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IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

K. Patricia Cross

Harvard Graduate School of Education

Attention to excellence in education skyrocketed to public attention a year or so ago with with the release of the report entitled A Nation At Risk. In colorful and endlessly quotable language, it informed the public that, "Our nation is at risk.... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (p.5).

Nationwide, that report kicked off more than three hundred state task forces and blue-ribbon committees to make recommendations for the improvement of education in the fifty states. Higher education has since come forth with its own reports in pursuit of excellence, and legislators, educators, and the general public are more than busy considering and implementing suggestions for reform.

Report writing has become both an art and a passion in the 1980s, and there is the hope--in the academy itself, I think--

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that all of this emotional appeal for action will not pass into history without making some impact on education at all levels. Personally, I don't regret the attention education is getting these days. I think it has the potential for leading to vastly improved educational experiences for students. And that, we should remember, is the point of all of the hullabaloo--improved learning experiences for students.

Strangely enough, I don't think that "improved learning experiences for students" has been the focus of much of the attention in higher education. In some cases, we have the shoes on the wrong feet. Whereas we should be clamoring for better colleges for students, we seem to be demanding better students for colleges. State reforms that raise admission standards for college entrance, for example, may at their best, be calling for improved learning experiences for high school students, but they do not address--indeed they avoid-- the issue of improved education for college students. That is where I want to begin this morning.

First, we need to have some notion of what kind of education today's college students need to survive and prosper and make their contribution to the society of the 21st Century. The year 2000 is only fifteen years away. Today's entering college students will be in their mid-thirties by the turn of the Century, getting ready to assume positions of leadership. What kind of people do we want them to be? What should they know and be able to do? What values should they have? They will be determining the direction for society, and their education is

important to us, to them, to the nation, and to the world.

Futurists have not been notably successful in predicting what the world will look like even fifteen years in advance. The steeper the slope of change, the more difficult planning becomes. I don't know, for example, whether Alvin Toffler's "electronic cottage" will be a reality of the 21st Century. If so, education will be so radically changed, that I doubt we can see the total impact clearly enough to make reasonable plans. Our task is not to prepare students for life in the electronic cottage, but to prepare them to adapt to a world of change. What students know when they leave college will not be nearly as important as what they are capable of learning.

The explosion of knowledge is so great right now that scientific and technical information doubles between a student's freshman and senior year in college. Fortunately, students don't remember much of the content that we work so hard to teach them. If they did, their information about yesterday's world would make them candidates for early retirement, in favor of new college graduates who had more accurate and up-to-date information. While information will inevitably become outdated and irrelevant, we cannot afford to have people who become obsolete and irrelevant to the world in which they must live.

What we really want students graduating from college to know is how to learn new content as it is revealed through the constant expansion of knowledge, ~~about our universe~~. It has been said that education is what remains after content has been forgotten. One way to approach planning for the future of higher

education is to ask, what do we hope remains after content has been forgotten?

If we phrase the question that way, it casts a new light on what we mean when we speak of excellence in education. Does educational excellence mean high scores on achievement tests that measure mastery of subject matter content? ~~Perhaps,~~ Yes in part. Given the assumption that students need always to stand on the shoulders of generations that preceeded them, we want students to know what we know so that they don't perpetually reinvent the wheel. But education is far more than the transmission of knowledge. Indeed, were we to content ourselves with the transmission of knowledge, we would be moving backward, with each new generation learning only part of what we know. The task of education is to enable students to move beyond what we, as teachers, know about the universe. Our worth as educators is measured, only in part, by how well we teach subject matter.

Those of you who have studied the history of student personnel administration will recall the phrase "deeper teaching," which was the title of a book used in graduate programs in student personnel in the 1950s to suggest that counselors and advisers were really nonclassroom teachers engaged in teaching meanings, values, and attitudes that had a lasting impact on the way students lived their lives. That task is known as "student development" today, and there is increasing research evidence that student attitudes and values are probably caught, rather than taught. ~~Especially important today is how students think about learning.~~ From the environment one values we hope they will catch is an enthusiasm for learning. If ~~they~~ graduate from

thinking they have completed a task

college with a sigh of relief, ~~saying "There that's done,"~~ then we have failed to educate them. Mortimer Adler (1982, p.11) puts it this way, "Schooling, basic or advanced, that does not prepare the individual for further learning has failed, no matter what else it succeeds in doing."

Increasingly employers are asking for people who can invent new products or procedures, who can interpret trends and analyze problems. Peters and Waterman, the authors of In Search of Excellence call it "productivity through people." In the Industrial Revolution, productivity was achieved through putting money into more efficient machinery and plant expansion. The idea was to produce more at less cost. In the post-industrial society, productivity comes from knowledge and people who know how to generate it and use it. A good idea can be worth millions today--so much that Rosabeth Kanter (1983, p.18) says "Idea power is the most important economic stimulus of all."

