

University for Man is a 7-year-old free university program in Manhattan, Kansas, offering approximately 200 classes each semester. UFM is a community-wide experiment in leisure-time "therapy" involving more than 7,000 participants a year, 50 per cent of whom are non-university students.

## education as community activity: university for man

by Joseph K. Rippetoe and Sue C. Maes



Mr. Rippetoe joined the staff of University for Man in 1973 after completing a master's degree in sociology at Kansas State University. During 1973-74 his major responsibility at UFM was as project director of a grant from the Kansas Committee for the Humanities for the public program "Preserving a Sense of Community." Besides working in community education, his major sociological interests include social movements and the history of social thought. He teaches an occasional course on social movements at Kansas State University and is a frequent book review contributor to the *Sunday Manhattan Mercury*. Recently awarded a scholarship, he was on leave the summer of 1974 to pursue advanced studies at the University of Oxford.

Ms. Maes, an instructor for the Division of Continuing Education at Kansas State University, has been the Director of University for Man since 1969. Holding a master's degree in family and child development from Kansas State University, she is also employed by the Kansas Headstart Training Office in their Child Development Associate Project. In addition, she is trustee for the Manhattan (Kansas) Halfway House for Prison Parolees, consultant to the St. Mary Indian Center, and serves on the board of directors for the Teen Outreach Center and the Adult Learning Center, both of Manhattan.

Free universities are among the least understood educational phenomena today. This is partly because they are few in number, but perhaps more because they have made few attempts at a widespread dissemination of information—neither throughout the educational community nor to a more general nationwide audience. Unfortunately, some people misconstrue the "free" characteristic to mean "license," or else take it to mean the absence of **any** cost to participants. Others stereotype free universities as radical or even subversive organizations. This article attempts to demythologize free universities in general by examining—as a case study—the progress and future potential of one such educational agency in particular.

A free university might be defined as "a community learning center that connects people who want to teach or learn with the resources to meet their needs."<sup>1</sup> According to Lichtman,<sup>2</sup> such centers may be distinguished in terms of their financial support as either dependent or independent agencies. Dependent agencies are those affiliated with and subsidized by accredited institutions. Independent free universities, on the other hand, subsist through other sources, usually modest tuition charges. Lichtman also notes that the "free" aspect of free universities does not necessarily refer to monetary cost, but, instead, to the educational process itself: "Students are free to participate and to drop out. . . . Instructors too are freed from content, space, and institutional sanctions to experiment."<sup>3</sup> Free universities of both types may be considered alternatives to the bureaucratization and limited scope of contemporary higher education.

The radical criticism of American education in the 1960s and early 1970s provided inspiration—though not necessarily direction—for the free university movement. From grade school to graduate school, everything from curricula to pedagogical methods fell under attack. As a result, many Americans have become somewhat more sensitive to the numerous contradictions inherent in their public school systems.<sup>4</sup> Much of the criticism, however, has concentrated primarily on shortcomings of American education rather than presenting specific proposals for structural change and/or alternative approaches. Holt<sup>5</sup> and Kohl,<sup>6</sup> for example, focused mainly on the successes and failures of **individual** teachers and their students. But, save for Illich,<sup>7</sup> there has been little talk of any **systemic** overhaul. Moreover, even such an outspoken critic of public schools as Kozol has noted several shortcomings of their present major alternative—free schools.<sup>8</sup> What has seemed to be the underlying problem with American education? Briefly, Friedenberg<sup>9</sup> argued that

schools shouldn't be places where society sends people who don't **want** to be there. Following this thesis, the thrust of the free university movement involves the creation of educational agencies where people participate solely because they want to. At present, its primary focus continues to be at the post-secondary level.

### An Overview of University for Man

University for Man (UFM) is a free university serving Manhattan, Kansas, a community of approximately 47,000, including college students.\* In seven years, UFM has evolved from a predominantly college student-oriented organization into an agency currently offering educational experiences to diverse clientele within the Manhattan area. This focus on the **entire** community has become evident in several ways. First, according to the most recent enrollment survey, approximately 50% of the program's participants are other than college students. A second measure—highly encouraging—concerns UFM's sources of financial support. Although the Student Governing Association of Kansas State University (KSU) continues to allocate the major portion of operating funds, 1973-1974 marked the first year partial support was received from a local community organization—the Manhattan chapter of the United Way. In addition, UFM recently received its first non-local funds, a project grant awarded by the Kansas Committee for the Humanities (KCH).\*\*

Since 1969, UFM has been under the direction of Sue C. Maes, who coordinates the efforts of six additional staff persons plus several volunteers. Though the staff is small, around 200 free classes are offered every fall, spring, and summer; thus the major input into this programming comes

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\*In the fall of 1966, a KSU instructor gathered together some friends to create musical, art, and drama happenings each week. That same semester another group was meeting regularly in a student's home to discuss man in the year 2000. These two groups became aware not only of each other, but also of several free universities being organized in California. Nurturing the idea of a similar educational agency, they approached the student government for funds. Money was allocated for a small brochure featuring seven courses—and UFM was created.

