

## A Faculty Member's Response to Focus '69

Focus '69 was a real catastrophe in one sense. That is, there were so few people who came to hear what was said so meaningfully by our guests. The topic, "Focus on Social Morality," provided an opportunity for national speakers, clearly concerned with social morality, to proselyte, to challenge and to further motivate our students. However, the attendance was abysmally low. One finds more students every Friday waiting in line to cash checks in the Student Center than one found at Focus '69. The reasons for this are, I think, unrelated either to the speakers who came or to the messages they had for us. Each was a very distinguished national figure. William Kunstler is the most prominent, the most able and the most fearless constitutional lawyer in this country today. He spoke as the first in the series with what I considered to be a brilliance that seldom, if ever, has hit this campus. The others are prominent in their own right as well. John Seigenthaler, for example, editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*, is a real fighter on questions of social morality. I had the good fortune of working closely with him last spring during the California Democratic Primary, as both of us were on Senator Robert Kennedy's

staff at that time. No, it is not a question of who the speakers were or what the speakers had to say that resulted in such abysmal attendance.

In no way can such attendance be attributed to inadequate publicity or the incompetence of those who directed the program. They did an admirable job. What really accounts for the lack of interest shown by our students in a forum on social morality is much deeper than that. There is underway among all young Americans, and especially young Americans on the college campuses, a fundamental transformation in their attitudes toward, and their behavior regarding, questions of social morality. Very simply, they do not want to fall into the trap of talking more and doing less. Debating questions of social morality was simply not as meaningful an experience as acting on questions related to social morality. I have no doubt that any event involving significant social action on a moral issue would generate ten times the number of students given the same publicity. The students want to extend themselves into the lives of others rather than talk about the need to do so.

This has some desirable as well as some undesirable consequences.

I think those of us older than the present college generation are likely to be somewhat envious of the commitment that many young people have toward others, a commitment that is relatively selfless, a commitment not especially related to their careers. In that sense, preparing for a career seems somewhat unrealistic or unimportant to many young people. That is, from my point of view, an undesirable consequence of their deep commitment. The desirable consequences, however, far outweigh, in my opinion, the undesirable ones. We should keep a very close look at what is going to be happening with young people in college communities. We should not allow the very small minority of students who are oriented toward violence in expressing their commitment to overshadow the much, much larger group of students, still not a part of the idle majority, who will find other ways to express themselves. They're going to communicate just as Focus '69 wanted them to communicate, but that communication will involve some form of action. It's our responsibility to insure that such action finds others receptive.

Gene L. Mason  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science