No wonder that employers, states, and the nation are so interested in an educational system that will result in people who have "idea power." Ideas are far more important to our world than information which has become both plentiful and cheap. "Running out of [information] is not a problem," says John Naisbitt, "but drowning in it is" (1982, p.24).

The change from valuing information to valuing ideas seems to me to have been extraordinarily rapid. When I was in graduate school, the library search for relevant information constituted the challenge of term papers. The challenge is quite different for my graduate students today. They are inundated with

relevant information. Both the quantity of publication and the ease of retrieval have put more background at their disposal than they know how to use. Their challenge is not to locate relevant information but to put it together to create new perspectives and new ideas. The well-stuffed mind is a poor measure of education; it has ~~simply~~ now been outclassed by the computer.

The abilities that become valuable in our kind of world are the skills of synthesis and application. Those of you familiar with Ben Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills will recall that synthesis and application are more advanced cognitive skills than recall and comprehension. The age of computers and telecommunications calls for higher levels of cognitive development, and institutions of education are going to have to find ways to rise to the new demands.

The demand for higher levels of cognitive development has an analogy in today's perception of physical fitness as a developmental process. Before machines replaced human muscle power, there was little need for physical fitness programs. People got more than enough exercise on the job. But the purpose of the exercise was to get the work done, not to develop the body or to keep it physically fit. When machinery replaced muscles on the job, people moved to higher levels of physical development. They became free to be more like humans and less like machines. Instead of the over-developed forearms, for example, of yesterday's steel workers, today's more sedentary workers are likely to exhibit more balanced physical development by engaging in a program of exercise that promotes their human health and

well being.

Perhaps the age of the computer will have a similar impact on cognitive development. Instead of performing the low-level cognitive skills of memory and recall, which are handled better by a computer, human beings are now free to concentrate on higher level development that includes analysis, synthesis, and application.

Following this line of reasoning, I asked myself how educators might go about developing a program of "learning fitness" comparable to the physical fitness movement that has so captured public fancy as the Industrial Revolution plays itself out.

Unfortunately, we cannot give students a good education any more than we can give people physical fitness. Both must be developed over a period of time by the individual. There are some interesting analogies between physical fitness and learning fitness:

1. The dissemination of research on physical fitness has been helpful, and the general public proved fairly easy to reach and to teach. Smoking has declined, jogging has increased, knowledge about the cardiovascular system has spread, and many people know the difference between exercising to develop muscle strength and exercising to develop heart and lung capacity. If learning fitness came to be perceived as important as physical fitness, would not people be eager for more knowledge about how to attain it?

2. Fitness is developmental. It is clearly understood that

no one--not Nautilus, not Adidas, not Jane Fonda, and not the national and local park and recreation system--can give people physical fitness. People understand that it takes time and requires their own personal investment. Experts can diagnose, prescribe, and offer feedback, but in the final analysis, fitness is something people must attain for themselves. The best we can do is provide the environment, the equipment, and the support system to enable people to develop themselves.--and much of that is the special province of student personnel admn.

3. We cannot modify the rules of physical fitness to take account of the life circumstances of the aspirant. We can't, for example, suggest that adults invest less time in the process because they have job and family responsibilities--although we can certainly make jogging tracks available, put exercise rooms and swimming pools in hotels, make the hours of Nautilus consistent with adult schedules, deliver inspiration, information, and yes, even images of fellow fitness buffs dancing to the beat of aerobic music on television.

4. We can't make everyone equal in physical fitness. Everyone can improve, and everyone can do something--even if from a wheelchair or in homes for the elderly. But the challenge must be consistent with the ability and condition of the learner. Today's concept of physical fitness is basically non-competitive. Sure, there are a few super stars who win the Boston Marathon, but for most people the companionship of running together and the feeling that they are doing something good for themselves is enough.

5. Fitness must have some payoff; it has to work. People

need the reinforcing feedback of feeling better, looking better, and in general taking pride in their accomplishment. One of the interesting things about physical fitness is that people are willing to wait for long-term results. Joggers do have to see improvement, but it does not need to be today or tomorrow. Indeed, the current advice seems to be that intermittent exercise is better than constant pushing because muscles need time to recover and time to grow and develop.

6. Fitness is never finished. We cannot participate in a rigorous well-balanced program as young people and hope to remain fit for the rest of our lives. We will all slip out of shape from time to time, but we should learn what being in shape feels like and we should know how to get in shape.

7. Fitness is for amateurs. There is no mystique about it, and experts do not intimidate. Although body builders and marathon athletes may know everything there is to know and do everything there is to do in developing their own expertise, they do not deter the rest of us from knowing what works for us.

8. Fitness does not require large expenditures of money. Wearing the right shoes will surely help, but stylish jogging outfits and fancy equipment are incidental, and lack of funds is rarely heard as an excuse for doing nothing.

