

New Students In Postsecondary Education

by

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In the history of higher education in this country, there have been three major philosophies about who should go to college. The first was what I shall call the "born rich" or the aristocratic philosophy wherein admission to college was determined largely by family status and the ability to pay the tuition. The purpose of higher education was to prepare young people to assume a station in life that was related more to family status than it was to the particular abilities and interests of the student. The symbols of the "born rich" era of admissions education were private, high-tuition colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton; and students who were white, upper-class male. By and large, things didn't work out too badly since colleges were designed for the population they were expected to serve.

The challenge to the "born rich" aristocracy was made by advocates of the anyone-who-is-willing-and-able-to-do-college-work-merits-the-chance school of thought. Often called the meritocracy, this became the second great philosophy of admissions in higher education. Under

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this philosophy, colleges were designed to serve students of presumed academic merit. The notion that a college education was an earned right rather than a birthright brought a new perspective to college admissions. Admissions criteria changed from the ability to pay the tuition to the ability to show high aptitude for academic work. The meritocracy played down the importance of family and played up the importance of academic achievement, without fully recognizing the close relationship between the two. The symbols of the era were land-grant universities, selective admissions, talent searches, and scholarships. The hero of the day was the immigrant cobbler's son who was bright and hard working but who had no money and no social position. The rallying cry of the 1950's and early 60's was academic excellence, but since the students to be served were selected for their potential for high academic performance, the fit between colleges and students was still reasonably adequate. The narrow definition of learning in both the "born rich" aristocracy and the "bright student" meritocracy is demonstrated by the perfect logic wherein the richest students attended the most expensive, and therefore presumably the best, colleges of the aristocracy and the brightest students attended the most selective, and therefore presumably the best, colleges of the meritocracy.

In the late 1960's, we could observe the influence of both of these historical answers to the question of who should go to college. The primary determiner of who went to college was academic ability--as that ability was measured by grades and test scores. The secondary determiner was socioeconomic background. Most people--educators as well as lay people of the 1970's--are still fighting the battle that all students who prove

themselves academically able should go to college, but that battle has been largely won. Most young people who show high promise for academic work are now in college regardless of race, sex, or socioeconomic background. Although there is considerable regional variation, nationwide almost three-quarters of the students who rank in the upper half of the high school graduating classes are attending college today--even if they rank in the bottom quarter on socioeconomic measures.

The 1970's are moving us rapidly into the third great era of college admissions--egalitarianism, or postsecondary education for everyone. This school of thought maintains that everyone should have equal access to educational opportunity regardless of socioeconomic background, race, sex, or ability. The symbols of the era are community colleges, open admissions, and financial aid based on need rather than on scholarship.

In the awkward transition period of the 1960's and 70's reality has not kept pace with our ideals. The last vestiges of the "born rich" aristocracy linger in the convictions of many, if not most people that students should pay their way through college. And vestiges of the meritocracy are still quite apparent in the belief of the majority that academic excellence is the goal of higher education and that "good" students and "good" colleges are those with high academic performance scores. The equal opportunity philosophy, which we have embraced in spirit, challenges us to accept all students including those whose academic performance is inadequate, and therein lies the rub. Our colleges and our concepts are still largely designed to

serve an academic elite, but the students in today's colleges are the children of the new egalitarian age.

Even as the issue of whether we should have universal higher education continues to be debated, the practices of open admissions colleges have moved us into serving new kinds of students. They are here--the new students of the seventies. What do we know about their past learning experiences, aspirations, attitudes, and interests? What experiences can colleges offer that will lead to self-actualization and the development of human potential? Are colleges prepared to offer these students a new kind of learning experience that is sufficiently different from what they have had for the past 17 years to make freedom of access to college more than a hollow victory?

To shed some light on these questions, I conducted some research using information from four large national data banks. I vowed not to ask students to fill out more questionnaires until we had utilized the enormous amount of data that already existed on student abilities, attitudes, interests, and aspirations. Thanks to the generous cooperation of my research colleagues across the country who shared their data; and thanks also to financial support from the Center for Higher Education of the University of California, Educational Testing Service, and the College Board, the research project was launched in the spring of 1970.

