

Wanted: New Personnel Services for New Students*

by

K. Patricia Cross

Over the last decade, postsecondary education has undergone a profound crisis of purpose. Giving verbal definition to the phenomenon robs it of its drama, but it can be rather simply stated as the transition from the meritocratic system of education which provided advanced study for those "meriting" it to an egalitarian system of postsecondary education for everyone--regardless of past merit or future promise.

Under a meritocratic system of higher education, our national purpose was realistic and pragmatic. It was to use our relatively scarce educational resources to educate our brightest and most promising young people to use their knowledge and training to raise the standard of living for everyone. By and large, we have not been disappointed.

Scientific invention and increasingly efficient production has undeniably made possible the highest standard of living the world has ever known. The problem now lies not so much in the future generation of new technology and new products as in better distribution of benefits, broader-based knowledge, and greater concern for individual development. The way to raise the standard of living for everyone is no longer to concentrate

*Prepared for the NASPA Western Deans' Conference, San Diego, January 24-25, 1973.

our total resources on the training of a few selected leaders but rather to educate the masses to their full humanity.

Higher Education was never designed to educate the masses. Thus it is not surprising that we face a crisis of purpose. New kinds of students with new needs are on our doorstep, and frankly, we don't know what to do with them.

Under the meritocratic philosophy, we designed the college program and then selected the people who could profit from it. Under egalitarianism, the order is reversed; we pledge to take on all comers and do what we can to make life richer and more satisfying for them and for the society.

Of necessity, the new education begins with the needs of students--not with the needs of colleges. In a sense, this is where student personnel workers claim they have always been. But I think the claim is not quite true. Student personnel administrators generally have found themselves in the awkward position of beginning with the needs of colleges but taking into account individual differences by helping students to adjust to college demands. In the case of educationally disadvantaged New Students, for example, we recognize the problems presented by low academic motivation by working with students to improve motivation rather than by working with faculty to improve instructional methods and curriculum so that motivation follows naturally. In the case of older women returning to college, we recognize their problem as part-time students by helping them to adapt their lives to the schedule and procedures of the college rather than by working with colleges to institute new flexibilities, to recognize adult competencies, and to make

financial aid available to part-time students.

I see a new order of priority for student personnel deans. Of course, the job will still require men and women who enjoy working with young people and who relate well to them with flexibility and openness. But I believe the successful dean of the 1970's must demonstrate a much stronger base of professional knowledge and expertise about human learning and development than has been true for the last couple of decades. True, some graduate programs now teach a little of something called student development, but as the new professionals enter the administrative maze at most colleges and universities they soon learn all the bad habits of experienced administrators. It is not long before they find themselves swamped by the day-to-day administrative trivia of procedures, arrangements, memos, and endless meetings which fill time without making progress. Cross' first law of administration states that the urgent will always crowd out the important unless the administrator makes a continuous and conscious effort to give his or her attention to the things that will make a difference in the long run.

The thing that will make a difference to young people, to colleges, and to the nation in the 1970's is the quality and appropriateness of postsecondary education for everyone. We have made a national commitment to equality of educational opportunity which is not being met by simply admitting New Students to an educational system that was designed in a different era for different kinds of students.

Students of the 1970's for whom the traditional system is, in one way or another, inappropriate consist of four groups. The groups cannot be defined so that they are precise and non-overlapping but I have tried to group them by educational needs.

The first consists of a group that I have called New Students to higher education. I define New Students as those who have not been successful in education in the past for whatever reasons--disadvantaged home and school backgrounds, interests and talents that are not developed through traditional academic disciplines, different cultural emphases or whatever. The distinctive characteristic of the group is that they have experienced failure in the American school system. This has affected their concept of themselves and their future attitudes about learning. This group includes, but is not limited to, ethnic minorities. Numerically, most of the New Students who are not well prepared academically for college-level work consist of the white children of blue-collar workers. New Students, defined here as low academic achievers, are those gaining access to higher education through open admissions policies.

The second group placing new demands on higher education consists of part-time adults. By part-timers, I mean anyone whose major responsibilities consist of something other than attending school or college. Under this definition, an 18 year old army private has adult educational needs whereas a single 30 year old full-time graduate student does not. Part-time learners are gaining access to higher education primarily through nontraditional studies that deemphasize the time and place requirements of traditional education.

The third group I want to talk briefly about are the so-called traditional college students. They consist of all those that we used to think of as "college material"--young people whose families have traditionally sent their relatively high-achieving sons and daughters off to primarily residential colleges. These students predominate in selective admissions

colleges. They are, of course, not new to higher education, but they are making some new demands of colleges. And it is important to take a look at their dissatisfactions and suggestions for reform.

The fourth group cuts across the other three but consists of those who have been discriminated against by social institutions--primarily ethnic minorities and women. The educational needs of ethnic minorities have much in common with those of New Students; the educational needs of women are likely to fall with traditional students or with adult part-timers. But it is important to recognize that conscious and unconscious discrimination still hinders ethnic minorities and women from full participation in educational opportunity. The distinctive educational needs of this group are to overcome all forms of discrimination based on class identification. These new students are gaining access to higher education through consciousness raising and affirmative action plans.

I have written extensively elsewhere about the characteristics of these various groups as they are revealed through research. Time does not permit recounting those findings here, so what I have tried to do is to put together in my own head what we know about the characteristics and needs of each group and to distill for you what I think the implications are for higher education.

Let's talk first about the group that is posing the greatest professional challenge to educators--young people who have experienced largely failure in the American school system. 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. Open admissions has

changed this. We now have an enormous influx of students into higher education who are not prepared to do college work.

