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A NOTE ON RF PROGRAM
FOR THE UNDERDEVELOPED AREAS

by

Norman S. Buchanan

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A Note on RF Program for the Underdeveloped Areas

(The following note is offered with some hesitation. It does not pretend, of course, to be a complete answer to the whole program problem raised by the Trustees' action in December, 1955. It is, however, offered as a possible point of orientation for program discussion which the Trustees' action has made necessary. NSB.)

1. The RF has operated on the basic assumption--as does most of the western world--that knowledge is good in itself, its application beneficial and, therefore, that free enquiry should be encouraged.

Broadly viewed RF "programing" by the trustees consists of an assessment and judgment as to which kinds of knowledge should be further promoted and/or as to what important problems organized knowledge can be fruitfully directed. Judged by its actions RF has not regarded all branches of science and learning as equally important nor believed that all problems can be solved by the application of knowledge. In practice of course RF has usually further narrowed its concentration by limiting its program to certain segments of the many sciences or disciplines, e.g., not all biology, medicine, economics, etc.

2. Once the "program" has been adopted RF has operated on certain convictions as to how knowledge is promoted and how it is applied to problems of importance. The first is that gifted individuals (within program) should be supported and encouraged but that they should have an audience to inspire. This usually means university lecturing and scholarly publication.

A second is that knowledge in any field will be pursued more vigorously and its results will be richer if the individual (or the small group) works in company with other scholars of similar quality even though the latter are in fields outside RF program interests. In other words, the place to support scientific or scholarly work is in universities or institutes. Thus, to support a very able person in a weak academic department or a strong department in an

otherwise weak university is usually considered an unpromising venture. The whole environment as well as the point of immediate support is a relevant consideration.⁽¹⁾

1 The basis for this belief is presumably that in a very real sense knowledge is an organic whole of many parts and that to advance any one branch of knowledge one has to presuppose vigorous work is going on in related but unsupported fields immediately close by. RF may not support pure mathematics in its program but it would never underestimate its basic importance to the scientific fields in which it does have program.

A third operating principle is that achievement in science and learning is emulative. One good center of research and scholarly effort will set the standard and so raise the average level of performance in a whole university, over a large region or even a whole country. Consequently, support concentrated at a single center will yield greater returns, it is believed, than the same financial support diffused over many centers. Since a university usually trains more persons to advanced levels than the faculty members required to train them it is almost inevitable that the better trained people will have to find places in the schools of lesser quality: not all Harvard Ph.D.'s can remain at Harvard.

A fourth operating principle is that almost the only worthwhile pursuit of knowledge or investigation of a problem is the "disinterested" one. This usually means two things: first, that a person has to be trained to understand and apply certain generally accepted scientific and scholarly methods; second, that he has to be protected in his search for new knowledge or his study of important problems from those who would proscribe his endeavors or dictate his conclusions. In the western world, the universities are the main citadels of protection for the "disinterested" scholar or scientist and therefore they are the most appropriate centers for RF support.

3. Doubtless there are other assumptions and principles on which RF has functioned. But those sketched above are perhaps the most pertinent in

planning program for the underdeveloped areas as a whole or for the areas of special concentration, i.e., Mexico, Brazil, Japan and India. For these areas either have cultures which invalidate RF's traditional assumptions or the external circumstances are such that our operating principles are unrealistic.

RF's basic assumption that knowledge is good for its own sake and that it is also the best means by which the well-being of mankind can be improved is neither accepted nor understood in most of these areas. Granted some muddled thinking on this point even here in the west the contrast is still striking.