Since the single most common characteristic of students who are newly entering colleges is low test scores and poor high school records of achievement, "New Students" were defined as those scoring in the lowest third of the high school senior population on tests of academic aptitude whereas "traditional" students were considered to be those in the top

third--the group that have traditionally been considered "college material." Nationwide, over half of the students graduating in the lowest third of the high school classes today are planning to continue their education beyond high school.

The four samples that constituted the base of my research were not designed to be comparable; the criterion tests were not the same; the data were collected at different periods between 1961 to 1969; but across the four studies the characteristics of the lowest-third students are remarkably similar. It is thus possible to present a composite profile of the New Students that are challenging the traditional practices of higher education.

Most New Students are caucasians whose fathers work at blue-collar jobs. A substantial number, however, are members of minority ethnic groups. The great majority of fathers have never attended college and the expectation of college is new to the family. Those who constitute the New Student pool of high school graduates have not been especially successful at their studies in high school. Whereas traditional college students (upper third) have made A's and B's in high school, New Students tended to make mostly C's. Traditional students are attracted primarily to 4-year colleges and universities, whereas New Students plan to enter public community colleges or vocational schools.

Fundamentally, these New Students to higher education are swept into college by the rising educational aspirations of the citizenry. For the majority, the motivation for college does not arise from the anticipation of the joy of learning the things they will be learning in college, but from the recognition that education is the way to a better job and a

better life than that of their parents.

The most poignant description of these New Students, perhaps, lies in their past experiences in school. Moving through the American school system is a very different experience for students who are in the bottom of the class academically than it is for those who rank in the top third. Traditionally colleges have been geared to teaching college students who have been successful in school. Research that traces the development of youngsters from seventh grade through high school graduation shows that about half of those who graduated in the bottom third of the class have been in the bottom third all the way through school, but the other half were in the middle third of the class in seventh grade. Because it is usually the least successful students that drop out of school along the way, average students and below-average students keep falling lower and lower in class standing relative to their more successful classmates. In a sense, there is always room at the bottom. When the last drops out, the next-to-last takes his place. For those in the top third of the class, the experience is quite different. It does not matter much who drops off of the lower end of the scale, the top third remains the top third throughout the school years. In other words, one of the most vivid lessons learned in school is one's relative standing in life. New Students learn gradually that they are "below average" and many learn that they are "failures."

We are just beginning to recognize the all-pervasive effects of these experiences with failure early in life. The research shows clearly the personality syndrome of individuals who are constantly in the bottom

third of the class. These students are more likely than successful students to state that they feel nervous and tense in class and that teachers "go too fast" in class. If given a list of activities with the instructions to check those on which their performance is "above-average", many New Students find no activity--in school or out--that they can say they do well. For all young people, school is their major business, and the school record is a more public rating of competence than is likely to exist at any other period of life. Half of us, after all, may in any absolute sense be "below-average" on any single dimension, but after we get out of school we have a wide range of options open to us. Some people can be good mothers, some good typists, some good researchers, some good executives, etc. Today's young person has to be a good student, as we define that ability. Is it any wonder that many young people have a sense of failure and futility about them?

John Holt (1970) a sensitive observer of children presents a colorful description of the anxiety present in most American classrooms. When he asked elementary school children how they felt when the teacher asked them a question and they didn't know the answer, one boy spoke for everyone when he said in a loud voice "Gulp!".

I asked them why they felt gulpish. They said they were afraid of failing, afraid of being kept back, afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid. Stupid. Why is it such a deadly insult to these children, almost the worst thing they can think of to call each other? Where do they learn this? (p.63).

One of the unintentional lessons learned by students who start their school careers handicapped by the lack of verbal and other

academic skills is that failure is always reaching out to envelop them. The picture is not unlike that of a strong and a weak swimmer thrown into downstream currents above a waterfall. The strong swimmer soon swims to calm waters and begins to focus attention on how fast he can swim, while the weak swimmer is dragged into such swift currents that his only concern is to keep himself from going over the waterfall. In the language of psychology, the strong swimmer becomes achievement-motivated while the weak swimmer becomes fear-threatened. Future learning is structured differently for the two swimmers.

