Editorial

A Sense of Community

Although few social and political institutions begun in medieval times have survived in a recognizable form in western society, the essential structure of what we refer to as *universities* has survived. Rashdall (1936) wrote, "the institutions which the Middle Age has bequeathed to us are of greater and more imperishable value even than its cathedrals" (p. 3). In spite of such lofty sentiments, the concept and structure of the university as a tangible locus of instruction and research has been challenged on many occasions since the 13th century. Wars, disease, natural disasters, dogma, and political upheaval have all threatened the existence and structure of the university.

Beginning in the 20th century, and continuing into this century, some scholars concluded that particular new technologies possess the capability either to transform the structure of universities or to render the concept superfluous. For example, there were those who envisaged television as the means by which the university campus where students and scholars congregate would become obsolete and unnecessary. In 1932, while television was in its infancy both in its deployment and in its technological development, George Cutten, the President of Colgate University, wrote, "The question really comes whether in the future colleges as formal institutions will be necessary, and if the attendance of classes in any one place will not become as obsolete as the buggy of twenty-five years ago" (p. 261). Evidently, television did not quite have the effect on universities that Cutten had imagined. Despite the failure of television to alter substantially the structure of universities, similar claims have been made when other technologies were applied to education. In the decade spanning the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, a movement prevalent in North American education was to use mechanical teaching machines and other approaches that followed the tenets of programmed instruction (Lumsdaine & Glaser, 1960). These machines were touted by some as the means by which education, even in its fundamental structure, would be forever changed. Like television, teaching machines have failed to alter educational structures (Gilbert, 1979; Sorestad, 1963). There are now optimistic claims that the advent of Internet-based instruction and digital means of distance learning may succeed in rendering the university in its present form obsolete (Crow, 1999; Lewis, 1988; Wilkinson, 1996). Other accounts such as Thompson (1998) present a more balanced view, stating that radical change to the structure of universities as the result of computer technologies is but one possible development, depending on what is considered.

Although authors such as Baer (1972), Postman (1992), and Stoll (1995) caution against trusting the claims for any technological innovation too far, an important point that is often overlooked when universities are considered is that of educational community—in other words, the salutary effects both of formal and informal face-to-face communication between human beings in an environment conducive to learning, scholarship, and debate. Among many other factors, a major reason why universities came to be was because they

provided such an environment. They provided a locus where scholars and students could gather and engage in appropriate learning, scholarship, and discussion. The latter point was quite a novel approach in education of the 11th century, but was something that a particularly successful teacher, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), put into practice (Compayré, 1893; Rashdall, 1936). Although some of Abelard's contemporaries, as well as later teachers, adopted his methods, others were not as innovative or inspired. The scattered and variable nature of scholarly education in the period before the advent of universities was both recognized and criticized by individuals seeking such education.

Nicholas Breakspear, the sole Englishman to be elected pope (Adrian IV, 1154-1159), noted that to receive suitable education in several subjects, he had to travel to many different cathedral schools in what is now France and to other places (Attwater, 1939; Mann, 1914). Not only was such extensive travel difficult and costly in the early 1100s, but Breakspear complained that the quality of instruction varied widely between individuals and locations. His account of itinerant scholarship was not unusual for the time (Rashdall, 1936). The seeming lack of cohesiveness and consistency in scholarly education was conducive to a lack of standards and the rise of undesirable practices.

Adrian's successor was Orlando Bandinelli (Alexander III, 1159-1181). Before being elected pope, he was renowned as an excellent teacher. He noted serious problems with the largely disjointed system of education in what is now western Europe. From first-hand experience and from Adrian IV's accounts, Bandinelli saw how some individuals were being appointed to teaching positions without adequate qualifications, whereas other teachers would subcontract their teaching to others while they did other work, sometimes in other locations (Alexander III; Mann, 1925).

To teach, one was supposed to have earned a *licentia docendi*, which recognized that the holder had taken suitable courses and had been examined for mastery of knowledge and the ability to articulate that knowledge. In many instances at particular schools, however, these teaching licenses were sold, either for a fixed price or for a continuing percentage from student fees. Alexander III took action by condemning the practice as being tantamount to simony (the buying and selling of holy offices). Evidence of selling licenses subjected the perpetrator to excommunication, a punishment Alexander III even meted out to some bishops (Alexander III; Boso, 1973). Moreover, Alexander believed that by bringing more licensed teachers together, not only would the practice of selling licenses be discouraged, but a more comprehensive array of courses would be available for students. Thus Alexander set the stage for larger, stable, and more permanent educational institutions that had better means of governing themselves (Alexander III; Mann, 1925; Marrou, 1956). The stringent administrative policies implemented by Alexander III governing not only educational institutions, but educators as well were carried on and developed further by later popes (Compayré, 1893; Rashdall, 1936; Cheetham, 1992).

Besides a system of maintaining standards and offering a broader array of courses than earlier schools, universities arose because it was realized by popes and temporal leaders alike that, by themselves, qualified teachers with stan-

dards and students willing to learn lacked an essential element necessary to function as a dynamic system. It was the combination of these elements in a supportive and protective environment, through suitable rooms for teaching, libraries, accommodation for students and professors, provision of food, and a method of self-government, that resulted in a system that worked satisfactorily and consistently (Compayré, 1893; Rashdall, 1936). This arrangement with few exceptions has worked well, withstanding political and theological challenges. To be sure, the scope and content of the university has changed markedly since the 13th century, and the influence of popes and other clerical powers has diminished. Nevertheless, the principle of providing a structured environment with standards to promote and foster discussion continues to exist.

Technologies such as computers and television may provide individuals who do not have access to a campus some of what universities have to offer. At the same time, however, it is doubtful whether such technologies will be able to offer the blend of all the elements necessary to create the sort of community that was first experienced in the medieval university and that continues today. Although technologies and perhaps other innovations that do not yet exist may assist the university in what it does, the structure of the university will change markedly or disappear altogether only when a more effective system is developed. For almost 800 years nothing has come close to supplanting the "community of scholars."

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