Perhaps the most important manifestation of this difference from the point of view of RF lies in the character of the universities. These often exist in name; but the pursuit of knowledge is scarcely their dominating spirit. Rather they communicate and reinforce accepted doctrines and give formal professional training. Occasionally, for the sake of appearances presumably, they offer a smattering of instruction in subjects borrowed from the curricula of western universities. More often than not the faculty regard their university work as a part-time or even leisure time pursuit and are paid accordingly. For these and other reasons the faculty do not do much research. Finally, the universities are not protected havens for the disinterested pursuit of science and learning, being subject to interference from without and lacking the traditions and resources from which a stout independence might develop from within. Thus, as against the preconceptions usual in RF activities, the underdeveloped areas are not convinced that knowledge is per se good and, what is practically more important, their universities are not generally devoted to its pursuit.

If the above observations are not far-fetched, the kind of selective programming within sciences and disciplines which RF has usually followed appears to be unsuited to what one finds in most universities in most underdeveloped areas. One has to start further back, but where?

Should not the broad objective be to try to build the belief that knowledge is good for its own sake and ought to be pursued on that count alone--while not discounting at all its high social utility in practical application; and that, for practical purposes, this end is to be sought by means of strengthening the universities as a whole; strengthening them as centers of learning and research to which persons come for instruction and enlightenment in an atmosphere of free enquiry, an atmosphere largely sheltered from the chilling winds of public prejudice and official fears and fancies.

Admittedly RF's resources would not suffice for this end for more than one or two universities in any one country. But if the emulation effect is operative this would suffice. The important point is that the RF attack on the problem of establishing a proper university would not be confined to a few subdivisions within this or that science or discipline but would extend over a broad front and would include RF support not to a few but to most fields of knowledge acknowledged to be appropriate to a university. As we now operate in these countries to give selective support to an able individual or a little group is to fertilize a small oasis in a large intellectual desert. Thus, there are no side effects: those at the oasis cannot rely on the others for the basic support they need and their enthusiasms are wasted on their dessicated colleagues. What seems to be called for is a larger, more integrated attack on the university problem as a whole in place of the pin-pointed attack forward from a generally solid front. The latter has great merit in the United States, Great Britain or wherever the RF can assume that the supporting disciplines necessary to its own immediate program are good and that the university as a whole is generally strong. It seems unsuited, however, to the kind of university milieu to be found in most underdeveloped areas.

4. A program approach in terms of the university as a whole instead of target areas within fields of knowledge or particular sciences would be a new

departure for RF, even in the underdeveloped areas. The reasons for suggesting such an approach have been sketched above.

For us within the RF such a program would mean that each director would have to see the problem of the particular university in, say, Brazil or India, much as would a "divisional dean" in an American university. He would be trying to bring forward a group of disciplines but always in close collaboration with the other directors, the other "divisional deans," so that the particular foreign university as a whole would become greater than the sum of its parts. It would also mean giving support for things RF has not previously supported. Far more attention, for example, would have to be given to university organization, university administration and, perhaps, even university finance and the management of resources. No one pattern would serve everywhere but the conceptual principles on which strong universities in different countries are grounded are everywhere much the same.⁽¹⁾ These basic principles of university structure would have to be kept

¹ Provided, of course, one conceives of a university as a company of scholars questing for further knowledge and offering instruction in the spirit of free enquiry without let or hindrance.

constantly to the fore in attacking the problems of the particular university in the particular country. It would be a long range program by its very nature. But it would be one in which the objective is clear and progress is discernible. As such it would be worthy of the best traditions RF has established.

The proposal that RF concentrate on building up a very few good universities in the underdeveloped areas may seem too loose or too indirect an approach towards improving human well-being in these areas. But are not the programs of national governments, the UN and US technical assistance programs, and even the sizeable undertakings of FF, are not all these tending to over-stress highly immediate needs and the practical necessities of the moment to the neglect of the more basic but less obvious foundations on which a country has to

rest its capacity for improving the well-being of its people? RF's resources do not allow it to compete with these large-scale programs of other agencies. But could it not perform a singularly important role in development if it were to bring a few universities in these countries to a level of excellence? If RF could do this the consequences for human well-being would be exceedingly large.

NSB

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