Most New Students, after all, are pretty much like the rest of us. When faced with a task or a responsibility that we don't know how to do, we retreat if possible. New Students have devised some ingenious retreat routes. One quite useful method that has been used with considerable success by New Students to demonstrate good will and sincerity and still protect themselves against the risk of failure, is to persevere at a task that they already know how to do. All of you have observed this characteristic in New Students. Some students will take great pride, for example, in doggedly repeating a task that they have mastered. While we can rejoice with them in their accomplishment, we also need to recognize that they are not learning anything new and that this is a response that is rather cleverly designed to protect themselves against the threat of failure. If you avoid tasks that you may not be able to do, you guarantee success in all that you do--despite the fact that all that you do may be trivial and inconsequential and fail to provide even the doer with a sense of accomplishment.

A variation of this retreat-to-something-easy syndrome is illustrated by the student who deliberately sets his aspirations very low. By not trying anything very difficult, his chances of failure are nil. As the old saying goes, "You can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor." Neither, of course, can you improve your abilities and position in life.

A third possible retreat route for New Students faced with learning new things is to pretend to self and to others that the task isn't very important. New Students whose experiences in school have led them to expect failure instead of success seem to say, "If I don't try very hard, I can't fail very much." This attitude of passivity in the learning situation has been verified through research. Students who perform poorly in school are significantly more likely than their more successful peers to score high on a general passivity scale consisting of questions such as "When I don't do something easily, I usually give up" and "When I face a tough problem, I don't work on it much because I probably won't solve it." Thus, one can say "This stuff that they teach in school is impractical and won't do me any good, hence I won't put forth much effort."

A variation on the theme of passivity as a defense mechanism is illustrated by the student who says with a certain amount of defeat in his voice "I can't do that." The optimistic teacher rises to the bait and says "Of course you can", whereupon the student proceeds to fail and in so doing he proves himself right and the teacher wrong. His defeatist attitude then changes to triumph as he says "See, I told you I couldn't do it." One has to admit a certain begrudging admiration for these tactics that protect the ego against failure.

What this student is saying is "Look, even if I didn't learn what you wanted me to learn, I have at least proved that I am smarter than you are." The ultimate end of the "I told you so" syndrome is revealed in the tombstone that reads "See, I told you I was sick."

But the bag of tricks of the failure-threatened personality has still some further ploys. How is one to interpret the research data that show that substantial numbers of students with very low academic abilities say that they plan to be doctors or lawyers or engineers? These unrealistic goals actually have an element of reality to them when viewed as protective devices. A student with sixth grade reading skills is not expected to become a lawyer--by others or even by himself. Hence when he fails to realize this high aspiration, it is not viewed as failure. To be denied admission to medical school is, in one way, a greater honor than to be accepted into the elementary education curriculum of Podunk College--especially if there is a chance that you might not be accepted by Podunk, a fate that would surely prove your inadequacy.

And finally, there is, at the present time a thoroughly good escape from school failure for New Students, and it consists of getting out of the school situation. That is exactly what many able and well adjusted New Students are doing. Because junior colleges have a preponderance of New Students and because they are not rising to the challenge of providing an education that will furnish both the psychological and educational support needed for turning failure-threatened individuals into self-confident learners, junior colleges have an atrociously high attrition rate.

So what should we do? There are three schools of thought about the responsibilities of educators with regard to postsecondary education for New Students. Although there are no hard and fast lines of distinction between the three, they may be basically described as follows:

Many people reject the pressures for egalitarianism, maintaining that if a student cannot do traditional college work, he should not be in college. The solution to the New Student "problem" for this group, which includes many college and university professors, is to keep colleges pretty much as they are and to provide vocational training for lowest-third high school graduates who wish to continue their formal schooling. The problem with this solution is that one's earnings and opportunities in life are pretty much geared to educational credentials. Despite the fact that research fails to show that what is learned in college has much direct bearing on the capability to do most jobs today, it does show that because employers use degrees as selective devices, a college education is worth money in the market place.

A second viewpoint is expressed by those who maintain that everyone should have the opportunity to go to traditional colleges and universities and that postsecondary education has the obligation to help lowest-third students develop academic skills to the point where they can perform adequately in the traditional college curriculum. Fundamentally, those who are concerned with remedial education for New Students take this approach. Their solution would consist of leaving four-year colleges unchanged, while putting the two-year college between the lowest-third high school graduate and his entrance to regular college work. This attitude may represent the majority viewpoint today. Most community colleges, for example, maintain that

the major purpose of special programs for low-achieving students is to prepare them for "regular" college. And although it is "in" these days to talk about developmental programs instead of remedial programs, the fact is that such programs are designed to correct the "deficiencies" of New Students. They usually consist of course work to correct academic "deficiencies", counseling to correct motivational "deficiencies", and financial aids to alleviate economic "deficiencies." The remediation solution to the question of how to educate New Students has one major element in common with the first solution and that is that its advocates accept traditional four-year college education as it is presently defined. In other words, they too feel that students should be in college only if they are prepared to do well in the academic disciplines as they are presently taught. The difference is that they would give New Students further opportunity to prove that they can do traditional work by providing remedial education at the junior college level.

