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New Dimensions of Quality in Higher Education

by

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What is quality higher education? There was a time when people thought they knew. It was typified by bright students, a faculty distinguished in research and writing, and affluent and successful alumni.

And how does a college attain such heights? Why, they select students of known academic accomplishments, recruit faculty with big names and proven records, and assure themselves of successful alumni through placing their seal of approval on the graduates of their college of distinction.

Then where does quality education come in? Well, that is assumed to take place between entrance and graduation, of course. But the only thing we know for sure is that the best way to graduate a bright class is to admit a bright class.

Up until now higher education has been a low risk venture. You get out about what you put in. So sure are people of this formula, that most research and careful application of the findings resides in the admissions office--not in the classroom. Probably the closest thing to science in the practice of education lies in predicting the winners--and losers--of the academic race.

Despite all the hue and cry to the contrary, the science of academic prediction is decades ahead of the science of education and learning--because

in accuracy of prediction lies the promise of institutional success. But a new day is dawning. It looks very much as though quality education in the future will be measured in terms of value added, and that means we will have to look at the process of education itself--at what happens to the student between entrance and graduation.

A recent case study illustrates the issues involved in the transition from the relatively easy task of prediction and selection to the infinitely more difficult task of education.

The authors of an insightful and sympathetic analysis of the open admissions policy at CUNY discovered to their "amazement," since they had "started out with an initial distrust of such tests" that the Cooperative English Test was uncannily predictive of student dropout and of independent teacher judgment about student performance. A very high percentage (50 out of 60) students with low test scores "were dropped or left the program voluntarily during the first year, and most of the remaining ten left in the second year" (Resnik and Kaplan, undated).

The findings illustrate the tension between the old and the new. The task of the old selective admissions approach was to find the most promising young people and to educate them for roles of leadership in the society. When technology was young and educational resources were scarce, it seemed logical and efficient for the growing nation to educate a cadre of elite leaders who would use their training and knowledge to raise the standard of living for everyone.

Now there seems an unending supply of the comforts and luxuries of technology. The problem for the future is not so much in the generation of new technology and new products as in better distribution systems, broader-based knowledge,

and greater concern for individual development. The way to raise the standard of living for everyone is no longer to train leaders but rather to educate the masses to their full humanity.

Certainly we will continue to educate leaders; we will always need intellectual leadership. But institutions ^{applied} like CUNY have taken on an additional and much more difficult assignment. The task of the new ^{school} CUNY is not to predict who will ^{survive or} fail, but to make life better for every student crossing their threshold.

The "amazing" success of the Cooperative English Test isn't so amazing after all. It shows two things. First, that failure on a traditional test predicted failure in the traditional curriculum with high accuracy. Second, that the traditional curriculum did not do anything to educate the nearly 100 percent of very low scoring students who dropped out. The test, the curriculum, and faculty judgments about performance are all irrelevant to the task of improving life for everyone through education.

This change in philosophy about the purposes of college and who should attend will probably have more impact on educational methods and procedures than anything that has ever happened in higher education. Just as soon as a college agrees to do what it can for all comers, it foregoes the luxury of selecting students who fit its way of life, and it takes on the obligation of adapting itself to the needs of students.

That is where many colleges are today.

Thousands upon thousands of students who would never before have considered college are on our doorstep, and we don't know how--or if--we can do anything to help them develop their talents to become happy and productive citizens. We face the task of gearing up to serve a new clientele.

The new clientele for higher education in the 1970's consists of everyone

who wasn't there in the 1940's, 50's, and 60's. There are four distinctive, but overlapping groups. 1) Low academic achievers who are gaining entrance through open admissions. 2) Adults and part-time learners who are gaining access through nontraditional alternatives. 3 & 4) Ethnic minorities and women who are gaining admission through public conscience and affirmative action.

Low Academic Achievers

I have written extensively elsewhere (Cross, 1971a) about low academic achievers as New Students to higher education. It is this group that epitomizes the problem of education beyond high school for the masses. It is not too difficult to accept adults--to deliver education in new ways, to credential adequate academic performance, and to permit part-time students to earn degrees. It is slow and sometimes traumatic but not impossible to abolish discrimination and grant ethnic minorities and women college degrees. But to deliberately set out to accept people who can't do college work as it is presently defined is an altogether different matter.

