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The Place of Regional or Area Studies
in Higher Education

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For some time prior to the war educators had been feeling an increasing concern over the constant trend toward specialization in the curricular arrangements of American colleges and universities. The fragmentation of departments was matched by the proliferation of course offerings on an ever more narrowly specialized basis, and the problem of guiding a student at either a graduate or undergraduate level so as to enable him to have a reasonable integration of his work was becoming constantly more difficult. In general, however, no effort was made to meet the problem squarely, and it was assumed that once breadth had been achieved by certain course or course-group requirements, the student could then most profitably secure a necessary minimum of integration through departmental major and minor specialization requirements.

It was recognized, however, that when the problem of integration was left up to the student and his busy advisor, there was a good chance that the student would emerge from college, clutching his B.A., with only a hazy and ill-digested sampling of a variety of "popular" courses in various departments. It was recognized, also, that many students did not profit from a departmental major type of integration

because in many cases the departmental majors were planned, not as part of a general educational scheme, but as the first stage in the training of professional practitioners in the field covered by the department. A few institutions have tried to cope with the problem by developing broad inter-departmental courses, required of all students, e.g., the Columbia two-year course in Contemporary Civilization. Others have experimented by offering an alternative major which is interdepartmental in character, e.g., the Wisconsin majors in American Institutions and Hispanic-American Studies. But, generally speaking, the combination of tradition, vested academic interests, and numerous administrative difficulties discouraged the widespread adoption of any of these alternative arrangements. In consequence, many academic administrators have fallen back on the comforting view that if their institutions offer a satisfactory range and variety of courses in different fields, the student is likely to have enough types of intellectual experience to make his four years a profitable investment of time and money.

To this background of ferment and experimentation, the war has added a new factor, the possibility of areal or regional grouping of studies as a substitute for, or as an alternative to, the conventional arrangements of the past. The global character of the war made it necessary for our armed services to secure large numbers of persons who were specialists in the language, civilization, geography, etc. of a particular area. Since many of the areas for which these

specialists were needed were precisely those which had been most disregarded in the conventional college curricula of the past, specialized training programs had to be set up, and the nature of the need made it possible to adopt new methods of intensive language instruction as well. While the standard of instruction given in the various centers has undoubtedly varied, it can be said in general that the academic institutions have met the need about as well as could have been expected under wartime circumstances.

Looking ahead to the postwar situation, the colleges and universities which have participated in this training program are faced with the problem of scrapping what they have done and converting their plants back to peacetime production of the prewar character, or of retaining the areal grouping of studies and using it either as a special feature of the offerings of the particular institution or as an integral part of their major arrangements. The enthusiasts for the latter course are both numerous and articulate and it is more than likely that many institutions may undertake ambitious developments along this line. Consequently, some examination of the problem, weighing the possibilities and shortcomings, may be useful at the present time before substantial commitments have been made.

The Undergraduate Curriculum

For the undergraduate curriculum, the primary question is the relative value of the areal grouping as an educational

tool by comparison with the traditional disciplinary grouping. This can be considered only in terms of the needs of various groups of students.

Pre-professional students, who regard their undergraduate years as training for a career upon which they have already decided, can be separated into two groups. First, there is the traditional class of those who plan to be physicians, lawyers, engineers, professors, and the like. Obviously, for these people an area program cannot take the place of the standard disciplinary sequence as now given. On the other hand, it might have considerable utility in the future, provided there is an increasing need--which is quite likely--for professionally trained persons who, in addition to their disciplinary competence, have a specialized knowledge of a foreign area in respect to which they plan to practice their profession. In prospect it appears that the areas in which specialization is likely to be developed may be those in which the greatest need for these professional specialists is likely to occur. This is particularly true, for example, for the Far East, and it may be true for Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa as well. While there is an obvious substratum of professional knowledge equally applicable to any and all areas, it is undeniable that additional knowledge, consisting of specialized study of the language, culture, etc. of a particular area, might be of great professional value to the person concerned. In the past, we

have had an under supply of these people, as most of their knowledge of the latter sort has been obtained through actual field experience abroad. Clearly, they would have been better equipped to rise rapidly in their professions if their field experience had been supplementary to carefully planned preparatory instruction in this country.

There are two complicating problems for the development of area programs for students of this first class. First, is the time element. The amount of required disciplinary course work in pre-professional curricula is such as to leave very little time for these liberal arts subjects however they may be grouped. Since the basis of all the proposed area specialization is the intensive study of the language or languages used in the area, no combination of professional preparation with area training would be possible without a considerable lengthening of the preparatory period. The second problem is that of quantitative need. The number of students who can, or should, be encouraged to plan for this type of professional career is bound to be limited to a small minority. Therefore, institutions could not profitably devote any considerable financial support to an area training program if this need were the only one to be met.

There is a second class of students who have a professional interest only to the extent that they look forward to a business career. Here, there may be a profitable field to be explored. American companies engaged in export trade

have traditionally been handicapped because of their lack of knowledge concerning the peculiar characteristics of the foreign market which they wish to develop. We have failed to adapt our products to special foreign needs, and we have failed to produce an adequate supply of persons who are equipped to deal competently with the special problems of foreign advertising, dealing with foreign purchasers, etc. In this respect, we have always been at a disadvantage by comparison with British and German competitors.

It would seem as if areal specialization would be extremely useful for students who plan business careers of this type. The difficulty again is that, while a considerable expansion of American foreign trade and foreign contacts of many kinds after the war is to be anticipated, the number of persons who will need this special training is comparatively restricted. Consequently, not many institutions would be warranted in making elaborate plans for this special type of student. If the development goes beyond a reasonable need, there is always the danger that too many students may be led, even though inadvertently, to believe that such a course is a gateway to an assured professional career.

These considerations point to the conclusion that there will be an increasing, though still modest, business and professional need for persons who will have had the kind of training which an areal grouping of courses would provide. The next question is the extent to which this type of integration would be desirable for general educational purposes.

In other words, would it be as good as, or better than, present arrangements for the needs of the average student who is interested in a liberal arts education rather than specific professional training?

Considered as an alternative to the present major system, it would seem to be of dubious value. For most students there would be greater value in being exposed to a substantial array of courses dealing with various facets of a particular discipline than in the study of diverse aspects of the civilization and institutions of a selected foreign area. This conclusion seems warranted for two reasons. First, there is distinct educational value in delving beneath the surface of a field of knowledge, in gaining an awareness of the intricacy of the problems which it presents, and in learning how and by what methods students of these problems carry on their work. The same type of intellectual experience could not be obtained by a number of survey courses dealing with the history, political and social institutions, art, philosophy, etc. of a particular country or region. The first type of work is, or should be, intensive, while the other is to a far greater degree extensive. Even though they may be polarized around a single region, a group of survey courses in various fields do not provide an adequate substitute for advanced work in a single discipline.

A second reason why the one is probably not a satisfactory substitute for the other is a judgment concerning the comparative value of the two as functioning equipment in the

student's mental arsenal. If concentration upon, say, areal studies in the Far East made it necessary for a student to do less work in the history and institutions of the Western European countries, he might know a great deal about Chinese and Japanese institutions but he would not know a great deal about the origins and development of our own institutions, which are so exclusively derived from European, rather than non-European, sources. For most students, there is probably a greater value in the study of the unique and derivative factors of American civilization than in the study of other civilizations which, however great and advanced, have not been the ones on which we have drawn. These objections would not apply to areal studies of Western Europe, but the interpenetration of the civilizations of the countries of this area has been such, and our institutional derivations have been so diverse, that a functional rather than an areal tapping of these sources would seem to be better for most students.

At this point it may be argued, and quite properly, that areal specialization should be considered primarily as a supplement to, rather than as a substitute for, the conventional departmental type of specialization. Theoretically at least, there would be much advantage in combining the two kinds of integration so that a student would have both a departmental and an area grouping of studies, but the great difficulty would be in working both of them into a conventional four-year college course. Obviously, this could be done by concentrating a student's work almost entirely upon (1) the usual basic requirements, (2) the departmental major, and

(3) the area grouping of studies. To do this, however, would be to monopolize the student's time so exclusively that little or no time would be left for sampling offerings of other fields, and every educator knows how frequently a chance sampling of a new and unknown field of study may influence a student's entire life.

These difficulties suggest a possible way in which an area grouping of studies might be fitted into a curriculum without any revolutionary changes in past practice. This could be done by setting up some area study majors which would be available as alternatives to existing departmental majors. Since these area majors probably would be few in number, a relatively small minority of students would be attracted to them. These students might include those (1) with definite professional interests, and (2) with no professional interests whatever. In the latter case, there might be as much value to the student, who has no specialized intellectual interests, in studying a region as in majoring in a subject chosen at random simply because a major is necessary for graduation. The number of the latter group attracted to an area major would depend largely on the reputation for difficulty which such a major would have by comparison with some of the less rigorous departmental majors. In any event, the regional major would serve to meet a definite, though limited, need in terms of student interest.

If it is agreed that, theoretically, the proper place for regional study organization is as a partial alternative

to the present system, a number of questions and problems immediately arise. The first of these is that of the extent to which colleges can or should go in trying to set up these regional studies. Another is the question of organization and staff arrangements. Both require brief comment.

Clearly, areas marked out for study units should be of substantial size and importance, but they should possess enough basic cultural, historical and linguistic unity to make the regional designation appropriate. It is doubtful if such an effort should be made for Western Europe. There is great linguistic and cultural diversity, and so much of the study of that area is now organized on a country basis, that it is probably best to continue the present arrangement. It is possible, of course, to organize studies of the civilization of a single European country, and there is some discussion at the present time of the desirability of having area studies of France, Italy, etc. While exceptions might be made for countries, such as Britain, whose institutions have profoundly influenced our own, it is doubtful if a single country should constitute a region the study of which would take up a substantial part of the student's college work. This would seem to be a type of specialization quite as narrow as the departmental specialization which the regional major is designed to offset.

Leaving the matter of Western Europe to one side, the other possible regions are (1) Eastern Europe, including the U.S.S.R., (2) the Far East, and (3) Latin America. Most

American colleges and universities are poorly equipped at the present time, in terms of staff or other facilities, to offer satisfactory work in these regions. They are somewhat better equipped with respect to Latin America than for the other two, but this is due primarily to the fact that Spanish is a standard subject in the collegiate curriculum, while Russian and Chinese are not. Except for the matter of language instruction, facilities for the study of Latin America are almost as inadequate as for Eastern Europe and the Far East. Consequently, a considerable outlay would be necessary to undertake substantial regional work. Because of library and staff problems, it is doubtful if any except a few of the largest and best-equipped universities should make a serious effort to set up such regional study programs. Unless they receive substantial outside financial assistance, the other institutions could not go far in this direction without sacrificing some of their present offerings, and the burden of argument in this paper is that the regional major should be envisaged as a supplement to, and not as a substitute for, the status quo. Consequently, outside financial support should be limited to those institutions which have the library resources, at least a nucleus of the necessary staff, and the other equipment which would be needed for the organization of regional studies. It should be emphasized that a regional study program should not be attempted unless it can be done well; poorly done, its value would be less to a student than any of the alternative

arrangements. It is probable that those institutions which will be in the greatest need for outside financial aid are those which should not be encouraged to embark upon this program.

Organizational and staff arrangements for regional study are currently the subject of much debate in those institutions which are contemplating moving into this field. Protagonists of one group maintain that a satisfactory start cannot be made unless there is a clean break with the past. Consequently, they believe that there must be separate departments, e.g., a Department of Far Eastern Studies, in which the historians, linguists, students of philosophy, etc. will work together in developing an integrated program of studies on the region. Less drastic is the proposal that a full-time administrative officer, known as Director of Regional Studies or by some similar title, be appointed to supervise all regional work. He would be advised either by a separate inter-departmental committee for each regional study program or by a single inter-departmental committee including representatives of all the departments participating in the various regional programs. Professors offering these regional courses would continue to be regular members of their respective departments. The regional studies program, therefore, would consist of lists of approved courses offered in the various departments, and the general administrative arrangements would be in the hands of a skeleton staff.

It is not necessary in the present paper to weigh in detail the respective merits of these organizational proposals. But there are a few pertinent aspects of the administrative problem which may affect the entire program. Thus it is obvious that the second type of organization would be practicable for many more institutions than the first and, if it is a satisfactory arrangement, it would make possible a more rapid development of regional offerings than would be the case if it is necessary to set up special departments for each regional program.

Separate departmental organization raises the question of procuring staff. Comparatively few persons have been trained for this regional teaching and, though much valuable wartime experience has been gained, not all of it can be made to apply to the problem of peacetime organization. The question, therefore, is whether young teachers and scholars will be willing to specialize in this way rather than in the traditional way. Some difficulty of this point has been experienced in the past by those institutions, such as Chicago, which have set up courses cutting across traditional departmental lines. With comparatively few exceptions, young people have felt, and for good reasons, that prolonged work in such courses would hinder rather than help them in their careers. They realized that they would make their reputations, not as successful teachers in such courses, but as historians, political scientists, or economists. Something of the same

problem might arise in connection with the proposed creations of new regional departments. It would not be quite the same, because the members of the teaching staff would maintain substantially their traditional disciplinary identity, but they might feel that they would be handicapped by not being members of their regular departments. Much would depend on the prestige of the new development and the number of institutions which undertook similar programs. The traditional approach is deeply rooted, and young scholars might be reluctant to venture a great deal of their time in this way.

