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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 the Faculty at one of its fall meetings a statement of educational policy and program. After appropriate discussion and revision the document is adopted by the Faculty and then presented by the President as a report to the Board of Visitors and Governors. The 1957 statement is printed herewith and circulated to the recent alumni of the College in the hope that it will stimulate discussion and comment as the College seeks answers to curricular and instructional questions.

RICHARD D. WEIGLE
President

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PROGRAM OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

1957

It is fitting, once again, in the twenty-first year of the St. John's program and within the frame of a statement of educational policy, to reflect on what the College has been doing all these years, to try to gauge its achievements and its failures. Ours is a sober task that has to be guided by a passionate desire not to succumb to either complacency or despondency. We usually vacillate between these two extremes.

I

All a school can do—and St. John's is no exception—is to establish the conditions under which learning may take place. In some important respects the College has succeeded in doing that. The curriculum provides a wide basis for the exercise of the skills of discussion, translation, demonstration and experimentation which in turn help the learning mind to experience the discipline of the liberal arts and to acquire an understanding of them. The various divisions of the program, especially the Seminar and the Formal Lecture, offer the student a good opportunity to enlarge his horizon, to consider aspects of things not yet considered, to meet with views of the world not encountered before, to discover the familiar in the new and the questionable in the familiar. The College knows well how to spur questioning and inquiry. It has created an intellectual climate that permits the student to face problems, not in the attitude of passive spectatorship, viewing a series of systems of thought or imagination, the "idols of the Theater" in Bacon's phrase, but rather directly and actively, in the attitude of perplexed curiosity, wrestling with difficulties which have become his own. It is not a panorama of opinions, or styles, or disciplines, or systems; it is the sharp edge of a crucial question, the stumbling block of a massive contradiction, the labyrinth of complexities in a given problem, that furnishes link after link to the chain of learning offered to the student at St. John's. The essential factors that make this climate possible are, to quote a previous Statement, the community of the learning effort, the continuity of the learning process, and the spontaneity of the learning itself.

II

In other important respects, however, the College has failed. The spontaneity of learning is blunted when the intellectual effort made by the student is not commensurate with the weight of the material

presented to him. This is too often the case. It is not enough to blame this lack of effort on the bad working habits acquired by the student before he comes to St. John's. The College has to share this blame. It has failed to provide for the necessary equilibrium between routine work and spontaneous questioning, between discipline and freedom, between scholarly involvement and thoughtful detachment. It has not yet learned to exploit fully the unavoidable tension between the demands of scholarship and the reflective wonderment which alone can make that scholarship a fruitful means of education. This lack of equilibrium leads too many students to take "either a great deal out of a few things, or a very little out of many things". And it also leads, especially in the Junior and Senior years, to a kind of apathy that on occasion seriously obstructs the continuity of the learning process and even endangers the community of the learning effort.

III

These failings can be attributed to three different kinds of causes. One, of a rather accidental nature, is the small size of the upper classes. This tends to bring about a situation in which the members of a group—a seminar, a tutorial, a laboratory section—know each other too well and are, consequently, not too much inclined to confront each other in the give and take of an argument, unburdened by accumulated memories and ready anticipations.

Another cause, of a far graver nature, is the insufficient habituation of the students to independent work, as for example, a searching exploration of a given text, a penetrating analysis of mathematical theorems, their scope and mutual relations, a patient dealing with the intricacies of a laboratory problem. The written work of the students, including the annual essay and the final senior thesis, however valuable, cannot be considered—even taking into account notable exceptions—as representing that kind of work.

Related to the cause just mentioned is a third: the very great amount of regular and so much diversified work imposed upon the student. For many years now this fact has been one of the primary concerns of the Faculty and the Instruction Committee. The work load of the students has been actually reduced through the years. The concensus was that the load appeared excessive only in relation to the poor working habits of the students. And, furthermore, the exacting demands of the curriculum stemmed from the principle, always agreed to, that growth requires stretching rather than shortening of intellectual fibres. All this is undoubtedly true. But it is also true that the quantity of assigned work and the time needed to do it kept impinging upon the possibility of some spontaneous initiative on the part of the students.

