



*Bulletin of*

# St. John's College

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL  
POLICY AND PROGRAM

1965

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## *Statement of Educational Policy and Program of St. John's College*

The Polity of St. John's College provides that the Dean shall annually, with the advice and concurrence of the Instruction Committee, present to each division of the Faculty at a fall meeting a statement of educational policy and program. After appropriate discussion and revision, the document is adopted by the Faculty and then presented as a report by the President to the Board of Visitors and Governors. The 1965 statement printed herewith was adopted by the Faculty in Santa Fe and in Annapolis, and was presented to the Board at its regular meeting in Santa Fe on October 2, 1965.

This is the third occasion on which the Dean's Statements of Educational Policy and Program have been published. The 1950, 1951 and 1952 statements were printed in December of 1952 as Volume IV, Number 4, of the *Bulletin*. The 1957 statement was printed in January of 1958 as Volume X, Number 1, of the *Bulletin*.

RICHARD D. WEIGLE  
*President*

# STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PROGRAM

St. John's College

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"I grow old, teaching myself many things."—Solon

"Much learning does not teach one to have understanding."—Heraclitus



Let these two quotations remind us of a paradox in liberal education: On the one hand, education is a process that continues throughout life; on the other, the liberal arts college graduates students after four years, with some sort of a claim that an end has been reached (perhaps only to the patience of the faculty). For all that we realize that commencement is but a beginning, a college has failed in its purpose if it has not ended a stage in the student's education. And the student has failed if he does not begin his new life as an "educated" man, prepared to act in the world not merely as a learner, but as one who has learned something and is able to act on that learning.

The first consideration, therefore, in forming an educational policy is a clear definition of the ends to be achieved by the time the student completes the curriculum. One end will, of course, be to implant in the student a love of learning that

will lead him to wish to continue the process of learning. But greater attention must be given to the immediate task the college sets itself in its curriculum.

Let us take the words of Heraclitus as a guide to the ends of policy for the college curriculum. The word I have translated "understanding" is *noon*, the Ionic accusative singular of *nous*. In its pre-Platonic sense *nous* means both observation with informed discrimination, and intellectual grasp, or thought, or rather, perhaps, it means a combination of these activities, shaded now one way and now another. In any case, the implication of Heraclitus's remark is that *nous* is the end or object of learning. *Nous* is recognition of something outside oneself, of the world, and a penetration beneath the surface appearance of what one sees. This meaning is as old as Homer and remains with the word even in its most philosophically refined sense in Plato and Aristotle.

I would say, then, that the policy of a liberal arts college should provide a plan for the student's curriculum that will "teach him to have *nous*." One principle is immediately clear: the teaching and learning in the college is directed toward the contemporary world and the student's powers in that world. The curriculum must be student-centered and contemporary. *Nous* is always in the present since it is the informed awareness in the living human being of himself and his surroundings; it is always the student's awareness, only to be aroused by the student himself.

A second principle derives from the implication of the word "informed" in the phrase "informed awareness." The awareness of the educated man is not a simple, immediate response to his surroundings, but is a response guided, conditioned, by a fund of knowledge, of memory and imagination, by powers of discrimination and by a critical faculty to make that awareness clear, exact, and penetrating.

A policy to achieve this end, based on the principles I have listed, may take different forms. For good reasons St. John's adopts the so-called classical approach as its policy. Classical too often connotes antiquity. The term, however, means "outstanding." Those works are classical which are best in their kind. And best in kind, when applied to works of the human spirit, means offering light on some of the deepest, most commonly encountered problems of human living. In so far as human problems, to a great extent, do not change with the passage of time, classical works are always contemporary. The St. John's program strives to be contemporary not by incorporating the results of the latest research, not by reading the books that are the fad of a season, but by facing up to the fundamental questions that are always present to men.

Since this point is one that is often misunderstood, it is worthwhile to dwell on it. The fund of factual knowledge

Thirdly, as a pendant to the two principles already mentioned, the quotations from Solon and Heraclitus make it clear that the curriculum for a liberal education must be selective. Solon's naive delight in *polymathia* rightly earns Heraclitus's scorn. Erudition, pedantry, whatever you call it, is not learning, is not education, is not wisdom.

