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Agriculture and the Liberal Arts Curriculum

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Incidentally

by Lillian V. Grissen

Agriculture and the Liberal Arts Curriculum

Holding up a plant, the speaker asked, "What is this plant?" and "When was this plant first cultivated in Northwest Iowa?" The lecturer, Dr. Cal DeWitt of the Institute of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, addressed a Dordt faculty and student audience on "The Importance of Integrating Agriculture into the Liberal Arts Curriculum."

The specimen, a corn plant, was identified easily. The audience then tried to recollect when Sioux County was first settled by its ancestors and guessed that date to be about 100 years ago, assuming the first pioneers brought corn into the area. Most of the audience were surprised to discover that corn has been here for almost 1,000 years, having been cultivated initially by the Indian dwellers on the Iowa tall-grass prairies. DeWitt used this illustration as an example of the possibility of integrating agricultural information into some of the traditional components of liberal arts education, such as history, sociology or anthropology.

DeWitt then developed the concept of the American college as a product of heredity and environment "which concept came to depart radically from its European antecedents" and "came in a large part to represent the essential frontier character of our civilization." The American college departed from its beginnings in liberal education. This departure is evidenced by specialism and departmentalization in universities, and the subsequent transfer of this specialism and departmentalization to the liberal arts colleges. These symptoms are confirmed, in DeWitt's opinion, by "the inability of students to ask important questions which lie outside of established

disciplines" and by "the exclusion of ethics, values, and Christian focus."

DeWitt stated that this departure from liberal arts, unlike at many American colleges, does not exist at Dordt. He referred to the development of the concept of "serviceable insight," a concept which is central to Dordt College's educational task. The idea of serviceable insight is unique because it is "based on an integrated world and life view, it is holistic." It unifies theory and practice, it unifies the disciplines, and it unifies faith and learning for the purpose of stewardly service. In addition, serviceable insight is liberal, allowing "one to be a responsible steward in any situation." It is "applicable to the issues and problems encountered in living the stewardly life." It is other-serving, "based on the Lord's ownership of all and not self-directed." It is disciplined, "it does not fragment knowledge."

Within this context of serviceable insight as the central theme of liberal arts education, the study of agriculture is a natural and important component because "for the freedom-for-stewardship college, the study of land stewardship is essential," and both agriculturalist and non-agriculturalists must be equipped to be fully responsible stewards.

DeWitt concluded by stating the benefits of integrating agriculture into the liberal arts curriculum. "To agriculture this integration fosters the idea of rooting agriculture in knowledge, insight, wonder, and love; and to the liberal arts this integration adds important elements to a holistic view of stewardship."

Henry De Vries