

Matthew L Johns
3/13/08
Unit 5

In A Passion for Learning, Philip A. Cusick identified anywhere from eight to twelve “pillars of learning” exhibited by the American scholars he chose to write about. These run the gamut from a reading broadly and from great books to a concept like resiliency in the face of obstacles. While I struggled to see a new pillar after an online study of his figures, I was struck with the feeling that the pillar of seeking out like-minded friends and colleagues to share knowledge and ideas did not go far enough in describing a dynamic that was essential in understanding the success of Cusick’s figures. In virtually each portrait, the figures sought out like-minded colleagues but their interaction went well beyond simply sharing of knowledge and ideas. More specifically, Cusick’s examples were all able to sweep up others in the momentum of their ideas and beliefs and make them active participants in the change process. Jane Addams and J. Robert Oppenheimer wonderfully illustrate this variation.

Jane Addams was the driving force behind Hull House in Chicago. Hull House would have been impossible without the people Addams was able to pull into her fold. From simply giving a speech in Chicago she was able to gain the financial support of Louise de Koven Bowen, a commitment that would last over 60 years.¹ She represents the way Addams was able to get others to financially support her ideals. Other women were drawn to Addams and Hull House to serve as the providers of services in that community. They eventually became the founders of several national movements such as the Immigration Protective Agency, the Juvenile Protective Agency, juvenile courts, and various other state and federal legislation.² People were drawn to what she was doing, worked with and were mentored by her, and left as her emissaries.

Philip Cusick’s portrait of J. Robert Oppenheimer understandably focuses on his World War 2 experiences. However, in reading about Dr. Oppenheimer through the various web sites I was equally impressed with the way in which he built and developed California, Berkley’s physics department. He did not view himself as the constructor of a department yet his enthusiasm and rare vision for theoretical physics drew people to Berkley and the department. He saw his role as creating an environment for the sharing of ideas about physics and its “unsolved problems.”³ Those drawn to Berkley by Oppenheimer went on to be long time collaborators with Oppenheimer, to fill physics positions around the world, and to begin their own departments that incorporated pieces of his vision. This organizational skill was also evident during his participation in the Manhattan Project. His skills and abilities allowed him to process information much more quickly than others.⁴ This was crucial in the management of a project of this size and magnitude. Oppenheimer was simply a person brought in by a colleague as a person who had offered some insights into problems the Project had been trying to solve.⁵ Within months, he had become the driving force and director of the Manhattan Project.

Addams and Oppenheimer both illustrate a truly valuable component of a person’s education: they were able to translate their revolutionary ideas into something comprehensible by others. More importantly, they were able to make others believers and active members in their movements. That is rarely an innate skill. In light of the varied backgrounds, educations, personal experiences, and methods that Cusick’s

examples utilized in accomplishing their goals, I would argue this was a skill that was learned and developed over time in each of them. Understanding this variation on Cusick's collaborative pillar more clearly paints the picture as to how his subjects were able to bring about systemic changes.

¹ Urban Experience in Chicago: Hull House and Its Neighborhoods

² Jane Addams and the Hull House Museum.

³ Oppenheimer: A Life

⁴ Oppenheimer: A Life

⁵ Breakthrough: A History of Physics at Berkley