

Hofstra's Most Distinctive Virtue
Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good
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Voluntary service to those in need of our personal help more than our money, help to those who need time and understanding, is at the core of the philanthropic tradition. Sometimes, new dimensions of service emerge spontaneously and anonymously in a community, out of the fabric of institutional life. That is what happened at Hofstra University—and continues there.

One of the shortest careers in government service ended yesterday with the resignation of Dr. Eileen Gardner from the Department of Education.

Dr. Gardner joined the Department a week ago. During that week it became known that she had written a paper for the Heritage Foundation in 1983 in which she argued that "spending on education for the handicapped had 'selfishly drained resources from the normal school population and most probably weakened the quality of teaching.'"

Dr. Gardner defended her position by explaining that what happens to a person in life, the circumstances a person is born into, the race, the handicapping conditions, the sex—those circumstances are there to help the person grow toward spiritual perfection."

The setting of these remarks is Hofstra's 50th anniversary; a panel on "evaluating philanthropy." We are talking about the relationship of philanthropy to education, but I want to come back to the case of Dr. Gardner. First, a brief effort at definition:

One working definition of philanthropy reflected in this panel is the familiar one of philanthropy as rational, large-scale giving by foundations

and individuals to enhance the quality of life in the community, and the extension of that grantmaking activity to corporations.

My preferred, broader definition includes giving for charitable purposes—acts of mercy to relieve suffering, to provide assistance to those unable to fend for themselves in meeting the ordinary daily challenges of life.

This broader definition also includes voluntary service and voluntary association—philanthropy is more than almsgiving, more than grantmaking.

The history of the philanthropic tradition in this broader sense is "the social history of the moral imagination":

- ?? How some individuals have developed new concepts and ideas for improving the conditions of life for the society and for other individuals
- ?? How groups have organized around compelling ideas to improve the public good
- ?? How resources have been marshaled to accomplish those ends

That is, (1) the intellectuals who conceived of the application of the ideas of social science to the solutions of social problems (2) used the mechanism of the philanthropic foundation to engage the interest and effort of others to advance their ideas, (3) supported by the wealth made available to them voluntarily by such people as John D. Rockefeller.

The story at a more local and personal level can be seen in one strong thread running through the history of Hofstra University. As far as I know, it is an unwritten history. I speak of the history of Hofstra's commitment to disabled students.

When I first came to Hofstra a dozen years ago, I found an organized, sophisticated, sensitive, institutionalized commitment to the education of the disabled. I even found a mimeographed guide, prepared by students, on "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About the Handicapped but Were Afraid to Ask."

The new residence halls on the new north campus on Mitchell Field had been designed with a concern for access by disabled students.

My son remarked that when he came here as a student four years ago he was uneasy in the presence of the physically disabled. He was uncertain about how to behave, as we all have been. In a very short time he became "used to" the presence and activity of disabled students. Living and working with the physically disabled at Hofstra is a natural part of life on this campus. It is more a part of the life of Hofstra than of any other campus where I have studied or worked.

There is more to it than social accommodation. Many of the disabled students need help from others, sometimes on an extensive and continuing basis. That help is provided by family members to some extent, but often by other students—students who themselves have no visible disabilities. Some of the most extraordinary acts of devotion and understanding that I've ever seen are routinely evident on this campus.

The students benefit, of course. A friend of mine who has taught psychiatry at Johns Hopkins for many years describes this kind of philanthropic activity as "a prescription for mental health" for those who engage in it.

The charitable and philanthropic acts that are evident in Hofstra's philanthropic tradition of concern for the disabled reveal "the social history of the moral imagination" in very concrete ways. It is a tradition that has a powerful and enduring impact on many students, whose lives and values are changed by the experience. Yet some students are not touched by it in the same way. Why?

And few students, I suspect, learn anything about why this tradition developed as it has on this campus and not on most others; about the individuals whose moral vision founded the tradition, which became persuasive and compelling to others; how the resources for these activities were found; how the activities were organized and institutionalized—made collectively binding on the allocation of some resources—and which aspects of concern for the disabled still remain beyond the scope of what is available even here.

There was a freshman seminar at Gettysburg College a year or so ago on the theme of "social justice and individual responsibility." There might be a similar course at Hofstra, or one on "the social history of the moral imagination" and how it is manifest in small communities like college campuses.

My purpose is to raise the question of where the philanthropic tradition belongs in the general education of undergraduates. My own inclination is to put the burden on the history department, but recently a political scientist and I talked about the role of interest groups; "one-way transfers of exchangeables" have become known as grants economics. The social psychology of the relations of dominance and dependence, as well as the psychology of helping behavior and the philosophical question of the limits of altruism also come to mind, along with the legal questions of rights and the allocation of medical resources. Someone told me that more

than half of the student semester credit hours at Hofstra are in undergraduate courses in business; historians of corporate philanthropy make it clear that business leaders come in all shapes and sizes, and that some of them are acutely sensitive to the moral dimension of economic activity. And, of course, the religious roots of charity are clearly central to these ideas—they are even determining in the thought of people like Eileen Gardner. (The shock effect of her remarks should not obscure the point she seeks to make about how we should understand the human condition.)

Hofstra students are mainstream Americans. Perhaps in one small but important way their lives have been deepened and enriched by their experience here—their experience with disabled students outside the classroom. Whether their intellectual development inside the classroom has helped them to grasp the distinctiveness of the philanthropic tradition and make of it a guide of their subsequent behavior, is no clear to me. And if it is not true of a place like Hofstra where the practice of philanthropy is everywhere in evidence, is it likely to be raised in the consciousness of students at "less enlightened" institutions?

The anonymous heroes of Hofstra's most distinctive virtue—its enlightened and sensitive and continuing commitment to the disabled—should be the source of a larger contribution to the education of Hofstra students. Those who have made Hofstra a morally better and finer place have done something extraordinary.

Why it is still thought of as "extraordinary," and why it should rather become a matter of the ordinary course of life everywhere, is a topic in the "social history of the moral imagination."

It is something worthy of attention in the liberal education of all undergraduates.

In celebrating its 50th anniversary, Hofstra is engaged in an exercise of reflection and self-assessment. The student who spoke at the opening convocation proudly referred to Hofstra's accounting program as being rated seventh in the country by the leading accounting firms. The other evening I attended the induction ceremony of the history honor society on campus, and I spoke with conviction of the high intellectual quality of that department. Hofstra has an important and difficult commitment to selectivity in admissions, and it has always had an unusual depth of talent in its faculty. It has an excellent library; as a frequent user of it, I join the applause for the steps already taken toward its second millionth volume.

Yet if I were to point to the characteristic of Hofstra that is its proudest achievement, one for which I can claim no personal credit or notable contribution, it would be this sensitive concern for those whose response needs only the opportunity that others must provide. On this single point, Hofstra need defer to no other place. And this single point may be enough to justify its future as well as its past.