

# An Enemy in the Camp: The Academic Librarian and Academic Structure

Joseph P. Natoli

There is a structure in academia that stands stronger than any building on any campus. Not only is what is to be learned defined but how it is to be learned. There are sanctioned rites of passage, ones which keep students closely tied to their professors.

Those who sit around me in the Reference Room can easily satisfy the grade for a course without asking me to play the part I have designed for myself in the academic drama—that of mediator. I, as a librarian, put aside my desire to mediate between book and student and resign myself to mediate between book and course assignment. I acquiesce to the notion of Mark Hopkins on a log with a student when I know that since the widespread availability of books in the early 16th century, Mark Hopkins has not been as important as the log he rides on, the book both he and the student read, the book that rests between him and the student, that he is the mediator to.<sup>1</sup>

I also perceive the power behind Mark Hopkins, power which legitimizes his role as mediator and legitimizes the vast superstructure he employs in the role. It is *de facto* power, power legitimized because it is exercised.

At the most elemental level, academic structure, from lecture to compulsory exam, is based on an American preference for a rigid positivist, behaviorist methodology, one which defines students, knowledge and the capacity to learn. The implication of such a methodology is that, left to his or her own inclinations, the student would drown in a chaotic, purposeless subjectivity, completely overwhelmed by interests which have no universal import.<sup>2</sup> Attributing this sort of disposition, a methodological disposition, to academe is my attempt at looking at the best side of things. Most of what generates academic structure is far more a matter of elitism, nest feathering and ignorance. The elitism is represented in the same way elitism is always presented—the establishment of a hierarchical relationship, one in command, one servile.

There is an elitism in the notion that advanced learning can only take place in the sacred halls of academe, that the professors have a monopoly on knowledge. Attendance at lectures, actually sitting in a classroom for a certain number of times a week, is another aspect of a stifling academic structure. The importance of class attendance at lectures in spite of evidence which indicates students do as well without the benefit of such attendance is indication that teaching is held as being synonymous with learning, that everything must be taught instead of learned.<sup>3</sup>

With the responsibility for their own learning taken from them and placed securely within an impregnable academic structure, students lose interest in the

intellectual enterprise. It is what they have ostensibly come for but that enterprise is replaced by sports, frats and what Mandell terms "the keen enjoyment of each other."<sup>4</sup> To many students, a social life at college, one which is full of team spirit, frat loyalty and extracurriculars is their only personal involvement at college. Those years for many become halcyon years, years free of social, political and intellectual responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

Each course is regulated so that uniform assignments and uniform examinations are given. It becomes impossible to permit students to jump over the course and approach the subject which underlies the course, approach it via innumerable books, innumerable interpretations, often interpretation which contradict each other so that it becomes difficult to reduce all to the dichotomy of clear cut right and wrong. The instrument that obliges students to accept all this structure is the grade. Time invested in work not to be graded is neither time abridged nor time extended but time wasted.

As a librarian, I think that the fundamental issue here is yet another dichotomy between a librarian within an academic institution but not institutionalized, not dependent at core upon the academic structure, and a professor totally dependent and totally supportive of the academic structure. And that academic structure, according to a vast amount of evidence, is not conducive to learning but generally confuses efficient teaching with sufficient learning. I call this a dichotomy on an intellectual level, but in practice what it amounts to is conflict. When I resign myself to tending to an academic structure I know is destructive not only of learning but of people—students, faculty and librarians, I give up my true function as a librarian and play a role assigned to me.

One of the notable problems with course structure is that very little coordination takes place between the half dozen courses a student may take a semester. Very often courses are treated as pure, separable entities which do not blend into other courses. Specialists guard their preserves, disciplines are in competition, students are in competition with other students, professors with professors. The librarian, through a variety of means, tracks one subject into another, mindful only of the intellectual search. A bibliographer is aware of what is going on in the numerous disciplines within his or her province. Their instruction goes no further than pointing out the existence of works, indicating contrary statements to those already discovered, indicating reviews, criticism, summaries, outlines, comparisons, state of the art appraisals, contradictory research studies, new and obsolete works, acclaimed and unacclaimed works, reductivist and comprehensive works, and finally, primary works. As a matter of policy, most academic libraries do not purchase textbooks.

Traditional academe proceeds as if learning had nothing to do with students, and students themselves proceed as if learning had nothing to do with them. It is as if their purpose in life was to give themselves up and take on the quest for Objective Truth in the name of the Progress of Mankind. But ironically, when individuals give up their uniqueness for the sake of pursuing what is not unique but common to us all, our civilization becomes prone to easily manipulated uniformity. The institutionalization of learning, its confinement within an academic setting shrouded by the barriers of compulsory exams, grades, lectures, texts and semesters, takes from us our responsibility to learn ac-

cording to our own lights, to learn how, when, what we want to learn and for how long.<sup>6</sup> Since we are ultimately responsible for our own lives and our learning affects how we live and what we become, we cannot rightly put such responsibility in the hands of an institution. In the same fashion, librarians cannot give up the essential role they play, and must play, and allow that role to be subverted by an academic structure which will not revive itself.

**Joseph P. Natoli is Head of Reference at Z. Smith Reynolds Library,  
Wake Forest University.**

## REFERENCES

1. During that period (16th century), pedagogues discovered that the process of printing had made books so cheap that students could buy them, and that if they bought them and used them under appropriate conditions, and with appropriate sanctions for failure to read and master their contents, *they learned things* without actually having to be told them": J. H. Hexter, *Publish or Perish—A Defense* in *The Professors*, edited by C. Anderson and J. Murray (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1971).
2. Phenomenology, as a whole, reintroduces the subjective factor, although it has been more favorably received in Europe than in the U. S. See T. W. Wann, *Behaviorism and Phenomenology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
3. For a discussion of available alternatives to actually sitting in a classroom, see Ernest W. Kimmel, "Problems of Recognition," in *Explorations in Non-Traditional Study*, ed. S. Gould and J. Patricia Cross (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1972), pp. 64-94.
4. Richard D. Mandell, *The Professor Game* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977).
5. This attitude typifies the middle and late 70's. Most of the data cited in this essay regarding the inadequacies of academic structure emerged from the "dissident academy" of the 60's. Although our present economic crises curtail educational experimentation and innovation and rekindles educational primitivism (see the "References" section of Paul Copperman's *The Literary Hoax* [New York: Morrow, 1978], academic librarians are just now putting together critical views of traditional academic structure and new views of themselves as coordinators, mentors, mediators, facilitators.
6. The institutionalization of learning (see I. Illich, P. Goodman, P. Freire, R. P. Wolff, *et al.*) has parallels in the technicalization of society (see J. Ellul especially), the objectification of religion (see N. Berdyaev, T. J. Altizer, *et al.*), and the regimentation of the individual (from M. Stirner to N. O. Brown, C. Reich and T. Roszak). Not only has learning been institutionalized to its detriment but the academic library has been called upon to be a "sub-institution." See John D. Millett, "Higher Education As An Institution," in *Reader in the Academic Library*, ed. M. Reynolds (Washington: Microcard Editions, 1970).

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