In This Issue:
An Essay By
Dr. Gordon Brumm
On Gordon Brumm

Dr. Gordon Brumm, a former professor of Philosophy, was released from his teaching position at Suffolk on April 13, 1979 as the result of a hearing by the Faculty Committee on Tenure, Promotion and Review. Quoting an article appearing in the Suffolk Journal of May 28, 1979: "On November 21, 1969, Dr. Brumm was told by Dr. Grunevold (former dean of the colleges of arts and sciences) that his contract would not be renewed for the following year. Dr. Grunevold gave as the one and only reason an extremely negative evaluation by Dr. Sababian, Philosophy Department Chairman."

As Dr. Brumm was in his second year of teaching at Suffolk, he had not received tenure so the University had no legal obligation to rehire him. At the time he received his notice from Dean Grunevold, Brumm made an appeal to the Student Government Association for a student survey of his teaching. The results of the survey were as follows: 56 percent rated him "superior"; 26 percent "competent"; 6 percent "fair"; and 1 percent "poor".

The Journal article also stated "In his statement to the Faculty Committee, Brumm claimed that the evidence showed his teaching to be entirely adequate by any reasonable standard, and that in any event no serious attempt was made to evaluate his teaching; that events indicated the reason for non-renewal came from outside the Department (Philosophy); and that past actions by the Administration and/or the Chairman indicated pressure against his speaking out on political or semi-political issues."

With the publication of this article RAVIN MAGAZINE makes no attempt to pass judgment on the results of the hearing. We are presenting Dr. Brumm's essay as a point for thought and discussion. We invite your comments.

Suffolk; Education for Mediocrity

by Dr. Gordon Brumm

The best way to describe Suffolk is by way of its polar opposite, Harvard, that se plus alia of elite institutions, whose psychic and social distance is accentuated by its geographic premises. In Harvard Yard, there are old but tall-looking buildings with high ceilings and wide courtyards, separated by grassy tree-studded spaces, these combine to produce an atmosphere of spaciousness and freedom and saw.

The freshmen dormitories, and the Houses which stretch from the Yard to the river, provide living facilities, adorned with plush images and common rooms; for all students who want to use them. Libraries, resources are superb facilities, and athletic facilities also. Scholarships are plentiful and if a needy Harvard student cannot win one of these, at least he can be assured of being able to be on a loan or a job which cuts minimally into his time. Harvard undergraduates run their own nationally-recognized daily newspaper, and on occasion Harvard students may journey to Washington with one of their professors to confer with a high government official. Everything about the college suggests power, capability, opportunity, confidence.

Contrast this with Suffolk, surrounded by rotten townhouses, the metal and glass Danaher Building rising out of Boycott Hill with all the majesty of a suburban dental center; with no dormitories, with most of its students commuting from distant towns, or working at full-time jobs, or both, with a minimal library, with athletic facilities located down the subway line in Cambridge.

I do not mean to say that Harvard is without faults — after all it was Harvard and not Suffolk students who struck in '75. Indeed, Suffolk has some advantages over Harvard, such as small classes and a "deep" non-restrictive admissions policy. But nothing could be more obvious than that a Harvard student is offered much more terms both of education and of psychological consequences than his Suffolk counterpart. One obvious reason is Suffolk's relative poverty. It lacks Harvard's endowment, and prides itself on its low tuition. It simply can't afford what Harvard can.

However, it is a basic misconception to think of Suffolk's poverty both as inevitable and as sufficient reason for the abysmal level of education found there. One version of the
misconception, sometimes endorsed by the administration, interprets Suffolk as a place of Higher Magic, a community, where those who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged may find success through their struggle and an atmosphere which immediately raises questions as to why the poor must struggle more than others. What are the consequences of their having to struggle are, and whether they can go as far as their elite counterparts anyway. Such questions are circumvented by what is probably the more common view, that the gulf between the two schools is a morally innocuous, natural consequence of a sorting out by ability which follows from society’s quest for excellence. According to this interpretation, Suffolk is part of a system where the greatest rewards are given to those who can achieve, with the school’s administration and faculty struggling bravely to help their students achieve as much as possible. But the validity of such a view is far from self-evident. For ignoring the problem of relative ability, it could be argued, for example, than democracy and true equality demand the devoting of more resources to the less apt students in order to bring them up to level.

