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Note to editors: The following is the first of four articles published in Duke University's faculty-staff weekly newspaper, *Dialogue*, examining key aspects of university life now under study at Duke. This article appeared in the March 18, 1994 issue. The following version has been edited slightly for a wider audience.

DUKE PONDERES INTELLECTUAL LIFE; DEBATE STRIKES AT HEART OF DUKE'S IDENTITY

by Virginia Boyd

Three Duke University task forces and a committee studying intellectual climate, greek life, residential life and East Campus enhancement are expected to report their preliminary findings this spring.

Many believe the long process of self-examination and the resulting discussion ultimately could leave a major imprint on community life and the educational experience at Duke for years to come.

President Nannerl O. Keohane said each of the task forces and the committee are expected to have completed at least a strong preliminary report by the end of the academic year.

"This will allow us to look at them over the summer, think about the patterns that we see and what kinds of suggestions are being made and then have more university-wide discussion of the specific recommendations in the fall," she said.

When Keohane arrived at the university last summer, the East Campus Enhancement Committee and the Greek Life Task Force had already been established with fairly well defined charges.

"At the same time, the kind of questions that had been raised by Reynolds Price (James B. Duke professor of English) and (The Rev.) Will Willimon (dean of Duke Chapel) and others about the quality of undergraduate life at Duke didn't seem to be capturable just by looking at fraternities or just by looking at East Campus," Keohane said.

Keohane discussed with the Executive Committee of the Academic Council and her senior officers how they might expand the focus of the inquiry and "cast a broader net" at a time when a lot of people on campus were discussing these issues.

It was decided to supplement the two existing groups with two others to address areas faculty leaders and senior administrators felt were left out. It was hoped the four groups would produce alternative approaches for some of the same questions.

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"We knew, in other words, that there would be overlap," Keohane said. "We hope that the overlap will be fruitful, but we also think there are a number of areas that are centrally the purview of each committee which are not entirely overlapped by anybody else."

Keohane said there is also the hope that as the reports come in, they will supplement each other by looking at a number of areas of undergraduate life and providing either some parallel or joined perspectives.

"If they give different answers to the same question, that helps us indicate where we need more discussion," Keohane said. "If they come up with the same answers, that's further evidence that groups that have looked carefully at the issues point in the same direction."

Keohane noted that alterations to residential life, specifically, need to be made in the fall in order for them to be implemented in the following spring during housing selections. "So, we will certainly expect to make decisions on some of the recommendations next fall," she said. "Others may be easier to make even sooner. Some of them may be decisions that can be made this spring. Others will perhaps take longer as we need to think about the consequences. And some we may not accept at all.

"We certainly won't ignore the reports. We will either accept, modify or reject what they recommend. And we certainly hope to be able to accept a good deal of what they recommend since I know they are addressing their tasks with great care."

Giving Voice to Concern

Price and Willimon are seen as the instigators in what has become a widely debated examination of life and the educational experience at Duke.

"I think it's a very exciting time of re-examination, re-appraisal -- some of which is agonizing, some of which is funny and some of which is really dumb," said Price, whose 1992 Founders' Day speech gave voice to concerns that some say were widely felt.

"But I do think it's the first time in more than 20 years that the university has gone through the kind of drastic re-appraisal of undergraduate life that should be its daily concern rather than its every-two-decades' concern."

Price acknowledged the complexity of dealing with the individual and societal influences that affect students' lives and ambitions.

"I've got huge sympathy for the students. Some people think I'm angry at the students but on the contrary, what I'm trying to do is make life better for them -- help them get more for Dad and Mom's money," he said.

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Willimon, author of a "We Work Hard, We Play Hard" report, said he has received a "remarkable" response since the report's completion last April. While he was prepared for a debate among the faculty, Willimon said he was surprised at the depth of response from the student body. Willimon has supplied approximately 200 copies of the report to students who requested it, has met

with about 30 student groups, and has received encouragement from a couple dozen students who personally visited his office to express their appreciation.

Interest in Willimon's report has been expressed by a number of people outside the Duke community as well. In fact, Willimon likens this growing concern in higher education to that of a wave with Duke at the crest. "Part of the greatness of our institution is Duke's willingness to take a critical look at ourselves and to search for ways to improve what we have to offer," he added.

"I want to stress that leaders of other schools are expressing concern for similar issues at their schools," he said. "I've already spoken at 12 different campuses this semester and the talk I gave at UNC-Chapel Hill was attended by 300 students."

Willimon expressed concern, however, that the debate about "anti-intellectualism" at Duke is overshadowing other important issues. "I'm not sure what intellectualism is," he said. "I'm more concerned with a total look at campus life."

What Is Intellectualism?

