



Off-Campus Commentary

Elizabeth McDonald, Mt. Holyoke College, writes the first of a series of commentaries on education at different schools across the country.

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Dear Jean,

We all laughed when we read your letter saying, "Gee, I'll be able to plan and prepare good dinners when I graduate, but I won't be able to carry on a good conversation." This, of course, is exactly the opposite of what we say here at Mount Holyoke. The girls, after reading your letter, were very interested in helping me with ideas and suggestions and in examining just what it is that makes us believe so firmly in a liberal arts education. I hope we have successfully answered your questions concerning a liberal arts education.

A lot of the good we feel, is because of our curriculum and our small size, but this of course is not typical of all liberal arts schools. It is also difficult to understand (believe me, it took me awhile) this business of "learning for the sake of learning" which is the heart of a liberal arts education. I must add that what the ideal liberal arts education should be is not necessarily what we have at Holyoke, Harvard, Smith or anyplace else for that matter. It's just that the people who run these schools have a philosophy of education that is not geared at the "gray flannel suit" pattern of today. Not that the curriculum at Iowa State, Cal Tech or M.I.T. is wrong, or that we are any better than anybody else. It's just a difference in what we think an education should be.

"In the era of the common man, there is a need for the uncommon woman." These words, from a speech by President Richard B. Bettel of Mount Holyoke College, will perhaps point out best why women's colleges today, via a liberal arts curriculum, attempt to stimulate their students to a greater interest and better thinking concerning the world we live in.

You might ask, by what means is the liberal arts graduate prepared for the problems of "life after twenty-one," even though she cannot tell a teapot from a double boiler? Following are a few of the angles of education that are emphasized at Mount Holyoke in order to stimulate thinking.

1. Lectures open to all, given by off-campus speakers such as John Kennedy, Robert Frost, or Frank Lloyd Wright, followed by a chance to personally question the guest speaker.
2. Inter-departmental courses — who wouldn't be stimulated by a course entitled, "Darwin, Marx and Freud," combining biology, economics, and psychology or "Religion and the State," involving history, political science and religion?
3. A relatively close relationship, especially in the upper-class years, with members of the faculty. Many small seminar courses make it possible to hold class in the teacher's home. Also, we try to entertain the faculty at dinner quite often. The brilliance found among the faculty of any good school is inspiring.

Important as a starting place for many of our best discussions are conferences on religion ("Am I My Brother's Keeper?," "Lost In the Crowd, Our Modern Dilemma") and politics ("The Right of the People to Know," "The Atlantic Alliance: Community or Disunity?"). Politics, religion, economics, philosophy, yesterday's chapel talk or the coming election, campus issues, the curriculum, the organization of the student government — it's easy to find willing voices and sound opinions concerning any one of these. Of course, we do not spend all our relaxation minutes pondering weighty problems. The point is rather that when someone introduces a subject of campus, or world importance, most of us are able to discuss it fairly coherently and informedly.

This is because the chief emphasis at school is on the academic-learning for the sake of understanding. The stimulus to read on your own, to write term papers with original conclusions, to at least look at the *New York Times* or *Tribune* (80% of the campus does) and *not* to be satisfied with the mediocre — this is how we are prepared to face the intellectual part of our futures.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth