



Real gusto

by Roger Ebert

One of the problems in all big institutions, such as the University, is the tendency to which the structure itself tends to dominate the lives of those who inhabit it. Scholarship is essentially a free-wheeling, personal business, and while a university must try to provide the scholar with his tools and an ethic for using them, it must also be occasionally willing to leave him alone with his thoughts.

These are truisms subscribed to by almost everyone in higher education, but there is a great reluctance to put them into practice. There is a disturbing lack of faith, here and elsewhere, that unregimented students really will discover for themselves the things they need to know about life and learning.

My point is that the University, even when it is trying to do good, lacks fundamental faith that its students can enrich their lives through spontaneous self-discovery. Nothing illustrates this lack of faith quite so well as the fantastic programs and bureaucracies which have sprung up around the simple observation that students need more exercise.

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Although an educator in England or on the Continent would be laughed away from the fireside by any suggestion that it is the duty of the academy to exercise its students, we at Illinois come from a populist heritage and see nothing immoral about doing things for people for their own good. We do not even wonder at the repeated reports that European students are in better physical condition than our own; instead, we seize upon such statistics as further proof that bigger and gaudier superstructures are needed for our own dull, compulsory PE programs. We do not question why Europeans seem to WANT to exercise, and indeed even enjoy it, nor do we question our own programs and the loathing and false motives they inspire.

Thus we march the freshmen out to the playing fields, there to stumble through four semesters of physical education. We tell ourselves that these freshmen, tall and short, lean and rotund, are "developing their own personal recreational resources." Yet our students are not graded on how well they enjoy their sport and how joyously they throw themselves into it; instead, they are lined up and raced 100 yards, and the student who finishes first gets a better grade than he who finishes last.

Even worse, students are often graded on "improvement," as if a mad, panting effort to swim 40 yards faster than the last time has anything to do with the enjoyment of swimming. So much for the personal development of individual resources; our Puritan heritage will not permit us to exercise for the sheer joy of it. We must compete and be graded.

Irony is compounded when physical education, which is required for the good of the participating student, actually makes his lot more difficult. If the University were to examine the curriculum from the medical, as well as the academic, viewpoint, it would find that the first two years are by far the more strenuous and that many students have their physical resources depleted by PE classes to such a degree that they simply can't weather classroom work afterwards.

One simple example, of course, is the strenuous exercise required by water polo, swimming, track or basketball. I think it is obvious that a student will not perform as well in class after an hour of such activity as before. This has nothing to do with "conditioning." It is a simple matter of a rationing of available energy, and the superior athlete is likely to

exert a greater effort and be more tired afterwards.

If there were some way to look at parts of the undergraduate program in relation to the whole, such contradictions could be made obvious. Fate would not play such a role, and hour exams would not be flunked for such non-academic reasons, if the undergraduate program were better coordinated.

But unfortunately, we operate under a system of "departmental democracy" in which each power-center is allowed to formulate its own operations with relative independence. In practice, the price for this freedom is a tacit agreement to keep hands off everyone else's feudal barony. While the PE barons have the student they can make him run a mile if they want to. While the academicians have him, they can make him take an hour exam but cannot ask why he was delivered to them in an exhausted state. It's none of their business.

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But back to the playing fields. Since PE is "educational," an Intramural Sports program is devised for "recreation." But the do-gooder mind cannot comprehend such recreation as unplanned, spontaneous, natural, enjoyable activity. Somewhere, sometime, a bureaucrat saw 10 sophomores throwing around a football on a vacant lot, and determined that these underprivileged urchins needed a Program.

And so, today, we have IM uniforms, referees, trophies, cheerleaders, pledge teams, active teams, house points, chairmen, administrators and a system so souped-up that the average slob who wants a little exercise must STILL seek a vacant lot. Now a \$6 million building is being approved as a monument to this ego-boasting exhibitionism and house loyalty.