

BENNINGTON COLLEGE
BENNINGTON, VERMONT

September 16, 1943

Memorandum to Mr. Jones
From Peter Drucker
Re: Suggestions on the Teaching of History

At first sight it would appear that all our students should almost automatically acquire so much historical perspective and historical knowledge as to make unnecessary not only any concern over the teaching of history here but even separate courses in history. Almost all of the Basic Courses - the exceptions being only the Basic Course in the Dance and the Basic Course in Forms of Literature - are in a way historical courses. And the title given to one group of them: the Western Tradition, might well be given to the whole Basic Courses curriculum.

Yet it is obvious to anyone working with advanced students that very few of them have acquired a historical sense - let alone historical knowledge. For this, I believe factors which are outside our control are largely to blame: especially the feeling of young people today that they stand at the beginning of something new so that they are willing - and indeed most eager - to work on basic beliefs and ideas but unwilling to spend any time or energy on what they consider merely ephemeral forms.

I believe, however, that our failure in history results to a considerable extent from our own curriculum and that it is a weakness resulting from our strength. Most of us concentrate on ideas which, by definition, are timeless and have no history; or we work on forms and techniques which, too, are, properly speaking, outside of history. We do not, by and large, pay much attention to the institutional realization of ideas which is the subject of history. I would not want us to change for I believe that what is needed today is the awareness of the timelessness of ideas. But I think we could complement our program with little difficulty so as to provide at least a number of students with an interest in and an understanding of history.

Another factor to which I am inclined to attribute considerable importance is the neglect of the specifically American in our work here. Of all the Basic Courses offered this year, only Political Economy uses materials from the American past to any extent. Again I do not criticize the general policy; actually I fully accept the tenet of the unity of Western culture which underlies our curriculum. I also would not presume to question the decision of the Literature faculty that Poe and Henry James are the only American writers worth using. But I feel that even if not acceptable as "Great Literature", Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, and Parkman should at least be made accessible to our students as documents of their own tradition.

Part II - Suggestions

A. My first suggestion would be that we start next April a Basic Course predominantly working in the American tradition and with American material. I think that the Basic Course which Mr. Brockway is expected to give would be ideal for this purpose. It would be a course which Mr. Brockway is admirably fitted for, and one that would answer a very real need.

As for the organization of the course, I feel that it should start from contemporary problems and should work its way backward. It should concentrate on a few large subjects - and, in the manner of all Basic Studies, do concentrated and serious work on them. As to subject matter, I would suggest some such as:

The Puritan Tradition from the Pilgrims to the SEC - focusing on the tremendous influence the specifically American religious element has had on the entire development and structure of the country; I would like to add that none of my Political Economy students had ever heard of Brook Farm or of the Revivalist Movement of the 1820's and 1830's.

The influence of transportation on the development of this country.

The specifically American idea of the judiciary as a branch of the political government, and the development of the idea of government by law (including such things as "government by injunction"), etc. (I am going to work on this in Political Economy in the 2nd semester; but that is no reason why someone else should not do it next year.)

The suggestions given here are mostly in the social and political field - and this is intentional. In the fields of art, literature, and philosophy, neglect of the American angle can be understood. This is, however, not true in the social, political, and economic fields on which an "Americana" course should, therefore, be focused; needless to say I would like such a course to use not only economic and social texts but the sermons of the New England Divines, the novels of Hawthorne, the essays of Emerson, and the writings of Taylor of Caroline or of Fisher Ames.

B. My second suggestion would be to attempt to make economics a means to teach students an understanding of history. As a "Special Study" economics is largely concerned with theory, and with the history of doctrine. I consider this a very important subject but one which is primarily of interest to that small number of students who intend to con-

tinue work in economics after they have left College. Thus, in my opinion, we fail to make full use for the College as a whole of one of the most important disciplines and of one of our best teachers.

I think that we should look upon economics primarily as a means to study the specifically historical: the development of institutions. We would still get a lot of economic theory into such a course just as today Mr. Mendershausen gets in a lot of institutional history; but the focus would be different. What institutions should be taken appears to me as of less importance than that the starting point should be contemporary so as to show the student from the outset what the purpose of the course is.

C. My third suggestion would be to look upon the courses in history as complementary to the work done in the Basic Studies. This, I believe, would mean that instead of "American History" or "Medieval History" the focus of the courses - whatever their title - be on the history of something. And that something should connect with the work the students have been doing or are doing in the Basic Courses. For instance, out of the work on Shakespeare in the Basic Course a history class would come to the problem of the rise of the modern State which would force it not only to study the political history of Europe since 1500 but also the social and political ideas and institutions of the Middle Ages; not only reformation and counter-reformation but also the whole conflict between the idea of the "Christian Commonwealth" and that of the modern "Machtsstaat".

D. Finally, I would like to suggest that a small group of instructors who are, by the nature of their work, interested in the problem, be asked by the President to work out the concrete details of the teaching of history at Bennington College with the faculty members concerned. Besides the President of the College, this group might include Mrs. DeGray, Mr. Fergusson, Mr. Mendershausen, perhaps Mr. d'Estournelles, or Miss Adams, or some member of the music and of the visual arts group.