

Educational Publicity

Educational Publicity. Benjamin Fine. Harper and Brothers, 1943. 320p.

The author of this book is the education editor of the *New York Times*, and it is not surprising (1) that many of his remarks are practical and realistic or (2) that he is chiefly interested in the best and most serious aspects of current educational publicity. The book covers the public relations of both the public school and the college or university, but of the two, higher education receives somewhat the greater attention, perhaps because the author is more familiar with it through having tackled the subject before in a previous book.

Thirteen out of twenty chapter titles begin with "How to," and most of the others could have begun similarly without misrepresenting their contents. Primarily the author's intent is to explain the necessary details in learning what educational news consists of, in writing a news story acceptable to the city desk, in getting together a workable publicity staff and organizing it for business, in how to "build good relations with the press." In other words, the book would appear to be of value first to the educational publicity director and his staff (if he is lucky enough to have one), second to administrators who must appoint publicity directors and work with them, and third to students and others to whom public relations is something to learn about without any absolute certainty that they will employ it professionally.

But there is much more than this to the volume. Mr. Fine's picture of what should be differs so much from what is that the implications are unmistakable. There is meaning here for anyone dis-

turbed by the recent failure of liberal education to sell itself to the public.

Mr. Fine argues that publicity must be a kind of adult education. Immediately it must be said that he gives less space to new methods of popular communication and of learning than he might under the scope of his argument. A chapter takes care of the radio, a page the motion picture. His emphasis falls primarily on getting news stories into the pages of the daily press. The implications for publicity, however—and for the library and other elements in the college as well—are not to be missed. After the war the college must make much greater use of popular educational devices—of the motion picture, the radio, the phonograph record, and other audio-visual methods. These it has too largely neglected.

But when the author says that a successful publicity director must be an adult educator, he is thinking primarily of a state of mind. The college must learn to tell its story. The cloud which has passed over a good part of liberal education with the coming of war is due at least partially to the unwillingness or inability of the college and university to let the people know what is happening on campus.

If colleges and universities are not to become fewer and poorer, support must come increasingly from popular sources. Examination of popular stereotypes is not reassuring. College is a place (a never-never land?) where you spend the four happiest years of your life. College boys play football and learn good sportsmanship for "the game of life." College doesn't fit you for anything. College professors are long-haired, impractical, absent-minded. The facts-which contradict these

stereotypes are too frequently kept in cold storage.

Can all the facts be told? They can be when the college is willing to define for itself its proper place in American democracy and to justify that place. That would mean further change in relationships and culture patterns on the campus, but change and publicity, interacting, might well bring the college a greater measure of security.

College Publicity Principles

As a practical program Mr. Fine's principles for college publicity are worth setting down:

1. *Recognition of responsibility to the public.* Publicity directors "must realize that they have a serious obligation to the man and woman in the street, to those who have made colleges and universities possible."

2. *Stressing of new educational developments.* "Many people do not understand" the changes that are taking place in the American college "and feel that 'something is wrong' with educational practices." They would feel more confidence if they were kept informed of new developments.

3. *Interpretation of the campus to the layman.* "To the average person, the college campus is an enigma. Only during a crisis does he discover that the boys and girls on the American campus are faithful citizens. The serious side of the campus is not always publicized."

4. *Presentation of an accurate picture of higher education.* "Whether it have faults or virtues, tell a true story."

5. *Cooperation with the press.* "Without the support of the press, education will suffer and its growth be impeded."

These points and others more technical

are stressed over and over again. But stress and repetition are probably necessary. Although college administrators would probably not agree on the point, the implications of many of the author's remarks are that we have had far too little democracy in campus relations, too little recognition that we live in a democracy and are answerable to the public for many of our actions. We employ too little directness and common sense in relations with both students and with groups outside the college like newspapers. In some cases there has not even been common courtesy.

Attitude toward Censorship

Perhaps the test of the situation lies in the attitude toward censorship. Forty-five per cent of all colleges reporting to a questionnaire on the subject indicated that some form of censorship operated on stories originating on their campuses; this would lead one to believe that the actual percentage is much higher, since censorship is not a method freely admitted as congenial by the American mind. Newspaper reporters and editors and most professional publicity directors oppose censorship on the ground that it is unnecessary, that it makes for ill will, that building a Chinese wall around an institution is no real protection, that in the long run the facts are likely to come out anyway and in a manner that damages the institution's reputation more than if they had been faced openly in the first place.

Mr. Fine tells a very pertinent story. A certain college published a doctorate study by a graduate student holding that the leadership of the American Legion has tended to be Fascist-minded. The story hit the front pages, was quoted far and wide, and heated criticism began to

flow back to the college. The college officials didn't fight back or justify their policy. Instead, they first asked the publicity director why he hadn't "killed" the story. He replied that the college was publishing the thesis as a book, that it had awarded the student his degree, and that, anyway, reporters had asked for the story. Then the officials publicly denounced the reporters and charged them with betraying the college!

Ask yourself how the administrators on your own campus would handle (not avoid!) such a situation. Mr. Fine makes the technical point elsewhere that the first element of a good news story is conflict. He might further have reiterated the platitude that conflict of public opinion is the life blood of American democracy. No one expects American colleges to go about picking fights. But no one expects them, either, to declare themselves out of the American heritage or somewhere else than in the midst of the American scene.

The Library

Mr. Fine mentions the library only once. The college or university library is the place where, after the year's publicity releases have been bound, the resulting volume is "placed on public record." There may be a small compliment tucked away in this neglect. By inference he would class the librarian along with other members of the faculty who, he says, will cooperate in college publicity when a good publicity director is hired and given his proper opportunity. But there is surely

criticism in the fact that in all the illustrative news stories quoted or referred to the library never once turns up as subject.

I believe it has been said somewhere before that librarians are not publicity-minded. But perhaps in another decade they will become so. It is easily forgotten that college publicity is itself only an infant; most publicity departments have been established since the 1920's, and many a college still has none worthy of the name today.

This is no volume to tell college librarians what they frequently most need and sometimes hope for—how they can improve the library's public relations on campus. But they can read it profitably to get a livelier, more open-minded attitude toward the job of general education in which they are or should be engaged.

As a parting shot (I hope I do not make Mr. Fine out to be unduly violent; his book, after all, is quite mild and technical) the author calls for courses in public relations and for at least one school of public relations. I doubt that he should get what he wants. The courses and the school would surely be conducted for the information and training of publicity directors and future publicity directors. By his own admission, the first requirements for a good educational publicity man are newspaper experience, understanding of education, and a pleasing personality—each of which would have to be acquired somewhere else than in a school of publicity.—*Paul Bixler, Antioch College Library, Yellow Springs, Ohio.*