

May 1, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 17)

Dear Colleague:

A recent issue of Wisconsin Week (April 15, 1992) says that UW-Madison is no longer among the twenty great institutions of learning. The new President is somewhat concerned, but not overly so, for these rankings can't be trusted. True. But! I am worried. A slipping institution, even if the slipping is done slowly and gracefully, is bad for morale. The Wisconsin Association of Scholars has been critical of the Administration for hiring too many administrators. I haven't taken that criticism seriously. A University as large and complex as ours need inspired administrators as it does inspired researchers and teachers. However, in the same issue of Wisconsin Week, I see that we are creating "a full-time position geared specifically toward the needs of American Indian students." This position is in addition to what is already in place: a full-time staff member in the Office of Admission and two full-time staff members in the Office of Financial Services, all specialists on American Indian students. Three administrators for 191 students! Again in the same issue, a committee headed by an Afro-American studies professor is recommending the creation of a new position--an Associate Vice Chancellor for minority affairs, and the designation of a contact person for each minority group in the Offices of Admission and Financial Aid. The committee further recommends the establishment of a Puerto Rican studies program. Won't we then need three more administrators to counsel Puerto Rican students? What about left-handed students? Obese students? Students, otherwise bright, who can't read instruction in handbooks? Won't they all need full-time specialists?

The University is a community. But it would lose its purpose--its reason for being--if it forgets that it is, first of all, an intellectual community. It is not a social utopia. It cannot serve as a model for society-at-large where, properly so, the hungry are fed, the homeless housed, and unwed mothers given a chance to go to school. Society-at-large has failed in many ways, which is one reason why the University has to take up so many of its functions. The greatest failure in society-at-large is in human warmth. Children and young adults, starved of affection at home and in ordinary day-to-day social contact, seek it in the University. The University is to be home, full of warm, handholding adults. Intellect and its bright achievements become almost a secondary consideration. I can't help but notice that the "best professors," as voted by our students, contain few physical scientists and no professor of Sanskrit. They are too analytical and cool. They and their subjects lack the requisite warmth--the narrative and anecdotal charm that students (whites, but especially minorities) have come to expect.

Best wishes,