The third viewpoint is more radical than the first two, but like many radical proposals these days, it borrows some concepts from the conservatives. Some people are suggesting that there is nothing sacred about the traditional college curriculum and that four-year as well as two-year colleges might change to meet new needs. There is, after all, almost no correlation between college grades and success in adult life however defined, and so there seems no particular reason for insisting that there is something "wrong" or "deficient" about the abilities and interests of New Students because they don't match those of traditional students. Advocates of this school of

thought, of which I am one, feel that New Students, traditional students, and society would be better off if we made room for educating for a much greater diversity of talent. The present college curriculum rewards the ability to deal with verbal and abstract concepts; it has little reward for the ability to deal sensitively with other people, for example, which is one of the greatest needs of society today and one of the interests of New Students. And so, I have questioned what I see as an overemphasis on remediation to attain a goal that seems to me questionable.

The most reasoned approach to the question of the postsecondary education of New Students might consist of taking a flexible position that capitalizes on the advantages of each of the three previously described viewpoints. Remedial education does have a role to play in the education of New Students--both in developing the basic academic competencies that are needed in today's complex world and in providing the opportunities for some New Students to compensate for poor elementary and secondary schooling so that if their abilities and interests take them in the direction of traditional academic disciplines, they are free to make that choice. On the other hand, to adopt a program or attitudes that assume that traditional education should be the goal for all New Students is both unwise and unrealistic.

Remedial programs at any level with school-age youngsters have not wrought any miracles. They are minimally effective in raising the grade point average, and many appear to be disastrous in destroying what little self-confidence the student has left after a rather dismal trip through elementary and secondary schools. Unless the remedial program can build confidence rather than destroy it, I suggest that the student would be better off without it. This is not to say that we must give up on the

student who graduates from high school with seventh or eighth grade reading skills. It is to say that remediation needs to start where he is, gradually building confidence through his own recognition of improved performance. The goal of remediation should be to help the student take over the responsibility for his own learning--not to reach some arbitrary grade point average or test score.

The role of teachers and counselors of New Students, as I see it, should be to provide maximum opportunity for the development of diverse interests and talents. Standards should be high for all students, and we should not accept shoddy work because of our recognition that not all students will perform all tasks equally well. John Gardner said it well when he wrote, "An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water." (Gardner, 1961, p 86).

What the research on New Students suggests to me is that we need to broaden the curricula beyond the narrow dimensions of the academic disciplines and that we must expand the learning environment beyond the confinement of the classroom. We need more programs of cooperative education, for example--part-time work and part-time study. We need to look at the interests of New Students in jobs and the concrete useful application of knowledge as an advantage instead of a disadvantage. We need to provide connections between the classroom and the application of useful knowledge and we need to recognize the psychological importance of providing opportunities for high levels of

performance and solid achievement in a wider range of learning tasks. I have serious doubts about the benevolent wisdom of providing full financial assistance to enable New Students to spend full-time at educational tasks that they find onerous without providing the opportunity for self-development and independence that they may find in jobs. I believe that if we are to spend the same amount of money and time locating and creating jobs in the community that have a real potential for learning that we spend on remedial education, counseling and large financial grants, we would be developing the strengths of New Students and offering them the opportunity for self-development through focusing on their strengths instead of forever on their weaknesses. I can't really blame a young person who is exposed to the constant well-meaning kindness of counselors and teachers who strive earnestly to "improve" his abilities and attitudes, for splitting the scene.

In a nutshell, our task as educators is to help New Students overcome the fear-of-failure syndrome which much of the past education along narrow dimensions has created. People should be able to look to education to help them take the risks that learning new things always involves. To create an atmosphere in which one is free to fail while striving toward ever higher levels of achievement in developing a wide range of abilities that are useful to individuals and to society is the goal of all education.