

Note: The following article is intended to serve as an introduction to the general meeting next Sunday announced elsewhere in this issue of the Newsletter. It represents only one idea of what composes the Free University. Other contributions to the theory and practice of the Free University are solicited for printing in these pages.

THE FREE UNIVERSITY CONCEPT....Mike Pincus

The formation of the Free University represents the coalescing of a wide variety of groups and individuals over a single issue -- that something is wrong, drastically wrong, with American society today. Individual social critiques vary greatly within the organization; some people are mildly estranged, others are completely alienated from our technocratic culture. The result has been the variegated set of courses and activities which we have today. People of widely divergent ideas have cooperated in the creation of this radical approach to education.

Nevertheless, some danger exists in such a coalition. The Free University has to date shown a marked lack of direction in its activities and there has been considerable dispute as to the ultimate goals of the school. Questions concerning the future must now be raised. What is our purpose? Is the Free University intended to serve a purely educational function? If so, what direction should this education take? If not, what additional goals exist? Can political or social action become integral functional goals of the University? If so, what is to be the kind of action involved? This essay will attempt to put these issues in perspective and to provide guidelines for potential answers.

In the first paragraph, it was mentioned that the Free University represents a "radical" educational concept. By radical, it is meant that the educational aspects of the Free University are fundamentally different from those of existing educational structures. The Free University concept discards the notions of competition and status, of role-playing and role-fulfillment. In their place, it puts education -- not the education of grades and units, credits and degrees, but education in a very basic sense. Education here becomes the means of understanding the self, the way of formulating the relation of the self to society, and the guideline for liberating the self from fundamentally repressive modes of social organization. The attempt is made to understand alienation and overcome it. Further, the type of informal course organization of the Free University has for its goal the breaking down of communication barriers among people and the fostering of a deep sense of community which is lacking in an age which seems to emphasize the superficial aspects of human existence. The Free University is a place for people to come together, to talk, to teach, and to learn. Neglect of these fundamental educational goals of the Free University would mean its demise: without education, no other meaningful goals can exist.

But the Free University cannot operate in a vacuum. It exists in a larger world, a world of rapid developments and changes. Education by itself is meaningless; it must be translated into action -- made a living part of those who obtain it -- if it is to have any value whatever. But what is the nature of this action, and how does it relate to the education described above?

The question of action revolves around the idea of alienation -- the perception of the estrangement of the individual from society. But the recognition of alienation is not enough, for it is impossible for a single man to overcome the vast array of impersonal forces operating within society. Thus, communication enters the picture: the communication of the individual with others around him, the deepening of his understanding of himself and society, the pooling of shared experience and ideas in order that a coherent picture of the society and its evils may be formed. Each step in this experience is inexorably intertwined with the others in an ongoing educational process. Through education comes conviction, and through conviction, action.

It is not enough only to criticize, for failure to act upon conviction is a betrayal of that very conviction. But action promises success only through the unity of the actors involved. It is beyond the scope of this article to suggest possible courses of action. It must be remembered, however, that we live in a political world and actions taken in accordance with the principles previously mentioned must have distinct political natures. It is incumbent upon the members of the Free University to work out a careful ideological program encompassing the three central ideas discussed here -- education, communication, and action. Without such a program, the Free University will relegate itself to a meaningless role, lose its vitality, and die.