The greatest single barrier to college admission in the 1960's was not ethnic identity or socioeconomic status per se. Rather it was lack of demonstrated academic ability--as that ability is nurtured and measured in the schools.

Although black and brown and red students are overrepresented among this group of New Students, a great disservice has been done to ethnic minorities in equating skin color with low academic achievement. Actually, most of the students flooding into colleges poorly prepared to undertake traditional college work are the white sons and daughters of blue collar workers. Almost two-thirds of the community colleges in this country report that less than 25 percent of the students enrolled in remedial courses are members of ethnic minorities

(Cross, 1971a). Numerically it is whites, not blacks, who have gained educational advantages through open admissions. But regardless of skin color, there is a powerful relationship between social class and academic achievement. Over two-thirds of the lowest-third high school graduates are first generation college students; their parents have never experienced college. So much ignorance of what college is all about among family and friends of entering college students will probably never happen again in this country. In California, for example, with its extensive development of public postsecondary education, 80 percent of the high school graduates are continuing their education, and they will be able to pass some firsthand experience on to their children.

It is not, however, the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of New Students that ought to concern educators most. Rather it is the pervasive experience of New Students with failure in the American school system. Most students who graduate from high school in the lowest academic third of the class have been poor students all of their young lives. Thus it is not surprising to find research that shows that they don't approach traditional college learning tasks with enthusiasm and confidence (Cross, 1971b). There is no reason to think that colleges will do any better job with these students than high schools have done as long as they use the same methods to teach the same materials. Research that repeats the tiresome statistics that a few (but not usually very many) "high risk" students survive the first year of college should convince us that colleges are not making their adjustment to universal postsecondary education very smoothly. We might do well to give up our preoccupation with correcting the "deficiencies" of New Students and concentrate instead on developing the new range of talents and interests that

they bring to higher education. "College-level" work need not mean higher and higher levels of abstraction; it might well mean higher and higher standards of performance. In any event, our new educational purposes suggest that we begin with the student and help move him toward the development of his abilities. It does not suggest that we try to make him into a pale carbon copy of the academically elite leader of bygone days.

Adult and Part-time Learners

Under the new purposes of higher education adults too have a claim to education that helps them develop their abilities and fulfill their lives. They may not be young enough to meet the old criteria of furnishing fresh leadership to a growing technology, but they are able, eager, and interested students. In a research survey of the learning preferences and experiences of adults just completed for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Educational Testing Service, unpublished data) we found that 77 percent of the people between 18 and 60 in this country would like to learn more about something.

Although adults have been considerably more restrained about it than have some of the young people, it is quite apparent from ^{some recent data collected for} ~~the data~~ ^{for CNS} that they ^(UTS, unpublished data) too are demanding relevance in education. The message is clear that they want to learn how to do things--as opposed to how to think about things. ~~Dedicated liberal arts advocates will be disappointed to learn that~~ Adult males are most interested in returning to school to improve their vocational and professional skills whereas women are most interested in sewing and cooking and crafts and gardening. And those interests are in the lead for college graduates as well as for the general population. Adult learning priorities seem to be dictated by the usefulness of the learning. Highest

in priority are those skills that are needed by all adults in the course of daily living--vocational skills, investment, and home repair for men; home and family skills for women, and sports and leisure time activities for both men and women. Next in order comes learning that will foster personal development and community responsibility--humanities and the arts (especially for women) and public affairs and community problems. And finally at the bottom of the list of preferences, endorsed by fewer than ten percent of the potential adult learners, are the basic academic tools of social, biological, and physical sciences and English language. Once again, college graduates aren't much more interested in learning more about these staples of academe than are the general public. The problem, I suggest, is not that the social and physical sciences are inherently dull or unimportant, but that they are taught as background for professional scholars--and not many of the new clientele have any interest in becoming professional scholars. The physical and social sciences, after all, form the backbone of the new terribly popular--with young and old alike--curricula in ecology and urban studies. But these courses of study have a problem-oriented focus. They are taught in order to solve problems--not to perpetuate the discipline into graduate school.