Moreover, the common view is profoundly misleading as to Suffolk’s function. The gap between the two schools is not merely the result of a circumstance. It did not exist, it would have to be created, for the two schools are in a symbiotic relationship. They occupy two different positions on the same elitist status ladder and vocation — Suffolk is seen as the junior partner in this relationship — the two schools must be defined as superior and inferior to one another. Suffolk must be as it is Harvard’s role, for instance, is to produce an elite and vice versa, and the Suffolk administration and faculty continue to honor their status by maintaining their well-defined inferior role.

In that role, Suffolk students are happily happy. To an extraordinary degree, I found that a student’s attitude to be one of hostility, combined with a sense of inferiority, set in an intense self-judgment and self-hatred. Psychological death of persons acting against their wills and making other persons do the opposite.

In fairness, it should be said that some professors and especially science students are content with Suffolk. But surely not many. I never knew of a student express real happiness and the place, and I heard many expressions of dissatisfaction bordering on disgust. A surprising number of students and recent graduates simply wanted to forget about the school to have nothing to do with it. What was absolutely necessary. And of course there are a great many drop-outs, perhaps compensated by a very good student chance of my classmates who said they could never stay, in a way.

Different students are dissatisfied for different reasons. A glance at the faculty, and their courses, will help to explain.

The faculty is probably more heterogeneous than at elite institutions. Roughly, it can be divided:

1. Hard-Core Conservatives. The most powerful group by virtue of their numbers are of a conservative persuasion and represent with the administration. Strongly pro-institution, they are the ones that maintain the campus in a conservatively educational, stressing discipline and memorization in their courses. In most cases, politically conservative as well.

2. Establishment Humanists. Most of the older faculty fall into this group. Somewhat liberal politically, but careerist and educationally conservative, though tending to teach more openly, with more humanistic content, than their hard-core colleagues.


4. Young Activists. Radical or left liberal, both educationally and politically. Relatively unsolved. There are few of these, and even fewer who stay on for any length of time.

5. Old Timers. A decreasing number of veterans of Suffolk with insecure professional standing, who adhere to the status quo out of habit.

Almost all professors, faculty members in all these categories treat the traditional subject matter of their disciplines, whether in liberal arts, business, or education, but they treat the subject matter in different ways. This is partly a question of academic discipline, but mainly a question of personal and political conviction. The above aspects of practice and view are not always consistent, and thus may be in conflict with the political view of the same professor.

In the Old Timers and some of the Liberal Humanists, one can have a liberal education but not a liberal philosophy. And political indifference is often taken as a sign of liberal education. One cannot have a liberal education but not have a liberal philosophy.

The student body is also heterogeneous. A certain number of the more elite colleges articulate open receptivity to the liberal arts with a special emphasis on solving the world’s problems. They tend to despise the school because it is not liberal arts. Others, who are more interested in the social sciences, see it as a means to an end.

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October 1972

The second notable protest was the Kent-Cambodia Strike. When the news broke, several of the younger faculty members and the students, who had previously a generally repressive atmosphere, politically and socially, have been simmering. The faculty cooperated by allowing the students to escape their educational roles and escape their traditional examinations. But beyond the initial response, the strike was deeply disappointing, for it ceased to be anything but a holiday after the first couple of days. Students ran screaming out of Suffolk's doors—headed straight for the beaches, in most cases, much to the despair of the few activists who had organized anti-War projects. And so, the faculty members, with a little patience, gave students the opportunity to escape from school. It did not even serve to educate many of them out of their true amazing ignorance about the War.

Three Dimensions of Focus

In such an environment, a young instructor must be careful if he wishes to further his career. To accomplish this purpose, I would recommend: (1) He must not be self-serving; that is, express current passions and fashionable motives, but short of challenging students to either act or to think their way through his basic answers. (2) In conversation with administration and senior faculty members, explain student rebellions as caused by the rebels' hating their fathers. Assert that there is no permanent student body. This manner of argument—intended to influence administrators and students—might work until the students get out of school. (3) The second step is to fire the students. (4) The third step is to hire the students.

