

The Problem of Impersonality and Size

*An address given by Dean E. McHenry,
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In the early stages of our planning for this occasion, Dr. Frost and I phrased the topic "Must Bigness Mean Impersonality?" If it had remained so, my task might have been simpler, for leveling one's lance against an all-bad enemy or countering a defeatist argument is less exacting than reasoning about a less loaded topic. Although I should have answered the bigness question with a thunderous "No," it certainly would not have been the whole answer.

It would be absurd to suggest that because an institution is big it must inevitably strike all its members as impersonal: to suggest, for example, that on the large campuses of this nation—in Urbana, or Madison, or Berkeley—all students feel cut off, alienated, unwanted or dehumanized. This is clearly not the case: to suggest that one never sees a happy face on a large campus is plain nonsense.

The argument can be made in another way. If the statement that bigness must mean impersonality were true, it would suggest that the converse were true also—that smallness must always mean intimacy and a feeling of being wanted. Yet we know that this is not the case. Indifference *can* exist in a family of two, let alone in a college of two hundred. Many of us know small institutions that generate no particular warmth.

Or a third line of argument suggests itself. I recently came across the report of a study group in which several different people testified to the alarm that rapidly expanding numbers had caused at their institutions—yet one was concerned about growing from one thousand to three, another from three to five, another from five to ten: the numbers involved were very different, but the alarm at the "impersonality" that seemed to be creeping in was exactly the same.