Junior colleges and community colleges have not usually taught much, if any, philosophy. Since they alone have been growing rapidly this has been a distressing fact to most of the professional philosophers. The most recent statistics, not yet complete, show that less than half of the 1200 to 1300 two-year institutions in the country offer any sort of philosophy at all.¹ Both as people who care enough about philosophy to spend our lives at it and as academics who may need a new job soon, this is depressing.

Recent trends are said to be somewhat encouraging. Each year more two-year colleges take up philosophy and few drop it. Even some high schools and prep-schools now offer courses in philosophy. In a period when liberal arts registrations are said to be declining, philosophy registrations remain fairly constant. There has been no great increase in students, as in sociology, but there has been no general decline either.

I believe this analysis is far too optimistic. Two-year colleges are growing rapidly but having financial pains while doing so. Philosophy is a discipline that costs little to add to the curriculum. There are relatively few books or journals necessary, and these few do not become quickly obsolete. There are no expensive labs or shops to equip and maintain. There are not even any slides or movies to buy or rent. Moreover there is no shortage of qualified people to be hired. In short there are very strong economic and practical reasons that should make philosophy a desirable course to add to the curriculum.

The obvious rejoinder is that many of the two-year programs that these colleges teach are vocational — there is neither the time nor the interest for such "impractical" courses as philosophy. Unhappily this easy answer won't wash. By far the largest single area of study in two-year colleges is the liberal arts. In some community colleges the number of liberal arts or transfer students is over eighty percent of the total enrollment. These students should be just as regular candidates for philosophy as students on any four-year campus.

Moreover, a number of people concerned with teaching philosophy at two-year colleges report a general air of hostility toward philosophy as a subject and philosophers as an academic group on the part of junior-college administrators. Of course, this is not universally true; there are many places where philosophy is taught and philosophers are welcome, but it is true often enough to cause comment and concern.

The usual answers to these worries are that there are of course some problems concerning the teaching of philosophy at junior colleges but that with good will and a bit of work (and a better job of preparing graduate students to teach at junior colleges) these problems will disappear. In short the usual position is that there is nothing basically wrong with the current situation that good will and effort (and a bit more money) can't cure.

I disagree. Of course more money and better people and better preparation would help, but the current anemic condition of philosophy at junior colleges, when it should have so much obvious appeal to students and administrators,
indicates that there is a serious institutional failing at work here. The failure is basically that the universities and the community colleges are working toward incompatible goals, at least with regard to philosophy — and I suspect with regard to many other disciplines as well. Until this fact is recognized and remedied all the good will and good teaching in the world will be inadequate.

The junior college or community college program is essentially a two-year terminal program. Students are expected to take a set of courses over the equivalent of a two-year period. It is assumed that most students will not go on to further studies but will get a job of some sort, hopefully using the skills they have acquired in the program. This gives the junior college program a great vocational and practical emphasis. Students want, and have every right to expect, programs that contribute directly to their vocational goals. The types of philosophy courses that fit with these requirements are “problem” courses (the mind-body problem, the free will-determinism problem) or courses oriented toward practical problems (normative ethics, political theory).

The university offers a four-year program to its students with the expectation that many will go on to graduate or professional schools. Anyone who has taught at a university knows that the nature of the graduate program determines to a great extent the nature of the undergraduate program. Professors train undergraduate majors to the standards and in the subjects they will need as graduate students, and all too often they train introductory students only in the subjects and to the standards they will need as philosophy majors. To some degree this is inevitable and even desirable. After all, students go to the university precisely because it is a university; it offers them the chance to move easily and directly into these same graduate programs.

Unfortunately the community college is caught in a dilemma. The primary purpose of the community college is to serve community needs by offering terminal two-year programs, but many students take “transfer” programs with the intention of transferring to a four-year college or university. They are, for most purposes, freshmen or sophomores in an independent two-year part of a four-year program. Also, at the two-year colleges they are being taught by people who have degrees from universities. These professors are interested in their subjects as professionals and suffer a strong temptation to offer professionally oriented courses. This is what their transfer-students want and need. This is what they themselves are interested in. But if they do this to any great degree, they make the subject just that much less attractive to all the other, non-transfer students. If they do a good job as university-oriented professionals, they do a bad job as junior college instructors.

The university faculties offer no help at this point. They already tend to see the undergraduate major as training for their (or someone’s) graduate program, and the introductory courses as training for the undergraduate major. They are completely committed to the wholly professional standard. The instructor who teaches a course designed for non-majors is suspected of not being really serious. The universities consequently insist — as they must to retain control over their standards — on their right to reject certain courses previously taken by incoming students as not meeting their standards, or not being given on topics they think acceptable. The courses that they are most apt to reject are the courses that are designed specifically for the terminal two-year programs of junior colleges.

