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The Threat of Impatience

A fundamental threat to the survival of the university is impatience. While destructiveness is limited to a very small number, and while romantic visions of the university as a misty community without form or authority are confined to a minority, impatience is pervasive.

One target of impatience is inaction. Its stimulus is the daily intimacy with the horrors of war, poverty, violence, and oppression—all brought into the parlor on the television screen.

Another target of impatience is complexity. Hate and love seem so simple, so obvious and direct. Yet the structures of a technological society and its government seem hopelessly complicated, beyond the reach of most, seemingly unmanageable even to the few who do grasp the levers of power.

A third target of impatience is doubt. With a world to be saved, or simply a life to be lived, there is an overpowering urge to insulate yourself from the nagging, nibbling doubts which seem to spoil every confident hope and tarnish even the most ecstatic dream. Dogmatic assertion is a great relief. To some, blind fanaticism is "beautiful."

Patience, we urge, but patience without purpose is boredom. So "relevance" becomes the slogan of an impatient generation. Their plea is for release from the tedium of learning without purpose.

Better they should cry "significance," for the crisis of purpose transcends topical problems. Today's problem could be "solved," and still the vacuum of purpose would sap the patience which learning requires.

I do think we should be more forthcoming in our admission of the weaknesses and contradictions in our university inheritance. We should recognize and admit that the university is not for all people, nor for most people at all times of their lives. It is not even the only or, for many, even the best circumstance for learning. Action, too, has its claim as a teacher of wisdom. Capacity can be extended and enlarged by doing as well as by thinking.

We should recognize also that, as knowledge does become more relevant to operational decisions, universities do have an increasing professional and clinical function, for the potential operator as well as for the scholar. The applications of learning once associated primarily with law and medicine and engineering must spawn analogous applied sciences in social and environmental studies.

Most of all, we should admit that not all scholarship and learning are equally significant. The quality of intellectual excitement depends on whether the scholar is truly opening a new perspective or is simply accumulating data which do not themselves contribute to understanding. Definitiveness should not excuse the want of significance.

We must even admit that reason is not the only clue to truth. Intuition and creative imagination have their role in perception as well as in expression, in learning as well as in life. Not all that is perceived can be analyzed, let alone weighed or measured. Not all that is worth expressing can be "programmed." Not all that is "true" can be proved by objective evidence.

We should admit all this. We should leave room for—we should positively encourage—intuition, imagination, and the affirmation of revealed truth, even within the academy. We can acknowledge all these things, but we must continue to assert that impetuous action, conscious oversimplification, refusal to doubt, and the rejection of reason are enemies of the university.

—KINGMAN BREWSTER, JR., *President, Yale University*

This editorial is adapted from the Sigma Xi-Phi Beta Kappa Lecture, "If not reason, what?," delivered 29 December 1969 at the Boston meeting of the AAAS and reproduced in the March-April 1970 issue of *American Scientist*.