

¶A great educator tells us—

THE PROPER EDUCATION FOR THE YOUTH

General education should absorb the attention of students between the ages of 15 to 16 and 19 to 20. This is the case in every other country in the world but this. I favor awarding the Bachelor's degree in recognition of general education at about the end of the sophomore year. This suggestion is less startling than many people seem to think. President Butler of Columbia advocated it in 1902. Beginning with the college junior year, education should be limited to those who are willing and able to profit by it.

The next question is: what subject matter should we expect the student to master to qualify for the Bachelor's degree? My views on this question are well known. I do not believe that all students who should have a general education must study Latin and Greek. I do hold that tradition is important in education—that its primary purpose, indeed, is to help the student understand the intellectual tradition in which he lives. I do not see how he can reach this understanding unless he has read the great books of the

Western world, beginning with Homer and coming down to our day.

Nor do I hold that the spirit, the philosophy, the technology, or the theology of the middle ages is important in general education. I have no more desire to revert to this period than to antiquity. But some books written in the middle ages seem to me of consequence to mankind. Most Ph.D.'s have never heard of them. I should like to have all students read some of them. Moreover, medieval scholars did have one insight—they saw that in order to read books you had to know how to do it. They developed the techniques of grammar, logic, and rhetoric as methods of reading, understanding, and talking about things intelligently and intelligibly. I think it cannot be denied that our university students are woefully deficient in all these abilities today. They cannot read, write, speak, or think.

I should like to point out in passing that in the Middle Ages people went to universities at 13 and 14. They read books and experienced disciplines that

are regarded as far too difficult for Ph.D.'s or even university professors today. Most of the great books of the Western world were written for laymen. Many of them were written for very young laymen. Nothing reveals so clearly the indolence and inertia into which we have fallen as the steady decline in the number of these books read by students and the steady elimination of the disciplines through which they may be understood. And all this has gone on in the sacred name of liberalizing the curriculum.

The curriculum I favor is not too difficult for even very ordinary students. It is difficult for the professors, but not for the students. And the younger the students are, the better they like the books, because they are not old enough to know that the books are too hard for them to read. The entire course of study that I propose is now in force at St. John's College, Maryland. There a n unselected group of indifferently prepared students are studying these books with tremendous enthusiasm. They read last fall 10 dialogues of Plato and voted to have extra classes so that they might read the rest of them. In connection with the reading they are going through a formidable course of instruction in grammar, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics. For seven years I

have taught these books to unselected students in our University High School as well as to college students. None of them has suggested that the books were too hard or that they were not worth reading. I can testify that students who can read anything thrive on these books and that the younger they are the more they thrive.

Those who think that this is a barren program, remote from life and devoid of contemporary interest, have never read the books or do not know how to teach. These books contain what the race regards as the permanent, abiding contributions its intellect and imagination have made. They deal with fundamental questions. It is a mistake to imagine that young people are interested only in football, dramatics, and the student newspaper. I think it could be proved that these activities have grown in proportion as the curriculum has been denatured. Students are interested in the extra-curriculum because the curriculum is so stupid. Young people are interested in fundamental questions.

A problem that has disturbed those who have discussed this issue is, what books I am going to cram down the throats of the young? The answer is that if any reasonably intelligent person will conscientiously try to list the 100 most important

books ever written I will accept his list. There is, in fact, startling unanimity about what the good books are. The real question is whether they have any place in education.

Only one criticism of this program has seemed to me to be on the level: that it is unsuited to students who cannot learn through books. This, of course, is true. I suggest, however, that we employ this curriculum for students who can be taught to read and that we continue our efforts to discover methods of teaching the rest of the youthful population how to do it.

I could discuss the details of this program and of the attacks that have been made on it for hours. But the real question is, which side are you on? If you believe that the aim of general education is to teach students to make money; if you believe that the educational system should mirror the chaos of the world; if you think we have nothing to learn from the past;

if you think the way to prepare students for life is to lead them through little fake experiences inside and outside the classroom; if you think that education is information; if you think the whims of children should determine what they should study—then I am afraid we can never agree. But if you believe that education should train students to think so that they may act intelligently when they face new situations; if you regard it as important for them to understand the tradition in which they live; if you feel that the present program is unsatisfactory because of its diffusion, “progressivism,” and utilitarianism; if you want to open up to youth the treasures of the thought, imagination, and accomplishment of the past—then we can agree, for I shall gladly accept any course of study that will take us even a little way along this road.—*Robert M. Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, from an address, February 26, 1938.*