The proximate end of college education, that which is signified by the degree of bachelor of arts, is achieved when the student has made an assessment of his world by which he is capable of living in it effectively, according to standards of effectiveness not based on the person's own pleasure, or on monetary measures. Just as the measure of the common good is law and order, peace and freedom, so the measure of individual good is analogously in the individual's soul: virtue and wisdom, love and self-respect. These virtues are the standards to measure a man's degree of effective culture.

available to men increases with time; likewise the hypotheses adequate to account for known phenomena to the satisfaction of man's reason have increased in number and grown more sophisticated. Yet the greatest expressions of the human spirit in the spirit's struggle with its world, the great poems, philosophies, histories, retain their validity and continue to be comprehensible, because they communicate the thoughts of minds in touch with the realities of their world. It is this relation between the mind and the dimly viewed and frequently reinterpreted reality that contains an unchanging element. Facts accumulate and hypotheses multiply and gain in refinement; and they furnish to the mind new ways to the understanding of human questions, but the questions are ever-recurring.

The St. John's program, therefore, combines the approach through the great books of all time to the timeless questions

men ask, with the continual development of the means of knowing and thinking about the world that the advancement of knowledge puts at our disposal. The program is thus divided into seminars and tutorials, including the laboratory. In the seminars the student confronts the great spirits of the world in their manifestations in discourses, in the permanent written record. The confrontation seems most fruitful when the books are read in chronological order. Nevertheless, manifestations of spirit are timeless and hence present fact: they are not historical curiosities.

A second point that is often misunderstood is that no official doctrine emerges from the seminar readings, unless you consider dedication to reason and truth a doctrine. In that case, the doctrine of St. John's is that truth becomes truth for the student only as he makes it his own. The college does not compel acceptance of a creed; the chief result from

also the original philosophical meaning of the word. Information was the placing of a form in matter; in reference to the mind, the forming of the mind to be more receptive to ideas and hence capable of a wider awareness. The continual refinement of one's ability to use language is the first step in this process of information; the discriminations necessary for clear understanding, the development of greater sensibility through imaginative and thoughtful reading and writing, are the main business of the language tutorials. In the mathematics tutorials this process of refinement is extended to an acquisition of the language of number and geometrical form. This acquisition is good for its own sake and also to save the student from an ignorant, uncritical acceptance of the oracular declarations of modern authorities in science.

The laboratory work is a combination of seminar and tutorial. It extends the linguistic refinement of the mathe-

acquaintance with the great books is the discovery that, even for the greatest minds and spirits, truth is always a partial matter. The constant dialogue between the authors of the great books, the disagreement among them, the correction of an earlier author by a later, all testify to the elusiveness of truth. I say "elusiveness," not relativity, because it is no tenet of St. John's that all truth is relative. The St. John's student does not pass from a simple state of ignorance to a state of certain knowledge, comfortable and secure. Rather, he finds comfort in his gradually maturing capacity to recognize where his knowledge ceases and to have at his disposal the means to seek for the truth that he finds himself in want of.

The tutorials and the laboratory are designed to implement the element of "information" I have spoken of as the second principle in liberal education. I write the word in quotation marks, since I mean it in its etymological sense, which was

mathematics tutorial to the special sciences, but it also confronts the student, as in the seminar, with the accomplishments of the human spirit as it has deepened its awareness of the physical world.

The program must not only be contemporary, it must be student-centered. In this respect, also, there is misunderstanding. The idea of a student-centered learning is usually taken to mean that the student studies what he wishes, or that the curriculum starts from the needs felt by the student, so that his learning may begin at the point of his maximum awareness, so to speak. The St. John's program is rigorously constructed and required in all its parts of all students. How then can it be student-centered?

The answer is that, first, the class-room methods, of discussion and daily recitation in tutorials, of Socratic questioning

and dialectic in the seminars, keep the student always active, always performing tasks of learning. The distinction is always kept in mind that there are matters, such as rules of grammar, meanings of vocabulary, procedures in arithmetic, which, quite simply, must be learned by rote memory and are finally unimportant, and there is entertainment of ideas, which is all-important. In the case of the latter the student is encouraged, indeed required, to find his own meanings, to reach his own conclusions, subject to the constant need of justifying his opinions by rational argument to his fellow-students and the tutors in his seminar or tutorial.