9. Fitness is active. No one ever became fit by watching someone else or listening to descriptions of fitness. People who are models of fitness can inspire; experts can demonstrate exercises and skills; and reading assignments can inform and develop appreciations; but in the final analysis, the only way to

develop fitness is to engage actively in the activities that are known or thought to lead to that goal.

If the goal of a good college is to help students become "fit" for a lifetime of active learning, what do we know from research and experience about the processes of teaching and learning and how to improve them?

One of the better applications of research knowledge on teaching and learning in higher education is found in the recent NIE Report on educational reform entitled, Involvement in Learning (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984). The committee of educational researchers who wrote the report conclude that "The quality of undergraduate education could be significantly improved if American colleges and universities would apply existing knowledge about three critical conditions of excellence--(1) student involvement, (2) high expectations, and (3) assessment and feedback"(p.17).

They define student involvement as the amount of "time, energy and effort students devote to the learning process" (p.17). It doesn't take research to convince any educator that involvement in learning is critical; our own learning experiences and those of our students offer ample testimony. But the two fundamental principles derived from research by the authors of the NIE Report bear highlighting:

1. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program, and,

2. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of the policy or practice to improve student involvement in learning (Study Group, 1984, p.19).

Those two principles reflect some twenty years of research on college students, much of it distilled in Sandy Astin's (1985) new book, Achieving Educational Excellence. His contention, adopted by the NIE panel, is that students who are involved in almost anything on the campus, are more likely to learn and less likely to drop out than students who remain on the periphery. Students who live on campus are significantly more likely to graduate than commuters. This positive effect occurs in all types of institutions and among all types of students regardless of race, gender, ability, or family background. Holding a part-time job on campus, participating in athletics, ROTC, student government, ~~fraternities and sororities~~, honors programs and almost anything else that brings the student into closer contact with faculty and fellow students seems to result in a closer identification with the college with the attendant positive effects on student retention.

The research by this time is persuasive, and it helps that we knew it all along from our own observations and experiences. Engaging the minds and energies of students in the learning process is the goal of a good education, and it must be pervasive in the environment. Creating the environment for learning is everyone's responsibility, but student personnel administrators have a special interest and expertise in learning environments.

The problem for community colleges is that they were designed to serve a commuting population with understandably loose ties to the institution. How does a community college get involvement from a basically part-time, commuting student body with jobs, families, friends, and other local distractions? ~~Getting commuters involved in college is far more difficult than getting the involvement of 18-24 year olds who live in the college dorm and whose major occupation as well as preoccupation is with college~~.

Involving a basically commuter population in serious education is not, ~~however~~, by the way, a task unique to community colleges. Commuting students have become the norm for higher education; 80 percent of all college students are commuters. Indeed, a little-known fact is that two-thirds of all full-time students at four-year public colleges and universities are commuters. ~~Getting commuters involved~~ Involving commuters in their own education is a common problem for college educators, whatever they do and wherever they work.

The new literature offers a number of suggestions for getting the involvement of commuting students. These are well-summarized in a chapter (see Stewart, Merrill, Saluri, in press) in a book edited by Lee Noel & colleagues entitled, Increasing Student Retention to be released this winter by Jossey- Bass. The suggestions given there represent the practical implementation of the importance of "involvement" that is dominating the research of Astin (1985) and others on student learning and student development.

Basically, the recommendations, largely derived from

experience, boil down to helping students make connections with the people, activities, and ideas of the college and its educational programs. In some cases, the connections ~~are~~ might be assigned, as in the assignment of faculty or student mentors and advisers. In other cases, it is a matter of providing services that are so essential ~~that they permit students to participate because of flexible scheduling, child care, or low cost, or they are~~ so convenient and easy to use that students become involved in creating communities of people with similiar interests.

Commuters, like all other students, enter an environment which is established and maintained by administrators, faculty, and staff. Student personnel administrators are key actors in establishing the environment for learning.

Aubrey Forrest (in Noel and Associates, in press) offers some new research evidence that suggests that the more concerned we as educators are about what students are getting out of college, the more serious students are. His research showed that students are less likely to drop out; they learn more, and they are better satisfied as alumni if the college has made an effort to ~~provide comprehensive orientation~~ orient students to college and also has ~~attempted to~~ individualized instruction to fit the background and capabilities of the student.

The study is interesting because it looks at the impact of college across ~~the~~ a broad range of learning competencies, including the clarification of values, appreciation of the arts, and functioning ~~within social institutions~~ social, as well as improving communications skills, solving problems, and using science and

technology.