It's Friday night at 6, spring break has just begun and the Cameron Crazies have only one more night in Krzyzewskiville before Duke plays Carolina on March 5. Juniors Jarrod Holmes, Curt Sidden, Anu Agarwal and Francisco Escalante are willing to take a break from tossing a football in the parking lot to contemplate defining intellectualism.

An intellectual is "someone who can learn about, know and understand more than one area of life," said Holmes. Intellectualism involves "taking knowledge and using it in everyday life," Sidden said.

"Intellectualism is something that cannot be defined," Agarwal argued, adding that "an intellectual strives for knowledge and is not concerned about applications."

Escalante didn't want to decide on a definition but offered his insights on intellectual climate instead. "Intellectualism is all about motivation," he said. "There are opportunities all around us at Duke. It's up to us to pursue them."

Two first-year students, who had their tent pitched since Feb. 15, also were ready to offer some suggestions. Intellectualism "is not just parroting information but being able to take what you've learned in class and form your own opinions," Erin Buchanan said.

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"It's not that you have to know everything but that you have to be willing to learn," David McSwain added.

Earlier in the afternoon in The Cafe, sophomore Brian Fox contemplated his own definition. "It (intellectualism) relates a lot to topics that you deal with outside of class, the ability to process abstract thoughts, and sitting down and discussing issues that are important to yourself and society."

Trinity senior Trish Flynn qualified her ready response by citing the influence of Assistant Professor Kristine Stiles' art history classes, which had encouraged her to explore this subject.

"Intellectualism is the vigorous pursuit of meaning -- really searching for what meaning stands behind

what you are studying," she said.

"It's true learning; learning which changes the framework through which you look at things. It's studying the `whys' as opposed to the `whats.' It's the difference between searching for meaning and authenticity rather than security and comfort. The label itself thwarts actual pursuit because more people are interested in comfort than meaning," Flynn said.

Vice President for Student Affairs Janet Smith Dickerson said her dictionary defines intellectualism as "the exercise or application of the intellect." "For me, it is a life of the mind," she continued. "I start with an assumption that we are reasoning and mostly even reasonable beings; and that using one's rational thinking skills can be meaningful and fun."

An intellectual life, Dickerson said, is "a life in which one thinks, plans, analyzes, questions and challenges, makes choices, sees options, solves problems, and pushes the borders of knowledge. It is a life of vision and even mission. A life in a community with others where people are open to learning from inner as well as outer sources. It is a reverent, respectful life where one is cognizant of one's place in the physical as well as temporal universe."

Dickerson said efforts are being made through student affairs initiatives to assure that students "do not see their intellectual work as `drudgery' or their play as `mindless.'" Administrators should become role models to encourage intellectualism in students' lives, she said.

Curiosity, flexibility and persistence are the characteristics that distinguish intellectuals, according to Keohane.

"Curiosity because that's the fundamental motivation for anybody who wants to know about the world," she explained. "But flexibility because unless you are open to different perspectives and tolerant of ambiguity, you can't explore the complex avenues open in intellectual life with any degree of success. And persistence because intellectual life offers difficult problems, sometimes intractable ones, that do not yield ready answers but which can lead to productive insights as well as new interesting questions if you stick with it long enough."

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Intellectual Climate

Peter Burian, associate professor of classical studies, is chairman of the Task Force on the Intellectual Climate. The 12-member task force of undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty first met at the end of fall semester. Burian presented an update on March 17 to the Academic Council.

"It seems very odd to think that a university would not have a kind of community consensus definition of what an intellectual life is," Burian said. "It would be like finding out that the people at General Motors didn't have a community consensus about what a car is. This is what we do. This is our life, right?"

"But, in fact, I don't think that we do and part of it is because although there is a kind of formal structure of community here, we really are coming from a great many places. This includes faculty

from various schools and disciplines, students who are here for a variety of reasons, and administrators -- we all come with our own agendas and our own interests. And there hasn't been, in all the years I've been here, a lot of open discussion about the larger questions -- the goals and objectives."

Burian said the task force sees its mission as "trying to stake out what the university's overall objectives for improving the intellectual community and the intellectual climate are" rather than "trying to create an elaborate plan of action."

The task force is examining "how a vision of what is possible for Duke could be related to specific questions about curriculum, student activities, residential life, interaction of students and faculty, interaction of graduates and undergraduates, etc," he said.

"If there's one general notion that underlies everything we've been talking about, it's breaking down the barriers between the different parts of student, faculty and staff lives," he said. "It seems to me we tend to view the educational experience in terms of a series of rather ill-thought-through dichotomous experiences: works vs. play; teaching vs. research; student vs. faculty; graduates vs. undergraduates; and, to a certain extent, the interests of the sexes and the races are dichotomized as well.

