

What Exactly Is “Good Education,” Anyway?

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Forced by the needs of the time or triggered by outrageous treatment of a faculty, numerous generations of our colleagues responded with courage and determination.

Their collective wisdom is expressed in the many AAUP principles and standards that make up what we refer to as the Red Book. We often take things for granted, but we need to recognize more often that all of us faculty, whether we are members of AAUP or not, are the beneficiaries of these principles and standards. Of the many, four of them stand out as perhaps the most essential; academic freedom, tenure, due process and shared governance. These are the four major pillars that support the house of academia that we love.

Yet as I look through the Red Book I see only standards and procedures regarding the important conditions that allow us to do the best job as academics. There is nothing about what constitutes a quality education. Now more than ever, AAUP needs a position statement on what we believe good quality education to be. As we see more and more corporate philosophies and practices adopted at the expense of academic integrity, and as we realize with sadness a similar mentality spreading among our students, we need to define what we, the AAUP, believe quality education should be all about. My fear is that without such a position statement our education in this country will continue to erode, following a utilitarian path and at the expense of what some consider to be “useless” areas such as the humanities and the arts. Many of our students, and I dare say even some of our own colleagues, consider any course that is outside their major field of study as unnecessary. After debate and discussion and regardless of our different disciplines, we should be able to agree on what quality education is and articulate it on a position statement. What do we mean when we think of a well-educated person? What are some of the universal characteristics of such a person? We need to agree that specialization should not necessarily be done at the expense of General Education.

In a 1952 letter to New York Times Albert Einstein wrote: “It is not enough to teach a man a specialty. Through it he may become a kind of useful machine but not a harmoniously developed personality. It is essential that the student acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and of the morally good. Otherwise he -- with specialized knowledge -- more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed personality. He must learn to understand the motives of human beings, their illusions, and their sufferings in order to acquire a proper relationship to individual fellow-men and to the community.”(From **Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein**)

The importance of good education as the solution to many of our global problems is also mentioned in the UNESCO charter. In the opening sentences we find the following references regarding education:

“That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed;...”

“That ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war;...”

“For these reasons, the States Parties to this Constitution, believing in full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, are agreed and determined to develop and to increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other’s lives.”

As the organization that we are, it is our duty to consider the development of a position statement on what quality education is. Such a position statement can help keep the education standards high and become a guide for those who are pressured to sacrifice valuable elements of education for the sake of specialization. A well-crafted statement about what constitutes quality education and its importance, both to our society and the world, is not only possible but also our obligation. While we preserve the valuable principles and standards described in the Red Book, we must constantly update and add to them.

In these troubled times, the social and global challenges we face demand it.