Though the mechanics of creating a free university lie outside the scope of this article, the interested reader might consult Jane Lichtman, *Bring Your Own Bag: A Report on Free Universities* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1973), pp. 100-124, and Larry Magid and Nesta King, *Mini-Manual for Free Universities* (Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508).

\*\*The KCH is an independent group of citizens working in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), a federal agency created by Congress in 1965 and supported by public appropriations and private contributions. The Kansas Committee receives its funds from the NEH and regrants them to support humanities programs throughout the state. The UFM projects grew out of the Committee's theme for 1973-1974, "Kansas in Transition: Human Dimensions of Community Development." The program in Manhattan, *Preserving a Sense of Community*, brought a humanistic perspective to bear on public policy issues of concern to Kansans. Similar programs were created in Clay Center and Abilene, two Kansas communities of less than 10,000 population.

from volunteer class leaders. These leaders range in background from university professors holding doctoral degrees to various other citizens of the larger Manhattan area who possess certain knowledge and/or skills. By coordinating an educational program which relies on volunteer instructors and schedules events in available free space—e.g., homes, churches, schools, parks—UFM is able to provide a wide-ranging system of educational experiences responsive to the desires of the community at a minimal cost. The only direct cost to participants is an occasional small materials fee in certain classes, usually craft activities.\*\*\* No fees are assessed for conventional administrative, secretarial, custodial, and teaching services. During 1973 more than 7,000 persons participated in approximately 500 events covering broad realms of human interest, concern, and activity. (For examples, see the boxed sampling of course offerings.)

These activities differ in several fundamental respects from those offered through traditional educational institutions. Since UFM charges no tuition, gives no grades, and offers no academic credit, the curriculum must reflect what people **want** to learn. In the absence of external incentives such as grades and credits, people generate their own internal motivations to learn; there is no other reason for them to participate. Accordingly, UFM rejects the prevailing concept of education as a process which necessarily ends when the individual completes formal schooling. With no distinctions based on age, test scores, degrees, or other arbitrary criteria, everyone can add to his or her individual store of knowledge or skill regardless of differential prior experience.

### On a Curriculum and Its Rationale

The curriculum at UFM is one of diversity: crafts, sports, and interpersonal groups are integral parts of the program. While most events involve practical application, UFM, to meet its societal responsibilities, offers also a number of classes concerned with "public issues." Of course, UFM as an organization maintains—rather than an **explicit** political\*\*\*\* posture—only an **implicit** social bias. By their very nature, educational agencies of any sort can never be value-neutral, albeit such an admission is quite uncommon among the exponents of conventional institutions. Typically, administrators of such institutions define research and teaching within the context of the status quo as value-neutral. Alternative institutions, on the other hand, generally interpret tacit acceptance of the status quo as indeed being a quite partisan position.

Several class titles from the UFM catalogue might illustrate its social bias: for example, "consumer education," "counter-corporate farming," "women's consciousness-raising," and "environmental ethics." When UFM was created, classes such as these constituted more than half of the curriculum. Since the community served has, for the most part, evolved through

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\*\*\*One popular location for some craft and other classes is the UFM house itself. A rather large house near the KSU campus is not only the home of a potter's wheel, wood lathe and the office, but also of five staff persons.

\*\*\*\*The term "political" is used here strictly in an "issue-oriented," rather than electoral sense.

that phase of educational need, public issues classes are no longer in the majority. UFM's present curriculum reflects a diverse community's shifts of interest; a rather eclectic means of support demands that it do so.

UFM is primarily a dependent agency. Though tuition fees are strongly opposed by most of the staff—and have so far been avoided—alternative methods of increasing independence are actively being pursued. The Manhattan chapter of the United Way recently responded to these efforts by contributing funds for planned expansion in the area of community services. Such services include, for example, free training in secretarial techniques for low-income and minority persons. UFM has also been instrumental in the establishment of a drug education center, a telephone crisis intervention center, a community food cooperative, and a parole and probation volunteer assistance program.

Why has the staff rejected modest tuition or other fees to support classes and services? The reason, which is essentially philosophical, is also rather lengthy. In **theory**, if the programs offered are consistent with real community needs, participants, if able, would gladly pay a small fee. Indeed, this system is the case at a number of free universities.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> In practice, however, there exist no methods for predicting these needs **a priori**, save those of "trial and error" and apocalyptic insights. Experience has shown that some UFM classes will develop a continuing popularity (for example, the "doctors series," in which local physicians discuss medical

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<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>Boulder (Colorado) Free School and Denver Free University are two excellent examples of stable and growing community education programs which are operated totally from small tuition fees.



topics of concern to the general public). Others in a given semester will fold after one or two meetings. But which others—and why—has not proven predictable.