"If we succeed in getting people to think seriously about whether all of these dichotomies really are somehow natural and necessary or whether there are ways they can be re-thought, we will have succeeded in our purpose."

Burian said he sees the question of intellectual life being very much a question of community.

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"There are questions that don't involve individual satisfaction and fulfillment as much as the kind of community that we are. What does it mean to be a member of this community? What is important and valuable about participation in the life of this place? What kind of signals do we send to members of the community, particularly students and faculty?"

A lot of students come to Duke "as idealistic seekers eager to discover what's out there in the world for them to master and become," Burian said, adding they are also "very attuned to what they find when they get here."

"I think we should be very clear about what kind of signals we are sending, about what kind of attitudes we are promoting, and about what we say -- not so much with the words in our bulletins and speeches but in all of our gestures, the kinds of facilities that we offer and the accommodations we make to students' interests."

The distinction between academic and intellectual has led to some confusion, Burian said. While some people have argued that students would be more challenged if their course load was increased from the current four per semester, Burian said this is not the same question as that of intellectual climate.

"I don't think that we want to promote the feeling that there's more hard work to be done. If we're talking about the intellectual climate we're not talking about making people work harder. We're

talking about promoting a community of discourse and exchange of ideas; a feeling that what we do inside the classroom has some bearing on our lives outside the classroom; and the belief that the ideas we toss around, the things that we read, the work that we do, the experiments that we perform, the things that we learn are not just for us alone at that moment ... but that they are part of some important ongoing dialogue we have with the rest of the world."

He said it also is important to recognize that people come to Duke for a variety of reasons, which are not necessarily "academically disreputable just because they're not our own."

"Are we doing everything we can to say, 'Of course this is a perfectly legitimate aspiration to be a lawyer or doctor or business person and we understand that there is a certain built-in constraint here. But are you making the most of the fact that you are here now? Are we bringing out everything that is there in you?'... I do think that, again, we can send them signals that will help them at least find a place in the intellectual community if they desire to do that."

Intellectualism vs. Professionalism

Law Professor Paul Haagen, who is a member of the task force, said he believes an intellectual climate is "an environment which fosters and facilitates and demands open inquiry."

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"I think there is a fairly high degree of consensus among the task force members as to what intellectualism is, but there is more division among the members of the Duke community as to how desirable it is as a value when compared to other values," he added.

According to Haagen, one of the values that compete with intellectualism is productivity. "For many faculty the concern of fostering full, open discourse gets in the way of getting things done," he said.

"Among the students there is the competing value of having fun, which relates to the identification of intellectualism with the classroom and the desire for successful nonacademic programming. Another competing value might be described as 'getting on with the business of getting ahead in life,' which describes a lot of students' interest in mastering the material so they can compete for jobs."

A large portion of the university population appears to believe that there is a conflict between the pursuit of a social life and an intellectual life, Haagen said.

"We may not be able to reconcile that," he said. But he said the task force has been discussing what can be done to help people feel they have "control of their intellectual lives rather than being passive participants."

Haagen also said he hopes these measures will reflect the history and tradition of the institution and won't result in Duke "simply turning itself into another school."

While some have argued that professional schools increase the tension between goal and process-oriented studies, Haagen disagrees. "It is my personal judgment that the problems with intellectualism are not different in professional schools -- if anything they are less," he said.

"It is relatively difficult to have any full engagement in graduate school without being involved in an intellectual life. A lot of things could be done to further their intellectual lives but the students in professional schools have already become engaged in that they have identified themselves with a particular discipline."

But psychology Professor Michael Wallach said problems with valuing professionalism too much can lead to a trade school mentality where the material to be learned is not questioned and students are mainly involved in absorbing, using and applying it.

"The more critical, inquiring and questioning mode is often associated with the intellectual, who others may see as bearing a privileged and aristocratic outlook," Wallach said. But what can happen among professional and/or trade groups is that they become immune to criticism and involved with self-sustaining and self-warranted pursuits.

"Fractionation into separate programs, departments, etc., often causes the members of these groups to look askance at other domains -- a spirit which I see as quite damaging," Wallach said.

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"Perhaps the biggest paradox of all is those academics who are bemoaning the lack of intellectualism in students are at the same time participating in a departmental organization that fosters an orientation to technical thinking and becoming licensed to pursue a specialty which can foster and abet anti-intellectualism."

A Mid-Life Crisis?

As Trinity senior Paul Hudson, who is also president of the Duke Student Government, sees it, "An intellectual campus is one in which students and other members of the community can successfully pursue their academic and extracurricular interests. Sometimes that can be encouraged through university planning and other times it needs to be a result specifically of a natural process.

"I guess what a lot of these committees are trying to figure out is when the university should be an active part of that development and when it should allow things to proceed without interference."