IV

This Statement addresses itself mainly to the pointing out of the College's failings, at the risk of exaggerating their gravity, in order to promote the formal discussion of them and the search for remedies within the Instruction Committee and the Faculty as a whole. It is quite possible that those failings are of a transient nature and reflect the character of the student body in recent years more than some insufficiencies in the structure of the Program. At any rate—to repeat what was said in a previous Statement—the rising preeminence of this problem merely indicates that the Program has come of age, is less "sensational", is more within the reach of the average "unexcited" student, is closer to its proper function—to educate. The challenge has to be met not by "adjusting" the College to the "unpreparedness" of the students but rather by stirring up in them the intellectual energy necessary to cope with the Program. And there has already been ample, if informal, discussion of possible means to achieve this end among the members of the Faculty and the Instruction Committee. The recent decision of the Faculty to leave the acquisition of operational algebraic skills to the students' own responsibility is one of the steps in the desired direction. This decision will certainly help to increase the continuity of learning in the mathematics tutorials and to improve the laboratory work. The changes in the Junior year, agreed on by the Faculty, notably the greater concentration on the study of certain books at the expense of others, will also tend to remedy the situation. The alteration in the procedures of the Senior seminar coupled with a decrease in the number of Senior tutorials was decided upon, two years ago, with the same end in view. But these measures do not seem to be sufficient.

As to the first cause of the College's failings mentioned before, the small size of the upper classes, it is reasonable to expect that it will be eliminated in the not too distant future by the quantitative and qualitative change in the enrollment. And this by itself might do a great deal.

As to the second and third causes, the Instruction Committee envisages two main courses of action: 1) A very considerable scaling down of the number of regularly scheduled classroom activities in the Junior and Senior years to provide time for independent work on the part of the students. This might be done in different ways, either by thinning out those activities throughout the year or by alternating regularly scheduled periods with periods set aside for individual work. 2) The assigning of work projects to Juniors and Seniors, which they will have to carry out on their own, but under strict and constant supervision by Faculty members. The Final Thesis might become the culmination of this kind of work.

These proposals are *not* meant to be radical departures from the program as it now exists. *a*) The idea of an all-required program of study is not abandoned; the students will have to go, as before, through all the divisions of the program with perhaps greater intensity, if less extensively, than before. No premature "specialization" is involved in the change of the pattern. *b*) Although some of the tutorial material will, of necessity, have to be reduced, the seminar reading material might not be affected at all or to a minimal degree. It will, in part, become the material of the work projects assigned to the students, and the work done by individual students will be presented for common discussion to the other students in their respective seminars. The laboratory work, as far as time is concerned, need hardly be changed.

The Instruction Committee will have to deliberate for a long time before reaching concrete decisions on the re-scheduling of the students' activities and on all the details of the instructional material to be abandoned, changed or left as it is now. And it is at this point that a general remark must be added: one of the great virtues of the teaching that goes on at St. John's is the *patience* with the shortcomings of the students, with the difficulties of a given subject matter explored in common, with the disappointments and frustrations, the faithful satellites of all teaching and learning. It is necessary to apply the same patience to the problem raised in this Statement. Any rash decision might be fatal.

Whatever the difficulties ahead of us, the goal of the educational program at St. John's will remain unaltered: it is the cultivation of intellectual virtues, the acquisition of abilities that enable man to look beyond the immediate, the accepted and the necessary. And let us not forget for a moment: all improvements of instructional patterns depend ultimately on the way the teacher follows them up, responsibly, patiently, generously, and full of fear before the immensity of his task.

JACOB KLEIN.
Dean

(Adopted by the Faculty, December 5, 1957)