks in the program were literature, philosophy, and history. School teachers and administrators were involved along with a handful of scholars in the respective areas of study. The exchange of ideas, experiences, experiments was rich and rewarding. The program only lasted from 1960 until 1965, but for years thereafter whenever one came across an imaginative and thoughtful program in history--as in the humanities in general--in the schools the chances were pretty good that a former John Hay Fellow was at the bottom of it. But my very simple points are these. First, those few of us who were involved in the program probably learned more from our school friends than they learned from us--and secondly, the great majority of our colleagues in higher education

not only knew nothing about such programs but on principle seemed determined to keep it that way. Once again, my prescription is for more of us to become involved with equivalent ventures with the schools--not only will we be helpful; we will be helped as well.

More recently, some of us have been involved, often as observers rather than as actors, in the enormously successful National History Day Program. Later in this program, we will have a discussion of National History Day in the Classroom by those who are directly involved. Our chair now heads up the program which is in so many ways a tribute to the imagination, energy, and commitment of our colleague David Van Tassel. School children at the junior high school and secondary school levels all over the country develop projects centering about an annual theme--writing papers, organizing exhibits, analyzing issues in a variety of ways, then competing at the state level, and finally at a major meeting that takes place in June at the University of Maryland in College Park. The programs involve students and teachers and parents and a variety of volunteers from the business and professional world as well as the world of academe. Many of the projects are at a high level of sophistication and quite clearly many dedicated teachers and intensely interested students are involved. And where are the people from higher education? To be sure, our various associations--the AHA, the Organization of American Historians, the Association for State and Local History, the National Council for the Social Studies, and so on--are indeed represented on the Board of National History Day. But again very few of us work-a-day

from our school colleagues, just as I hope they have something to learn from us. One of the ways in which both groups can further the repair of a K through 16 or 17 system is greatly to expand the discussion triggered by the initiative of the federal government in encouraging the preparation of voluntary standards in a variety of subjects such as mathematics, biology, English, and history.

In history, Goals 2000, the Educate America Act, started under President Bush, supported by the National Governors Association, and signed into law by President Clinton has promoted a substantial involvement of our major associations--the AHA and Organization of American Historians in particular--and has involved a wide and diverse groups of citizens from many walks of life. The result has been the recent publishing of suggested standards in American History and in World History. And yet, while the associations and some individual historians have been working with the schools to write the voluntary curricular standards, Katz is struck by how few college and university officials have paid any substantial attention to the attempts to reshape the national approach to pre-college education. They have, he comments, tended to assume that if colleges had any responsibility it rested in their schools of education.

I would carry the analysis one step further. For the most part, we historians have been woefully unconcerned with and even more ignorant about this initiative that may shape the teaching of our discipline for years to come. Yet, as soon as the suggested guidelines in history were aired, a major struggle--I do not think

that is too dramatic a description--began to shape up over what is and is not to be recommended for inclusion in the curriculum, what should be emphasized, and what excluded.

Long before "National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience" and "World History: Exploring Paths to the Present" saw the light of day we in the colleges and universities were discredited--I am tempted to say disgraced--by pronouncements from the left and right that speak volumes for the political posturings of their proponents and offer very little in the way of genuine exploration of our complex and indeed ever-changing past. Whether it is the ideological and distorted Afrocentrism of a Leonard Jeffries or the obsessive and stereotypical Europeanism of a Lynne Cheney--neither by any stretch of the imagination an authority, so far as I can determine, on any aspect of history-- the highly-charged agendas of the true believers at either extreme bid fair to take over the debate on standards that is really just getting under way.

Is there a mindless multiculturalism in the proposed standards that substitutes good will for good scholarship? Or do they attempt in some small way to remedy the xenophobic myopia that some of our contemporaries see in the pedagogical accents of the past? Teachers at all levels have an obligation to become familiar enough with The American Experience and Exploring Paths to the Present so that they may judge for themselves whether the guidelines are anything like the caricatures articulated by Cheyney and other conservative critics. But the debate on these issues will be

serious and fruitful only if we in higher education and our colleagues in the schools--to say nothing of the broader public whose fundamental interests are involved--really talk with each other, examine together what we teach and why we teach it, inquire together into our changed perceptions of the past in the light of our present experiences.

In a recent New York Times (Nov. 13, 1994) article, James Atlas quotes Professor Alan Brinkley of Columbia University as noting that "You can name virtually any field of history and find revisionists. There were New Deal revisionists, Lincoln revisionists, Eisenhower revisionists." Atlas himself points out that a generation of historians from Avery Craven to J. G. Randall interpreted the Civil War as an "avoidable conflict." I did my graduate work at the University of Chicago in Craven's heyday and even elected to offer one field in American history. I can assure you that it is only a slight exaggeration to say that we were encouraged to devalue the institution of slavery in the factors leading to the war. To the best of my knowledge, although I am not an Americanist, very few conservative historians of that era complained that by downplaying slavery the Randalls and the Cravens were perhaps thowing out the baby with the bath water. Would the teacher who insisted in the nineteen-thirties and forties that slavery <u>was</u> important have been branded as 'politically correct"?--And you can choose your own further examples.

Real discussion of these issues will help to clarify what the guidelines do and do not contribute to what should be taught in the

schools. I must say that I am less than enthusiastic about the unnecessarily sarcastic tone of a piece in the Times (Nov. 19, 1994) by John Patrick Diggins. Yet he raises serious questions, for example, about whether the thought and actions of towering figures should be downplayed and whether the new social history pays lip service to the "cult of democracy" at the expense of grasping the dynamics of leadership. This is a serious issue to be discussed seriously and broadly together instead of wasting our time counting the number of times Robert E. Lee or Albert Einstein is mentioned.

Professor Carol Gluck has pointed out (again the N.Y.Times, Nov. 19, 1994) that the two volumes of standards were produced by a process of open debate that extended over a period of two years. Teachers, administrators, scholars, parents, business leaders all had their say, she notes, in the drafting. A wide variety of organizations was involved as were Council of State School Officers and the Organization of History Teachers. By and large, the standards were established by consensus, a remarkable process that Professor Gluck suggests could not have happened in any other country. And the result was not--one needs to emphasize the not--not a national curriculum but a series of guidelines to enable the teacher to tailor her or his pedagogy to the needs and understandings of the children in the particular classroom of the particular school in its own particular environment.

Were mistakes made? No doubt they were. As I read the World History suggestions, I find, as everyone of you would find,

examples of undue emphasis or of omission and no doubt I will find more as I learn more. But the answer, it seems to me, is for many more of us in higher education to become involved, not only with the questions raised by the curriculum, but also with the teachers who will have to shape it on a day to day basis. We can no longer leave it to the self-chosen few who represent us--and do so energetically and effectively--in our associations. Working together perhaps we can demonstrate the uniqueness and the excitement of the historical enterprise and how much it really has to offer toward the understanding of the human condition. If we can do so, then the future of the past with which we are all concerned is likely to be a rich and enduring one.