For example, a number of community colleges offer courses in police science. There is obviously a place here for a course in ethics or political philosophy that discusses the problems of justice, punishment, violence, etc. But a student who
had this as his only philosophy course and seeks to get credit for it at a university will probably be told that the only acceptable introductory course in ethics is one that stresses Bentham, Mill and Kant and the problems of meta-ethics. This is fine for the university graduate program but what is the junior college instructor to do? Orient his course to university standards and see it become useless as a course for police science, or keep it as it is and have it be useless for transfer credit?

This conflict manifests itself in a different way with the administration. Some state junior-college systems demand a teaching certificate rather than a doctorate from their instructors. In other words the academic orientation of these colleges is more in line with that of the local high school than it is with the state university. Again consider the plight of the instructor in this situation. If he or she tries to teach a university-oriented course and insists on university standards and styles of work, his administration may well object that he is not doing the job that the community wants him to do. In extreme cases the administration may be afraid that the university-oriented professionals want to take over the college and turn it into a small liberal arts college instead of a community-oriented junior college. Conversely, the instructor is probably university-trained. If he gives courses that are not acceptable at the university, he will feel guilty about it (or at least defensive); moreover he will be cut off from the university-oriented groups that could help him maintain these standards. In either case he will be made to feel that he is not doing his job.

What can be done about this conflict? Probably not very much. It can not be made to go away. Both the universities and the community colleges have good reasons to think and behave as they do. The difficulty is not petty jealousy but a real conflict of purposes and functions. These functions are important; they can not be lightly changed.

Perhaps some mutual accommodation is possible in spite of the real difficulties inherent in the situation. Both sides must be ready to make some real changes in their attitudes and programs however.

On the part of the junior colleges, I believe that they will have to give up one of their most cherished beliefs: that the community college should be ready to respond to any reasonable request for any type of course. Some two-year colleges simply should not try to give any philosophy at all. Others should not try to give courses for students intending to transfer into four-year institutions. Others should give only courses for transfer students. Only two-year institutions of exceptional size and quality should try to give both kinds of courses, and when they do so they should try to make clear to students that there are two types of courses given and they are not really the same at all. Community college administrators may not be willing to do this: it conflicts with much of the present mystique of these programs, particularly with the “democracy” of educating all types of people and all levels of academic interest together.

On the other side of the problem, the university faculties will have to re-think the question of introductory courses, and to some degree their entire undergraduate program. Almost always, introductory courses at the university aim at an exposition of the most basic philosophic problems. Their purpose is to set up the theoretical basis for further philosophical inquiry. These courses may use contemporary articles by people who are not professional philosophers, but the purpose of using these articles is not to clarify what these contemporaries say so much as to provide an interesting platform for the discussion of a purely philosophical problem. The justification for this is two-fold. First, students will need
this material if they are to go on to further courses in philosophy. Secondly, this
is the only intellectually honest way to do the job: get the basics down firmly
before proceeding to the super-structure. Put in less kind wording this amounts
to the belief that all (or most) introductory students are going to take more
courses in philosophy and that the only intellectually honest way to approach a
philosophical problem is from the standpoint (or in the footsteps) of a profes­
sional philosopher.

Philosophy is not a strongly linear discipline as is mathematics or chemistry.
It is not essential to take most courses in a particular sequence. A case can be
made for taking the general survey courses last, when students can understand
and appreciate the development of historical schools, rather than first when the
subject is wholly new to them. Conversely, a case can be made for taking courses
on specific, limited topics such as philosophy of law, or history or political theory
or aesthetics as introductory courses because these courses have rather special
content in which the student may possibly have some background already and
in which he may well have a lively interest.

I believe that there will always be a certain degree of strain between the uni­
versity and the community college. This is not because university people are
snobs or because community college people are little empire builders. Each
group is committed to a program, and the programs are worthwhile. Unfortunate­
ly the programs tend to conflict; this can not be eliminated but it can be
mitigated. If the universities adopt a more flexible attitude about introductory
courses, they may find that community college students have often had an excel­
 lent introduction to philosophy. If community colleges made a sharper dis­
tinction between transfer programs and other programs, they may find that the
universities are not as unreasonable as is thought. Finally, if both institutions
give a little, they may be able to take some of the pressure off the instructors
who are currently caught between their conflicting demands, and also be able to
offer their students a more realistic and a more interesting choice of courses.

Since I teach at a two-year branch of a university, I tend to see the justice of the arguments pre­
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