Paul Klapper's Dream

queens College in the fall of 1937—a memorable time! The first faculty meeting—September 9—when a handful of strangers gathered, in temporary quarters at 2 Park Place in Manhattan, to be introduced to their new dean and to hear President Klapper's first exposition of his plans and hopes for this new institution of higher learning. The subsequent attack on the first order of business: the construction of a curriculum. The first assembly, October 4, on the hill in Flushing. And the first day of classes—Monday, October 11. A memorable fall indeed!

As a humble tutor (the lowest rank, at that time, for those of us who were still working toward the doctorate), I was naturally on the fringe of the process by which the shape of the College was to be determined. But the guiding principles were discernible to everyone who participated in its construction. And these principles were those of Paul Klapper: Paul Klapper too had a dream.

During his years as Dean of the City College School of Education he had had time to ponder over the details of that dream, and when the opportunity arose he was prepared to put them into effect. Perhaps their most visible aspect was the curriculum. The creation of the individual courses, the establishment of content, prerequisites, and sequence, was of course the task of the several departments, and subjected to the diligent scrutiny of the Curriculum Committee. But the framework had been provided by Dr. Klapper.

That framework had as its goal a truly liberal education, one that would produce graduates who understood the world they were about to enter and would be ready to take their place as useful members of society: Discimus ut serviamus. It was Dr. Klapper's aim to provide for each student, no matter what his or her major interest might be, at least a nodding acquaintance with as many aspects of human endeavor and accomplishment as possible. Hence academic requirements that occupied about half of the credits needed for graduation: four semesters of English literature, two of composition, a year of art and a year of music, a modern foreign language, a year of mathematics and a year of science, four semesters of integrated social studies (Contemporary Civilization). The major occupied about a quarter of the total. The remainder was allotted to "free" electives.

In its idealism this program aimed at nothing less than the fabled Renaissance man. And for most, if not all, of the students in those early years it provided a satisfying, wholesome intellectual and emotional experience. That it proved, eventually, to be flawed was largely due to human inadequacies. The broadly integrative courses, Science and Contemporary Civilization, soon degenerated into their component factors for lack of faculty able and willing to rise above a concentration on their own specialties. (The most successful teachers in the CC program were, I think, three members of my own department: a classicist, a Sinologist, and a Hebraist, whose broad background and wide reading gave them the perspective needed to avoid the temptation to concentrate on a part at the expense of the whole.) Science Survey, likewise, soon became not the whole it was meant to be but a composite of disparate segments, known, among the students at least, as Science Scourry. As departments increased the number of prerequisites they imposed on their majors, the number of free electives shrank: on graduation one of my sons had had exactly one three-credit course of his own choosing. These inadequacies led, as we all know, to complete disintegration as students, abetted by "progressive" members of the faculty (at a meeting of the Curriculum Committee, a dean openly denied the desirability of required courses on the grounds that he at any rate didn’t know what knowledge a person needed to be considered educated), gleefully proceeded to dismantle what had been a noble structure. It had, perhaps, outlived its time.

Just as important for the character of the new College as its academic constitution—perhaps more important—were the atmosphere and the attitude toward education provided by its first president. The small size of both faculty and student body permitted and fostered a feeling of close community and cooperation. It was Dr. Klapper’s spoken belief that the sole purpose of the College was to serve the best interests of the students, and that in pursuance of that goal all on the payroll had an equally important role to play: faculty, administration, maintenance staff. There were no "faculty" meetings, just staff meetings. The President and the Dean visited classes (sometimes unannounced). Faculty members were encouraged to visit each other’s classes, and not merely those in their own discipline. In line with their own background (Dean Kiely too had been an educationist), stress was laid on excellence in teaching and concern for the individual student rather than on pure scholarship, although the latter was not ignored either. Promotions ideally were made on the basis of scholarship, teaching excellence, and outstanding service in administration.
President Klapper (center) hosts a meeting of the Student Council at his home.

and overall contribution to the running of the college. Staff meetings were sometimes devoted to the discussion of purely pedagogic matters—not seldom to the discomfort (if not disdain) of the more conventionally academic scholars among us. At such times one had the feeling that Dr. Klapper was in his own element again, happily teaching a class (the skeptical would say a captive audience) in educational principles. Indeed, there were those who felt that Queens College was more of a glorified high school than a place of “higher” learning, that students were overly protected and coddled (Dean Kiely in particular made every effort to insure that no student fell by the wayside), that paternalism had usurped the place of Lehr- (and Lern-) freiheit. Perhaps so. Never mind: the benevolence and fairness and equability of its first president, supported by the unflagging devotion and care of its first dean, gave to the early Queens College a distinctive cohesiveness, a special quality of purposeful striving toward a worthwhile, achievable goal that made participation a pleasure, a privilege, and a rich reward.

Konrad Gries

Another impression of the early years is provided by Harry N. Rivlin, who was Chairman of the Department of Education during Paul Klapper’s administration. S.S.