Personally, Hudson said he thinks the universal basic skills he needs "to be a contributing part of society are already part of the Duke package."

"I don't think that we're turning out graduates who are somehow wanting of something that they really need on an across-the-board basis," he said.

Hudson also argues that the "opportunity for any kind of intellectualism at Duke is out there."

"Duke has taken a more hands-off approach and in that sense Duke rewards students who go after what they want for themselves. If you have trouble finding intellectual opportunities here, it's going to be even harder away from the university. I wonder when people complain that they find this to be an anti-intellectual climate. What is it that they're doing? What is it that they wish to have and why can't they have it? What are the real questions here?"

"When you ask, 'What is intellectualism?' immediately I have to start thinking, 'What are we trying to do at Duke?' If intellectualism is our goal then what kind of graduates are we going to turn

out? In a way that gets to the very essence of the question."

"I certainly hesitate to say what student opinion is because there's probably about three opinions for each student -- at least," Hudson said. "I think that, overall, the sense that Duke needs to be changed has become an exaggerated perception.

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"Probably everyone who has ever been associated with Duke could tell you some way they think something should be different. But I don't have the sense that I sometimes get from the news that students are banging on the doors to clear the slate and start everything over."

One concern Hudson said he has heard frequently is that "we at least need to decide which direction we want to go. And that if we want to be the way that Duke was in the '70s and '80s, we'd better cut out these task forces and different policies pretty soon because we're really corroding the old Duke by giving out the perception that Duke is in some mid-life crisis -- that we're trying to become a Harvard," he said. "Students come through here so fast that if that perception gets out to high school seniors, Duke will change whether we want it to or not."

The "old" Duke had a stronger image as a school where academics were the centerpiece but "right up there were athletics and the work-hard, play-hard attitude," he said. If one or more of these qualities are downplayed and aren't replaced with something equally attractive, then Duke as a package "doesn't look as exciting to most people who have come here in the past."

"If Duke wasn't already a school that had made it to the top of its class, then maybe we should be aspiring to change," Hudson said. "But I think Duke already fills an important niche for this country's university system.

"Are we trying to replace one of the top tier academic schools? Do we think there's an expanding market for that kind of school? If you start to look at it from a national picture, what is it that we're really trying to accomplish? Are we trying to kick Yale out of a spot? And then who fills the role that is filled by Duke that so many people in this country, including employers, think needs to be filled?

"Those are questions that I don't see being addressed. I don't think with our limited financial resources we can just jump in and be that kind of school. But we have been able to attract an outstanding student body because of these other assets. And from that we've been able to build a better national reputation and attract better faculty. ... I think this country probably needs more Dukes than it needs more Harvards," Hudson added.

Image and Reality

Potential students won't be turned off by Duke's intellectual life debate, said Director of Undergraduate Admissions Christoph Guttentag. If anything, Guttentag believes the discussion will

encourage students to come here.

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"The fact of this discussion, the fact that faculty are interested in it, administrators are interested in it and, in particular, that much of the impetus for this discussion is coming from students is a healthy sign and indicative of the extent to which many students are interested in seeing the intellectual climate on campus change," he said.

The current climate on campus, including the present mix of academic life and social life as well as the way Duke students approach their Duke experience, is appealing to a lot of very bright students, Guttentag said. It is also part of what has made Duke the popular school that it is and part of what defines Duke in the minds of the students.

At the same time, however, those top students who are not choosing to attend Duke -- those who are at least as impressive as the students who chose to come and as accomplished in both academic and extracurricular areas -- are doing so because they want a different mix than they think Duke offers, he said.

"I think they are looking for a place where academic life and social life are not presented as a dichotomy and are seen more as two facets or two views of the same experience," Guttentag said.

"One of the challenges we face here is how to make people see that the academic and the nonacademic are just two ways of looking at the same experience rather than two separate experiences. That is the difference in the way Duke is viewed and how Duke students view their experience here and how other students view their experience at other top schools."

"I am exaggerating the difference between Duke and other schools," Guttentag said. "But these things tend to become what people think they are. In other words, I'm willing to bet that Duke is not that different from a lot of other schools but it's how we view it and the image we project out there that affects what our audience thinks of us. So, I think there is an element of truth but also an element of perception here. And as much as we want to change the truth, we can also change the perception.

"Part of the reality is that we have more to offer the students who turn us down than they realize -- that's the trick. What we have to offer them is more like the schools that they're going to than they realize."

Once students believe what they have heard about Duke, they come to campus with a set of expectations, Guttentag said. "They come with these expectations because they are now part of our reputation -- that students will do one or the other (work or play), that these are separate things -- and those beliefs become self-fulfilling prophecies. Once the expectations change here, a little bit of a lot of other things will also fall into place."

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