

Philosophy 107, Spring 2009, Arguments for Description

1. The basic structure of today's bachelor degree is now over a hundred years old, and the idea that selected high school graduates can learn what they need to take over as educated leaders of their cultures, and do so in four years of full-time work, is no longer even close to the truth. The world has become wildly more complex while the degree stays stuck with its roots in the first land-grant colleges, in, even, pre-Civil War visions of Horace Mann and Justin Morrill. Higher education itself, separate from the degree requirements, has become more fragmented, with over twenty times the number of disciplines now than were available as the 1800's ended. A four year degree has over the years yielded to pressures which make the education involved more and more like a vo-tech two-year degree. The bachelor's degree, with taxpayers and captains of industry providing the push, has become more and more narrowly pointed toward a major, a major shaped by goals of getting a job or a kind of job even as the economic stability of occupations disappears and even as all of us more clearly understand that predictions about jobs are founded on quicksand, and as all of us more clearly understand that we need to prepare for jobs we do not yet know about because they do not yet exist.

One place where the evaporation of education for flexibility and breadth of knowledge has been most conspicuous is in general education programs. With few exceptions, part of the bachelor's degree still goes to general education, that is, to making graduates aware of what else the academy offers, and what other kinds of learning a society requires, besides the graduate's own major. One goal of such requirements is to combat intellectual provincialism, the tendency of graduates to think that the way they think is the way everyone should think. This anti-provincial theme receives more lip service than ever before even as the requirements have diminished into token gestures toward social science-driven knowledge of only cultural and racial diversity even as, for example, science graduates know less and less about the humanities and literature majors whistle past the graveyards of physics and biology.

General education a hundred years ago might have had some hopes of covering the territory of a basic liberal education, but general education no longer offers a serious effort toward producing graduates who understand what education is outside their own majors. Breadth requirements have shrunk over the last five decades to token gestures, and depth requirements are a thing of the past.

It is time to rethink the bachelor's degree, to make it more adequate to our times by making it longer, to rehabilitate general education by handing it back its teeth, to stop shortchanging graduates and the world by letting ignoramuses loose who think they are educated people. It is time to provide graduates who know the territory of higher education.

What would a serious bachelor's degree look like? Well, it could go several different ways--a perspicuous array of interdisciplinary courses could perhaps be a center of a decent general education program, through a combination of a Great Books approach and team teaching on themes. In most universities, this would require a revolution--and not a bloodless revolution. Turf battles over enrollments would doom it to failure.

A more doable program involving less pain might look like something many undergraduates are already trying to provide for themselves. That **involves five years rather than four and a G.E. program co-equal with the major**. It would be built more on student choices and yet would offer real breadth and depth.

Students now are often already serious about becoming educated persons, and as a result take longer than required and take serious courses beyond the requirements. A degree that acknowledges these ideals would replace current G.E. requirements by requirements that **each student acquire a minor in the sciences, a minor in the social sciences, and a minor in the humanities, all exclusive of the requirements for their major**. Each minor will include a capstone writing course centered on critical analysis of urgent issues within that discipline. Advantages of such a degree include that the total credits would be consistent with the total an average graduate now has at graduation (at HSU it's 154, 34 more--a full year of full time work more--than the requirements), it loosens up G.E. turf worries of those departments who are invested in G.E., since all the courses that count for a minor are now G.E. courses, students get more choices and get to follow their interests more in picking courses for the G.E. requirements (reducing the number of students we have to drag through present requirements by their

shirtcollars), and students will know better what higher education is about and what being an educated person involves.

Further, the first campuses making these changes will attract those students who really do want to get a good education and whose parents are okay with it, and those campuses will reap the benefits of those serious students in innumerable ways. Students alarmed by such a change and intent on the shortest route to (not an education but) a degree will go elsewhere and we will reap the benefits of their being elsewhere as well.

2. Draft Arguments Re: Draft Making Rounds of Congress's Back Rooms

It is old news that, in the face of strained military resources in the Middle East and increases in security risks both there and in other regions of the world, supporters of the military are exploring ways to reinstitute the military draft. Several new developments and weakening of opposition voices suggest the proposals may soon turn into legislation.

. . . Perhaps surprisingly, the Republican caucus and the conservative right are not the only ones calling for study of legislation to resurrect the draft. Some commentators think conservative think tanks are keeping relatively quiet on the issue because they see liberals articulating their case for them. One measure of liberal activism on the issue is that though the Vietnam-era model of local draft boards is the most likely implementation, it would be expanded to include women as well as men. Several reasons being given for considering a reinstitution of the draft which seem to have bipartisan support. They include the currently unfair burden being shouldered by National Guard troops, who now augment the armed forces at the cost of finding themselves doing tours in Iraq twice and three times as long as they had been led to expect even after being called up, the need to make young people feel more an integral part of the civic life of the country and its needs, and the feeling that if there were a draft then the public would be more activist in guiding Congress and the President regarding the war, thus letting them off the hook for unpopular decisions in the future. One informal bipartisan group also cites the historical effect of past drafts in shaping postwar boom economies and unification of national spirit. From within the State Department some voice a conviction that the world is facing future decades of global conflicts and tough times, and that the US has been able until now to live separated from those tough times but needs to admit the necessity of its own involvement and admit the end of its isolation from the need for stronger military interventions worldwide. There is also an argument citing William James (in his essay "The Moral Equivalent of War") and the architects of the Peace Corps (including President Kennedy), that a nation's citizens will be better citizens, and will exert themselves to be better citizens, if they have given a couple years in service to the nation.