So adult learners do challenge the heart of higher education--the curriculum. But equally important--and more likely to succeed--is their challenge to the time and place requirements of traditional education. It is this battle that the nontraditional studies movement has taken on. No one can put forth a very strong argument that four years, chopped into 120 credit hours delivered to people who can present themselves physically in a room set aside for "classes" makes much sense as the major strategy of education.

A concept of education for all the people requires new methods of delivery to take education into prisons, into homes, and into industrial plants. We need new measures of competency that acknowledge that what is learned rather than how it is learned is the true measure of education. And we need new flexibilities that can begin to make life-long learning a reality.

Ethnic Minorities and Women

① More attention has been given to the educational needs of ethnic minorities and women than to other groups of new clientele. And yet their challenge to educational tradition as preserved by the academic disciplines and by institutional procedures is not nearly so great as that presented by New Students or adults. True, the demands for equality of educational opportunity on the part of ethnic minorities and women has struck a deep emotional response in the white male-dominated system of higher education. Affirmative action is a personal threat to ruling faculty, administrators, and, yes, students too. But minorities and women are not a threat to the content and form of traditional education except as they constitute highly visible segments of ^{trad students} ~~the~~ New Students and adult populations.

It is hard to talk about curricular or classroom needs that are based on the color or shape of one's skin. But ^{my} ~~the~~ assumption ~~throughout this article~~ ^{is} ~~has been that~~ ^{The new} education ^{must be} ~~is~~ broadly interpreted to encompass the full development of individual potential. Given that interpretation, the educational problems of ethnic minorities and women are profound.

The influx of ethnic minorities and women into all segments of postsecondary education is increasing rapidly. In the single year from 1970 to 1971, the total undergraduate and graduate enrollment of women increased 5 percent

(compared to a 3 percent increase for men). The increase for blacks was 17 percent and for those with Spanish surnames 19 percent (Peterson, 1972). The most dramatic increases occurred where one might expect--in the previously closed graduate schools. Women made a 6 percent gain (compared with 4 percent for men), but blacks showed a 38 percent gain and those of Spanish descent a 31 percent increase. Spanish Americans are just beginning to get their message across with a force equal to that of the blacks. First-time graduate enrollments increased 36 percent for Spanish Americans, 11 percent for blacks, but only 5 percent for women (Peterson, 1972).

As these data show, ethnic minorities, and to a lesser extent women, are assuredly part of the new clientele. As I attempted to demonstrate in the introduction to this article, society looks to education to improve the lot of its citizenry. The failure has been painful in the case of groups whose appearance marks them as targets for discrimination. As Martha Peterson, Chairman of the American Council on Education, remarked recently, "The shame of affirmative action is that HEW had to get into it at all."

The problems, ~~however~~, are more than legal, or even moral. Racial segregation on campus is a growing phenomenon that no one knows how to deal with (see Time, November 27, 1972, pp 44-45). Highly sensitized women and ethnic minorities are becoming increasingly aware that it is easier to deal with overt discrimination that can be fought head-on than it is to deal with covert and frequently unconscious discrimination on the part of well-meaning people.

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The full meaning of universal postsecondary education has probably not been understood, and certainly not accepted, by the majority of people whose life work is education. The most common positions among faculty who consider themselves

enlightened are that higher education should be open to all those able and willing to do the work in the manner and form in which it is presently offered. A second position is practiced by a growing minority of misguided liberals who are willing to "lower the standards" of academic education in order to get credentials in the hands of the "disadvantaged" so that they can obtain for themselves the material and social benefits of society.

2 Neither position, it seems to me, is adequate for these times. The purpose of education is not to certify (especially not falsely) nor is it to prepare a band of elite intellectual leaders (except perhaps in graduate education). It is to maximize the potential of each person to live a fulfilled and constructive life. And to accomplish that end, we need not lower standards. Quite the contrary, we should organize education around the premise that we must demand of each student the highest standards of performance in the utilization of his or her talents.

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