The chief problem presented by the alternative method of organization is one of control and coordination. During the present emergency, the emphasis on language instruction has been unusually great, and this has resulted in giving the language departments a somewhat larger sphere of authority over the program than would be desirable as a permanent arrangement. In other words, whether the balance of authority would rest with the controlling committee or with the Director the arrangements must provide a proper balance so that no one department, and no one aspect of the regional study, is given undue weight. This has been a persistent problem in all attempts at joint courses in the institutions with which the author is familiar, and it is almost certain to appear in the administration of regional programs.

A comparison of these two forms of administrative organization points to the conclusion that the latter form is much the better of the two. It is much less expensive,

it creates fewer staff problems, and it invades fewer vested interests. If the Director is given the necessary amount of authority, he can bring about a more efficient coordination of departmental offerings and can supervise and control the contributions of the various departments. His position is one of the greatest importance to the success of the scheme; under no circumstances should an institution set up regional course groupings to be administered directly by inter-departmental committees. This suggested arrangement of the development of a limited number of regional study groupings, under the control of a full-time director, to serve as an alternative to the existing major arrangements, seems to provide a reasonable compromise in which the advantages of a regional major could be fully utilized with a minimum of disturbance to existing systems and interests. It should be emphasized, however, that the number of institutions in which this development can profitably take place is narrowly limited, and the superiority of a regional grouping over present-day arrangements is not such as to warrant poorly equipped institutions to seek, or to obtain, the considerable financial support necessary for the establishment of this type of work.

Regional Work beyond the Undergraduate Level

At the level of graduate training and research, the problem of regional coordination is quite different. Here there is a definite place for the carefully planned development of a few centers in which advanced training will be combined

with group research. In terms of need, priority in such a program might well be given to the establishment of an Institute of Eastern European Studies, an Institute of Latin American Studies, and probably two Institutes of Far Eastern Studies, one located on each coast. It is doubtful if there is any need for more than these four institutes, and since their financial needs will be considerable, it would be unfortunate if available funds were not concentrated upon this minimum number.

The selection of these three areas for study by special institutes should not need any detailed explanation or defense. The study of Western Europe is well-provided for by existing agencies, and little would be accomplished by creating a special agency for this purpose. The importance of Russian-American understanding to the future peace of the world is so obvious that the detailed study by objective scholars of the institutions, the culture, and the problems of the Soviet Union and its bordering states cannot fail to contribute to the kind of understanding which is the only satisfactory basis on which a policy of cooperation can be based. Similarly, the study of Latin America can be justified because hemispheric cooperation is a declared, long-standing policy of the United States. In the case of the Far East we have had only a limited number of persons who have possessed an expert knowledge of the languages and culture of China and Japan. Future collaboration cannot be based either on a lack of expert knowledge or upon the

sentimental and unrealistic attitudes which have so generally prevailed in the past.

In addition to this general need for the study of these areas because of their importance to our future foreign policy, there is a special problem as well. It appears more than likely that, despite the prospective creation of a general international organization foreshadowed by the declarations of statesmen of all the United Nations, the actual organization of international security in the administrative sense of the term, will be essentially regional. This division of responsibility can pave the way either for future conflicts on a titanic scale or it can serve as a basis for a realistic organization of peace. The systematic study of these key regions should contribute in an important way to the achievement of the latter goal.

These institutes would bring together competent scholars of all kinds--historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists, linguists, geographers, etc.--who were specialists in the regions concerned. Course work would be available at the graduate level for a limited number of outstanding students. Although the organization of the institute should have a considerable amount of autonomy, it would probably be better if in each case the institute were attached to a leading university, as this would make it possible to confer a university degree upon the students. This would also make it easier to bring together a permanent staff of the desired quality, and it would simplify the problem of library and other necessary facilities.

While the training aspect of the institute's work would be highly important, it should be planned as a research organization as well. The staff members should be selected on this basis, and each institute should have a planned research program resulting in the publication of fundamental studies and analyses of the institutions and problems of the specific region. To this end, funds should be available to enable staff members to undertake research in the region when this is desirable. Also, it should be financially possible to invite distinguished scholars from the region to spend limited periods of time working in the institute. Finally, the institute should be able to bring scholars from other American universities to work in the institute for a limited period. This would enhance the effect of the institute's work with respect to American higher education and it should in turn contribute to the quality and quantity of the institute's published research.

The development of such institutes would not duplicate or have an adverse effect upon any existing agencies. Some, such as the American Council of the Institute for Pacific Relations, combine limited research activities with a considerable amount of popularization. Others, such as the Council on Foreign Relations and the Yale Institute of International Studies, have made little or no effort at regional specialization and they have undertaken no substantial or organized training program for advanced students. The proposed

institutes would supplement the work being done by these existing agencies, particularly since emphasis would be placed, in two cases, upon areas in which little or no organized special research has been conducted in this country.