

Annual Dinner
March 12, 2014
Bob Pollack
Director's Remarks

Thank you all for coming to our Dinner tonight. I am sure that Professor Stiglitz's talk is on everyone's mind, as it is on mine, and I will be brief.

First, let me take the time to thank the four great colleagues with whom I share the Office of the University Seminars, on the second floor of this building. Alice Newton, Pamela Guardia, Gessy Alvarez and Summer Hart are all here, and I can assure you all that without them, there would be nothing but a shell where the Seminars now stand.

Now, a very brief recapitulation of why we are here tonight. Or, to put it another way, what are the University Seminars, after all? Here's the historical answer, from an article written by our founder, Professor Frank Tannenbaum of what is now SIPA, in the June 1953 issue of *Political Science Quarterly*.

"The formal beginning of the University Seminar movement at Columbia University can be dated from March 8, 1944, when nineteen members of the Faculties of Philosophy and Political Science sent a joint letter to Dr. Frank Fackenthal, then Acting President, suggesting the establishment of a series of *permanent* seminars."

Here's how that letter to Dr. Fackenthal closed its case. Imagine the courage and foresight of these academic ancestors of ours, to argue for and get resources on these grounds:

"To recapitulate the argument: the proposal assumes that it is the function of the University to so organize its energies formally as to devote part of them to a continuous research, study, analysis, and interpretation of a number of the more important and eternal institutions.

"These seminars, though permanent within the faculty, involve no reorganization of the faculty itself or of the departments. It is only projected that certain members in the departments will devote part of their energies to the seminars because they are already interested in those institutions.

"It is assumed that these seminars would be self-governing and call for no elaborate overhead administration.

(check)

"It is assumed that in the long run the personnel within the departments might be strengthened with a view to strengthening one or another seminar.

(hmm)

"It is assumed that a seminar would have a historical perspective without losing a current concern for current issues in human life.

(check)

...

"It is assumed that the seminars would develop their own traditions and character and their individual reputations in the world and have their own regular publications.

(check: University Seminars provided subventions for eleven very different books last academic year, each having emerged from a Seminar's discussions)

"It is assumed also that such a harnessing of the energies of some members of the staff within the University would stimulate intellectual cooperation within the faculty, influence the teaching, vitalize the student's interest in his graduate work, attract students from outside of the University and from other parts of the world, who would become votaries of one or other of these institutions, and would lead both by writing and through the training of personnel *to a more direct participation of the University in resolving the many issues that afflict our contemporary world.*

(Check!)

"This letter was circulated among the members of the University family by George B. Pegram, Dean of the Graduate Faculties. The proposal was widely discussed and, in the end, formally approved at a meeting presided over by Professor Austin P. Evans. In 1945, the movement was set in motion with the establishment of five University Seminars."

Three of the ninety current University Seminars were among those first five, formed seventy years ago this month, in the midst of World War II: *The Renaissance*, *Studies in Religion*, and *The Problem of Peace*.

In his column in the *New York Times* on February 15, 2014 Nicholas Kristof wrote: "The most stinging dismissal of a point is to say 'That's academic.' In other words, to be a scholar is, often, to be irrelevant."

Sixty years earlier Frank Tannenbaum had already foreseen and parried this criticism. Concluding his *Political Science Quarterly* article he wrote

"...[The Seminars] gather under the same roof scholars from other institutions, and many men [sic] from the active world ... because of that [the Seminars] have *some bit of wisdom and use* to add to practical people who spend their lives in mending the structure of any living institution."

So tonight, let us celebrate that "bit of use and wisdom" that keeps the Seminars alive and important to Columbia and the world.