The forecasting of community needs must be undertaken independently of financial constraints. If not, the agency becomes locked into the position of stressing that which generates considerable revenue and devoting little time and energy to that which does not. The staff consensus is that supporting the program through tuition fees would intolerably constrain the freedom of experimentation which has characterized UFM since its beginnings. During its infancy in 1968, UFM could hardly have offered seminars, say, criticizing the IndoChina War had people had to pay for them, since local public sentiment at that time tended to support or be indifferent to the war. In short, both the willingness to provide the publicly unpopular and the freedom to fail are integral parts of the UFM philosophy.

Not only does the staff express concern for the agency's freedom to experiment, but a similar freedom is currently afforded the program's participants. Since many people are unsure of what they want, the decision to operate without tuition thus becomes a financial factor encouraging participants to experiment. In this sense, UFM might be considered a paraprofessional community mental health program. A leisure-time "therapy" is offered which many conventional educational institutions seem unable to provide.\*\*\*\*\*

UFM enjoys the status of a non-profit corporation. As it is not in operation to make money, seldom are programs terminated solely because of small enrollments. Recently the Kansas Board of Regents cut back or abandoned a host of graduate-level programs which failed to produce an arbitrary number of trained graduates in those fields. This kind of action, ostensibly justifiable from the Regents' perspective, is fundamentally inconsistent with the philosophy of alternative institutions. Briefly, the UFM staff holds that individual, community, and societal needs **change** more rapidly than those responsible for such decisions seem to acknowledge. In contrast to more conventional educational

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\*\*\*\*\*A serious question may be raised as to whether such an individually therapeutic focus is indeed most appropriate. Emphasis on providing instruction in individual craft-type activities, while quite valid in itself, may indirectly contribute to a breakdown in community cohesiveness. Philip Slater's critique of the "American Character" (*The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, 1970) begs consideration of the question: to what extent should a free university encourage the pursuit of activities which deny or discourage human interdependence? Within the Manhattan, Kansas, community, for example, human resources are available to teach almost anyone how to make or do almost anything. Should UFM emphasize individualism? Or should the focus be more toward cooperative activities, such as volunteer service programs, community free schools, food co-ops, dramatic groups and the like? At present, the issue of individual versus community-focused activities lacks a meaningful staff consensus. A rather precarious balance between these two aspects of the program is maintained. The issue, however, is by no means peculiar to UFM, but indeed one which seems to pervade the entire free university movement.

systems, UFM is willing to undertake any class for which a capable leader will invest his or her time and energy to develop. Since many classes which have failed one semester have been successful during others, failure may not be the result of obsolescence but, instead, simply the consequence of faulty planning, mediocre leadership, etc. The free university style, then, is usually not to abandon a class, but rather to change leaders, format, or whatever is necessary to make it viable.

Despite its need to follow a more conventional educational format, Kansas State University is currently a staunch supporter of UFM, financially and otherwise. This relationship is essentially symbiotic: while UFM depends partly on KSU for funds, the state institution has gained much from the free university's success. For example, UFM **initially** proposed and organized "intersession" (a system of short courses between regular semesters), currently offered at KSU in both January and May. Also, the state university cites its sponsorship of the free university as a major effort in educational innovation, thereby mitigating pressures to reform its own structure. Finally, while defective projects become strictly UFM's problem, success is typically shared with the sponsoring institution. Not only does KSU occupy a

#### A SELECTED SAMPLE OF UFM CLASSES — 1974

Advanced Photography  
Alternative Living Styles  
A Study of Ethics  
Beginning Woodworking  
Birds of the Flint Hills  
Counter-Corporate Farming  
Doctors Series  
Drugs: History, Facts, and Fiction  
Edible Native Kansas Plants  
Fiddlin' with Fiddles  
Gay Consciousness  
Horseshoeing and Hoof Care  
Introduction to Harp  
Japanese Cooking  
Laughing: A Short Course  
Liberation Theology  
Life Planning Workshop  
Making Your Own Stringed Instrument  
Manhattan Food Co-op  
Men's Awareness Group  
Methane Generators  
Native American Music  
Our Bodies, Our Selves  
People's Bicentennial Committee  
Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga  
Rug Braiding  
Secretarial Techniques  
Sexual Health Care  
Southern Africa—Colonialism & Revolution  
Women's Consciousness Raising

position from which to claim credit but, as was the case with intercession, prosperous programs can be co-opted into the formal institution's curriculum. Though considerations such as these naturally contribute to a wistful UFM desire for greater independence, the UFM staff is nevertheless quite encouraged that the University has seen considerable merit in the alternative institution's program.