This last maneuver seems to prevail among most people. See, the colonial environment at Suffolk power supposedly resides with the few academic members of the faculty, who have been around all these years. What was previously a generally repressive atmosphere, politically and socially, has been simmering. The faculty cooperated by allowing the students to escape their educational roles and escape their traditional examinations. But beyond the initial response, the strike was deeply disappointing, for it ceased to be anything but a holiday after the first couple of days. Students ran screaming out of Suffolk's doors—headed straight for the beaches, in most cases, much to the despair of the few activists who had organized anti-War projects. And so, the faculty members, with a little patience, gave students the opportunity to escape from school. It did not even serve to educate many of them out of their true amazing ignorance about the War.

The problem is how to bring Middle American students out of their subservience to the so-called colonial population. Students atomized and demoralized, lacking self-esteem, lacking the continuity of life work, lack the social contacts among the students. This is a situation in which the students themselves are responsible for their own success or failure. But in order to accomplish this purpose, I would recommend: (1) He must not be self-serving; that is, express current passions and fashionable motives, but short of challenging students to either act or to think their way through his basic answers. (2) In conversation with administration and senior faculty members, explain student rebellions as caused by the rebels' hating their fathers. Assert that there is no permanent student body. This manner of argument—intended to influence administrators and students—might work until the students get out of school. (3) The second step is to fire the students. (4) The third step is to hire the students.

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area for rapping regardless of the desirability of freedom and self-expression as ingredients of the good life.) Such an education can only prepare the student to escape and evade, not to challenge. It tends to produce an intellectual and moral insobriquetiquette taking their cue from a refined desmogeneic — a mass of people who react to particular shocks or alarms as a matter of emotional reflex, without understanding what they are doing and without any lasting commitment, as exemplified all too well in the Kent-boda Strike.

The identity which needs to be discarded is one based on the sensibilities of power and control. The identity which needs to be gained is one based on the sensibility of reason and criticism. The education required is one which converts the student from the one to the other. The immediate purpose is to teach the student to reason, and to apply his reasoning to situations in which he can act.

What would such an education be like? This is hard to say, except that it would be quite different from most or all of what is now found at a college like Suffolk, in fact probably unlike anything most academics have ever seen. It would have to be like the usual elite education in challenging the student to be critical and intellectually independent, but on the other hand it would have to be a people’s education, having itself on concrete problems of concern to the students and thus deemphasizing traditional material. Dealing with concrete problems, it would break down traditional dividing lines between disciplines. Student activity and initiative would be stressed; grades would not be used as instruments of terror.

Such an education is possible at a college such as Suffolk but to bring it about on a significant scale would be no easy thing. In the first place its exact form and content would have to be worked out experimentally in practice. Second, many faculty members would oppose it, not to mention administrators, because it would stir up the students, or because it would challenge accepted standards of professional competence. Perhaps some teachers could be won over by arguments based on their alleged professional goals (growth, self-development, autonomy etc. of all students), but this is not likely in many cases. Third, many of the students would not themselves be ready for such an education (though this would not prevent its being useful). Their attitudes remind me of an occasion when I was in graduate school, and went to the Dean’s office with some problem. His secretary made a special effort to take care of my request, and then charmingly said, “You see how important you are?” I thought she was putting me on, and I turned off. For the bureaucrats had never considered me important before, and so I couldn’t believe it considered me important then. Likewise many students, accustomed to a system which makes senseless demands on them, may construe new methods as just another demand, only more difficult because it requires active instead of passive participation, and questions established presuppositions. They will be aggrieved, just as we are told the Frenchmen released from the Bastille were aggrieved by the sunlight after years of darkness.

And if this kind of education is to be brought about in any significant degree at a school like Suffolk, there must be increasing numbers of highs committed faculty members.

There must be a well-knit group of instructors who stick in the institutions for as long as they can, working to make it the kind of place it ought to be, in recognition of its political and social importance. One of the major obstacles to this needed development is the tendency among radicals or left-liberals at Suffolk — and I am sure at other schools — to accept the terms of the conventional class status-ladder scheme just as readily as their most conservative colleagues, hereafter referred to as “the informal administration” or “the bureaucracy” — to withdraw into private and purely professional concerns. To do thus leaves the field to the establishment even if every departing member is replaced by one just as solid — or worse, by one who leaves enough to earn influence. Thus, I cannot judge the behavior of those who leave or do so because other schools are more pleasant, or more helpful to their careers, or because they believe they can be more effective elsewhere. But in any case I suggest they can be most effective right at a school like Suffolk, acting not as colonial administrators but as true educators and friends, recognizing that this is one of the most important of educational political arenas.