One of the variables that differentiated high-impact colleges from low was the amount of time and attention given to orientation and student advising. A comprehensive program of orientation and advising was defined by the researchers as more than one day of orientation and the assignment of advising as a distinct function to people who want to do it and are compensated for it. I would interpret these practices as sending a strong message to students that faculty and administrative staff in these high impact colleges are taking education seriously. They go to considerable effort to prepare students to get maximum benefits from the programs offered at the college, in the classroom and out. It is a simple message really. Educators who take education seriously are likely to have students who take education seriously.

Community colleges have been accused of not taking education seriously. Critics claim that too much attention is given to explanations of why it is difficult to involve community college students in learning and not enough to establishing a climate of high expectations with sustained demands for excellence in performance.

In some ways, it seems unfair to me for society to forever be tossing the really difficult educational jobs at community colleges and then criticizing them because they fail to solve some of society's ~~most~~ toughest problems. After all, they are problems precisely because no one else has yet solved them.

At other times, however, I look at community colleges and I

conclude that your colleges are where the action is. You work in colleges where education can make the greatest difference, where lives can be changed, and where the real challenge of education lies. You work on the frontier; everything that happens in higher education seems to hit the community colleges first. Virtually all of the trends of the last twenty years, desirable as well as undesirable, have bloomed most fully in the community colleges. Listen to these "trends", for example.

TREND-Student populations new to higher education in the past two decades are currently over-represented ~~in the community colleges~~ -- women, ethnic minorities, adults, students from the lower socioeconomic levels, and part-time students.

TREND-The proportion of students studying part-time in higher education has increased 65 percent over the past fifteen years, but in the community colleges, part-time enrollments have grown by more than 100 percent.

TREND-Nationwide, the college student population is getting older. In 1970, only 28 percent of all college students studying for credit were 25 or older; today 40 percent are 25 or older, but ~~the~~ community colleges lead the trend.

Trend-Students at most colleges are becoming more career oriented. For several decades now, college enrollments have been moving away from the liberal arts toward career and professional education. This trend is epitomized in community colleges where the shift has moved from one-third enrolled in career programs in the 1960s to two-thirds today.

Trend-Many types of colleges are beginning to form partnerships

with high schools on the one hand and industry on the other. But nowhere is the trend more prevalent than in the nation's community colleges.

Trend Although universities are now exploring the instructional power of the computer, community colleges are clearly ahead in the uses of technology to deliver education and guidance. Many community colleges are using sophisticated and innovative systems of computerized guidance to monitor student progress and aid in retention.

You name it, and faculty and administrators in community colleges know more about most recent trends in higher education than educators in any other segment of higher education. Community colleges can quite legitimately lay claim to living on the cutting edge of change in higher education. No one said that life on the frontier was easy; at no time in history has life ever been easy for those tackling new problems or blazing new trails.

The fact is that there are no clear solutions for the social problems that our society is trying to solve through education. Every attempted solution seems to reveal some unanticipated problem. For every virtue, there is seemingly an equal and opposite problem lurking in the wings.

-Open admissions offers educational opportunity to segments of the population that have been denied a chance at college in the past OR it serves as a dumping ground for those who have little interest in learning and who simply take advantage of the opportunities made available to them.

-The comprehensiveness of the community college mission offers maximum choice for everyone OR it spreads resources too thin creating watered-down education and wasteful duplication.

-Commuter locations and the opportunity for part-time study offer easy accessibility and convenience OR they result in loss of college community with little involvement in the college or the education offered.

-The community college's responsiveness to consumer demand offers an innovative, student-centered curriculum OR it results in knee-jerk acceptance of every passing fad.

-Part-time faculties offer efficient flexibility wherein programs can shrink or expand upon demand OR the practice exploits part-time teachers and results in little commitment and minimal faculty leadership.

-The community college emphasis on teaching offers caring, skilled instruction OR it serves as an excuse for lack of continuing study and scholarship in one's subject matter discipline.

As a society, we devise a solution to one problem and in our enthusiasm, we inevitably tip the delicate balance, swinging the pendulum into the creation of new problems to be solved.

At the moment, society in general, and educators in particular, are working on solving the problem that I call "taking education seriously." If students are to take education seriously, then educators must take it seriously, looking closely at what colleges can do to increase learning. That is basically what the educational reform movement of the 1980s is all about.

If we are to develop programs of "learning fitness" that will

serve students now and into the 21st Century, we are going to have to set the stage for involving students in serious education. Administrators, teachers, and students must be united in the priorities they give and the rewards they distribute for contributing to student learning. That means that there is no sacred turf. Faculty are not solely responsible for academic learning any more than student personnel administrators are solely responsible for student development. Presidents and their administrative colleagues cannot distance themselves from the academic programs of the college any more than faculty can absolve themselves from responsibility for the reputation of the institution and its fiscal and academic solvency.

Education is what remains after subject matter has been forgotten. What will your students take with them from the learning experiences offered by your college, in class and out? Are you providing the foundations for a lifetime of learning that will be the essence of the educated person in the 21st Century?

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