3. One writer's (Jim Murray?) summary (or channeling) of Univ. of Chicago President R. M. Hutchins on football:

A university without a football team is like a retirement community without a warehouse or agriculture without bullfighting. . . . I pass over the scandals, the betting, the alumni gifts under the table to acquire "scholars" for this institution rather than risk those persons' playing for some rival, and the enormous gladiatorial circuses which threaten to turn our courses and research into byproducts of our real business of entertainment. . . . The players on full scholarship carry an unjust burden. They are like young men with more-than-full-time jobs who are asked to put all the loyalty and dedication they would have put on spouses, children, church, and friends, onto their team instead. Asking them to study courses as well is as preposterous as asking missionaries not only to save the world but to learn Sanskrit and aeronautics while they are at it. Universities ought either to put aside those huge sums of money and hire professional teams outright, or to have nothing to do with the big-money sports. Henceforth, the University of Chicago will no longer have football. Not only that, we won't miss it--except for when we lack excuses for poor academic performance. And my plan is for us to need no such excuses.

Sample ***Argument description, "2. Draft Arguments Re: Draft Making Rounds . . ."

What is the issue?

Though part of a story which may well include the opposing arguments, and the writer is not arguing for herself so much as reporting, the issue on which the arguments bear is "Should the U.S. reinstitute a military draft?"—actually, that's a little too strong—*Should the U.S. study the possibility of re-instituting a military draft?* is closer.

Terms that need clarified? "Draft" in this case (different nations have different forms and there have been different forms in the past in the U.S.) apparently means something like we had in the Vietnam conflict. That may need spelling out.

Arises how? The story does not tell how the issue arises, though the overloaded National Guard provides a hint. The war in Iraq and the war on terrorism are apparently part of the reason the issue comes up. Nothing is said about whether armed forces recruitment efforts are being less successful, but if they are that would also prompt the controversy.

Possible answers? The question is a yes or no question. That's yes or no to studying, a softer issues than implementing.

Stakes? The stakes are large. A draft will affect the lives of those called up even without the possibility that many of

them will die in the service. Their parents and families will also be more directly involved in the war. Communities whose young adults go off to the military will be affected in innumerable ways.

Related issues? One related issue is whether all citizens should be routinely involved in a period of service to the country, not just military service but other kinds of service. Because of the James citation, there is a question regarding what should be expected in the way of citizens' obligations to their country. On another side, issues are raised about the legitimacy of war. Since there is a possibility that the draft is being pushed in order to mobilize opposition to the current war, there are issues about how to get the public interested or taking part in debates about war.

What is the position?

The arguments reported in this selection from the story are all in favor. Yes, we should study setting up a military draft.

What is the support?

Most of the selection from the story is given to different items of support. The Guard and its members are unfairly overburdened. Young adult citizens are distant from the war and from national issues, and a draft would lessen that. Historically, drafts have helped the economy and unified the country(?!?!). It's time to get people off their candy asses and get them to face the real, tough world. People who have given service to their country feel more a part and are more involved with political issues of the country.

What is the point of view?

This is unclear. The writer speaks as a reporter, but makes the point that the arguments in support come both from the right and the left. Some items of support are motivated by worries about young people being uninvolved with national politics or citizens not feeling part of the country. The remark about the draft as a prompt to be more involved might suggest that the author hopes that, with a draft, protests against the current war might be more powerful. What remains unclear, though, is whether that hope, even if it is present, is the writers' hope or is a hope among those who increasingly support the idea of a draft.

Sample ***Argument description, "3. One writer's summary (or channeling) of Univ. of Chicago President . . ."

What is the issue?

Should universities have football programs? (This means big intercollegiate programs, not intermurals.)

Any terms need explained? "Football programs" in this context refers to large-scale expensive programs with large numbers of athletes, stadiums, huge media and alumni attention. We're not talking intermurals here.

Arises how? Most of how this arises is mysterious, but Hutchins (in this version, anyway, of his views) refers to scandals and shady doings, and to drawbacks of having such programs. Why now? We might ask, and the answer is we don't know.

Stakes? If any university discontinues football, they are certainly bucking the tide, going against the practices of most other schools, and cutting themselves off from one activity usually taken to be a source of campus spirit and pride, and alumni involvement and donations. On the other hand, discontinuing football might dramatize a commitment to academics, and might also allow more budgetary focus on courses and research.

Possible answers? This seems basically a yes or no issue, though of course universities might discontinue large-scale programs and still provide intermural versions or other small-scale programs, or might change conferences or take other measures in order to mount a less-expensive program.

Related Issues? Other large-scale athletic programs, such as basketball, track and field when that includes stadiums and large numbers of scholarship athletes and lots of attention given to them, would seem to raise similar concerns.

Position?

Hutchins is dead set against them. No, universities have no business being involved with football programs as currently run.

Support?

Hutchins thinks the basic idea of universities financing large football programs is preposterous. Football also invites, because of the money, corruption of various kinds. The players find that the team requires the kinds of allegiance and dedication which make being a player like having a job and a church and a family all at once and then they are also supposed to be scholars on top of that, which is unfair to them. It would be more honest if the university were to be like a team owner for a professional team, and forget the academics.

Point of view?

Hutchins is a University president, with concerns for the health and interests of the university as a whole. His arguments, though, don't require any special knowledge or background, and could have been given by any observer of college athletics.