### Conclusion

In October, 1973, UFM hosted a national conference for free universities, designed primarily for the well-established



ones. The purpose was twofold: to analyze the current direction of the free university movement, and to exchange insights concerning the countless practical problems quite common to such agencies.\*\*\*\*\* During the conference it became clear that UFM faced a problem as yet unknown to most other free universities—the feasibility of expansion. Numerically, UFM has stabilized its class offerings—around 200 classes seems to be all which can reasonably be provided free of excessive bureaucratization, computerization, and/or increased costs. Yet the agency's program is by no means locally-bound.

It has long tried to provide various events for nearby communities and neighboring Fort Riley, a major permanent military installation 15 miles west of Manhattan. Last fall, for example, a sample of the program was transported to Chapman, Kansas, a small farming community about 35 miles west of Manhattan. The response to the modest offering of three classes was highly favorable. Providing experienced and competent class leaders for Chapman demonstrated to the folks out there how an alternative educational agency might work in their own community. A slightly different approach was established for Clay Center and Abilene, two communities where UFM created public forum series funded by the KCH grant in the spring of 1974. As communities begin to discover their own resources, they can begin to develop programs under their own local direction.

Unfortunately, limited resources preclude an extensive amount of this type of expansion. At present, neither the funds nor the personnel are available to expand the program to other corners of the state. Having received a number of requests from various Kansas communities to help create UFM-type programs, UFM is currently seeking a federal grant to begin such work.

UFM has an advantage over most other Kansas communities in that numerous KSU faculty members have given freely of their time to lead a variety of UFM classes. Communities with smaller institutions—or none—may be somewhat handicapped in this respect. Yet the availability of professional scholars is not crucial; every human community possesses an enormous store of knowledge and skill. Its citizens need only take time to discover their talented members and encourage them to assume a new role: **facilitator** of a learning experience.

While conventional educational programs assume that one person knows the "answers" and somewhere between 6 and 600 people do not, free universities do not accept such a distinction. Eliot Wigginton, a high school teacher in the Southern Appalachians, who recently edited a collection of articles intended to preserve and transmit a dying Appalachian culture, has warmly articulated the principle that everyone has something to contribute: "This book is dedicated to the people of these mountains in the hope that, through it, some

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\*\*\*\*\*Summary and highlights of these proceedings are being made available through *The New Schools Exchange Newsletter* and *Edcentric* magazine. Both of these publications are not only ones which every library should handle, but journals which anyone interested in alternative education should seriously consider.



portion of their wisdom, ingenuity and individuality will remain long after them to touch us all."<sup>10</sup>

At UFM, the guiding principle is that everyone teaches and everyone learns:

All who participate in UFM, whether "teacher" or "student," are learners. One of the best ways to learn more about something is to try to teach it to another.

Participants in UFM come from diverse backgrounds, have varied occupations, and live different lifestyles. Faculty wives, policemen, college students, grandmothers, M.D.s, "street people," professors, and high school students are likely to be enrolled in any UFM course."

The goal of free universities in general and UFM in particular is not only to provide diverse systems of educational experiences. Equally important, at least from a humanistic perspective, is to facilitate greater acceptance and understanding among people of different backgrounds and lifestyles. As free universities such as UFM make room for persons of different ages, backgrounds and beliefs, education can truly become community activity.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Jane Lichtman, *Bring Your Own Bag: A Report on Free Universities* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1973), p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4. See, for example, Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *Coming of Age in America* (New York: Random House, 1963); John Holt, *The Underachieving School* (New York: Pitman, 1969); and Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967).

5. John Holt, *How Children Fail* (New York: Pitman, 1964) and John Holt, *How Children Learn* (New York: Pitman, 1967).

6. Herbert Kohl, *36 Children* (New York: New American Library, 1967).

7. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

8. Jonathan Kozol, "Free Schools Fail Because They Don't TEACH," *Psychology Today* (April 1972), pp. 30, 32, 34, 36, and 114.

9. Friedenberg, *op. cit.*

10. Eliot Wigginton, *The Foxfire Book* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972).

11. "What We Do," University for Man brochure (fall 1973), p. 3.

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If the school reform movement has learned anything over the past two decades, it is that within any given school population there is enough diversity in learning styles to make diversity in learning programs a necessity. Thus, any school proposal—fabulous or otherwise—that does not offer alternatives is manifestly deficient.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner  
**The School Book, For People Who Want To Know What  
All The Hollering Is About**  
New York: Delacorte Press, 1973, p. 51