The second way in which the student is kept at the center of the learning process is through the evaluation of his learning. Grades, though given, for practical reasons, are not the main means of evaluation. The student is considered as an individual. The faculty attempts to go behind the appearance

later life the impress of the college; they feel that they have taken part in a unique experience.

I have proposed four analogues to the ingredients of the common good as the measure of achievement of the good of the individual, which may be assumed to be the end for which we educate. These were virtue and wisdom, love and self-respect. With disregard for ambiguity, I called all four virtues. Then I went on to discuss the St. John's policy of teaching and to sketch the program that we believe effectuates this policy. It remains to be shown how the St. John's program as outlined may claim to produce an educated person who measures up to the standards named.

In the first place, the great books, because they present powerful images of men who possess or lack these virtues in varying combinations and degrees, constantly keep them

he presents through his work, to reach a clear understanding of his uniqueness and to determine how far he has really been educated. This is perhaps the most difficult of all tasks to accomplish. Nevertheless, that is what we try to do.

Recognition by the students of these means of keeping them in focus, of making the program student-centered, dawns rather slowly. Most students arrive at St. John's conditioned by high school to competitive grading, to trying to make an impression on the teacher. As they learn how much they are on their own, how much responsibility for their learning is placed upon them, and how necessary is participation in all classes, they gain a new attitude both toward their work and toward the college. It is this that accounts for the strong hold the college gains on their imagination and affection. Even those who do not continue the full four years carry through

before the intellects of the students. In addition the list of the books contains many that are analytical rather than imaginative, that supply a commentary, given by men who have thought deeply about the matters exemplified in the imaginative works, so that the *nous* of the student is under the guidance of great thinkers. Thus the student comes to live in a world of thought which is always aware of the standards.

But in the second place, the standards are always enforced, in the classroom, and outside of it, by the way in which the students live and work together. Where the ordinary college allows, indeed forces, the students into private and separate worlds, worlds of little coteries of art or science or even the still lonelier worlds of complete isolation, at St. John's the single curriculum, followed by all the students, creates a community of learning. In this community, by the nature of the learning process, the relevance of the four standards to the

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actual conduct of students is ever-present. Daily recitation together, seminar discussion, laboratory experimentation, requiring cooperation and comparison of results, would not work without mutual love, and self-respect. From these same ways of doing things arises the basis of virtue, the realization of the folly of misconduct of any sort, whether ignorant or malicious, and the consequent acquisition of wisdom, which is the ordering of the soul towards the good.

If these words sound too pretentious, let me rephrase them by saying that a group of intelligent young people, pursuing their own ends, but ends which are closely akin, actuated by some good will, can not but attain to a certain degree of wisdom as their practice brings them closer and closer to a realization that they are working towards a good. Nobody works towards anything except with the belief that what he is working towards is good. In so far as that good is internal

sidered by the faculty in recommending students for the bachelor's degree are intellectual in nature.

St. John's believes that the intellectual endeavor devoted to the tutorials and seminars conduces to the end as expressed in terms of the four virtues. We do not test or evaluate in any way to find out if our students are virtuous, wise, loving, and self-respectful. We evaluate their accomplishments in the

to the person's self, its attainment and its recognition are conducive to self-respect; in so far as it is seen as something to be acquired, as something external, it is the occasion of love, of recognition of a goodness in another. The other pair of terms, virtue and wisdom, fit into this pattern. In so far as the good is internal, its effect in the person is virtue; where it is seen in an external aspect, its effect is wisdom, the recognition of the good in the world that is other than oneself.

The St. John's program does not accept the current distinction between an intellectual education and education for character, or, as modern jargon might phrase it, "of the emotions." The account given of the end for which we strive in the four years of college study stresses standards by which to measure the achievement of the ends in terms of "virtues." Yet the work required of the student and the evidence con-

liberal arts. Can they state and defend a thesis with literacy and logic? Can they handle the formulae of mathematics and science? These are the criteria of acceptability for the degree. Yet such accomplishments are insufficient if considered as ends. The belief of St. John's is that through achievement in class, measured in this way, the far more important and immeasurable qualities that go to make up the good man are brought to fruition.

JOHN S. KIEFFER  
*Dean*



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(signed) THOMAS PARRAN, JR., *Managing Editor*