What is the task of postsecondary education in this situation? Research indicates that most community colleges perceive the task as one of remediation. They give first priority to correcting the "deficiencies" of New Students so that they may become more like the traditional students higher education is accustomed to serving. This approach makes two important assumptions. 1) It assumes that colleges can do in a year or less what elementary and secondary schools have failed to do in twelve, and 2) It assumes that the present college curriculum and methods are unchangeable or at least that they represent the desirable learning experiences.

There is very little evidence to justify either assumption. And the dangers of continuing to operate as though they were valid are considerable. Many New Students are dropping out of college after having experienced a reinforcement of their fear that they really are inferior, since even with help they cannot get interested in nor excel at the academic tasks that we prescribe. I am not too sure that the relatively few New Students who make it through to the degree are much better off. They are almost inevitably among the poorest performers in the academic race, and with the likelihood that the supply of college graduates will exceed the demand, New Students are those most likely to be unemployed or underemployed.

What are the alternatives? The one that I see as most viable is to attempt to redefine the college experience with greater flexibility and diversity so that individual learners may concentrate on the fullest

possible development of their strengths. Correcting weaknesses may be a necessary task, but it should not be center stage front as it is right now, under the philosophy of remedial and compensatory education.

Surely individuals have a right to expect that there are some important things that they do well--better than most other people. Unfortunately, half of the school population have little opportunity to develop or demonstrate talents that fall outside the fairly narrow definition of academic aptitude. Furthermore, with our penchant for eliminating the so-called "frills" of extra-curricular activities, many students have lost the last vestiges of opportunity to excel in school, which is after all the only pursuit modern society permits young people.

If we as educators are to concern ourselves with human development, then we must expand the definition of learning beyond the narrow confines of the academic disciplines. Higher education need not mean higher and higher levels of abstraction. It might well be redefined to mean higher and higher standards of performance. If the opportunity for the development of individual talents is an essential aspect of postsecondary education, what can student personnel administrators do about it?

In the first place, we need to know enough about New Students through personal experience as well as through research, to assure ourselves and our colleagues that a problem exists. We ought not to hesitate to fight for the right of each individual to have the learning experiences that will help to maximize his or her talent. Furthermore, we can help to design and implement broader emphases in learning.

Let me give an example using the field of psychology since it is my academic discipline and also many of yours. Psychology, as presented in college, is taught as preparation for graduate study. And there is nothing

wrong with that for some people. What is generally missing in psychology courses is a practicum that provides the opportunity for applying what is learned in class to the reality of working with people. Society now has a need for many more people to work sensitively with people than it has for academic psychologists. Furthermore many New Students show outstanding ability and interest in dealing with others. Yet we don't teach this skill in college nor do we even recognize it as an important learning area.

True, one of the reasons we don't teach it is that we don't really know how to do it very well and we have great difficulty measuring this ability. But one reason we don't even try is that the qualification for teaching psychology is academic competence--not necessarily the practical ability to apply psychology to real life situations. Most psychology professors have little experience, and some have little ability or interest, in working with people. The New Student who is interested in and sensitive to people may be a rather poor academic psychologist--so poor that he gives up his interest in learning more about people at a time when society most needs his particular talents.

Student personnel administrators are not necessarily academic psychologists, although some are fairly good at it. But student personnel administrators are presumably skilled at working with people. Why wouldn't a cooperative venture between the psychology department, the community, and the dean's office make a strong practicum that would have a high appeal to many New Students? Student personnel administrators might furnish the administrative talent for setting up internships in the community; they might use their counseling and placement abilities to assign students to

the jobs that would result in the best growth; they might use their practical experience in dealing with people to serve as field educators and supervisors. These are all tasks in which we as student personnel administrators have experience and interest. Meanwhile the psychology professor can do what he does best--provide the accumulated knowledge and academic background of psychology to enrich and complement the field experience. Some students will excel in the field experience; others will be better at traditional academic psychology. I see no problem and no innate hierarchy of value. Both kinds of students are learning and developing as people and as productive citizens of the world society. College credit should be granted for demonstrated proficiency in either learning option.

Perhaps it is too utopian, but I see such a program as offering something for everyone.

It offers New Students an important new option in postsecondary education--one in which they have already shown both ability and interest.

It offers society and the local community a corps of people who are talented in one of societies sorest needs--people to work effectively with people.

It offers student personnel administrators an opportunity to become directly involved in the education of students and to use their knowledge and experience to work directly with faculty to improve postsecondary education.

It offers academic psychologists a laboratory in which theory may be compared with practice, and it offers a potent teaching/learning tool to enrich the study of psychology.

I believe that the integration of academic learning with real life experiences is one of the imperatives for the improvement of postsecondary education. But it is of special importance to New Students who want and need broader, more varied, and more concrete learning experiences than those presently offered.

Another group of new clientele for the 1970's consists of people who represent the other side of the coin. Rather than adding work experience to academic learning, they would like to add a little academic learning to their work.

One of the fastest growing segments of all new students to higher education consists of part-time learners who are 25 or older. They seek to learn new jobs or how to do old ones better, to use new-found leisure time through learning hobbies or sports, or for personal satisfaction and cultural enrichment. What do we need to think about in higher education in order to accommodate the needs of this new group of students?

Primarily we need revisions in the form and procedures of higher education rather than the content and method that I emphasized so strongly for New Students. We need 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 than can begin to make life-long learning a reality.

The nontraditional studies movement arose in answer to these needs, and its rather phenomenal growth can be attributed to timeliness on several dimensions. It too came into being under the egalitarian philosophy that

proposes to improve life in America through education of the masses. Its goal is to abolish discrimination on the basis of age, geographical or physical isolation, and part-time student status. But it also came into being as colleges with tight budgets and leveling off of enrollments noticed a new market out there--with the money, the motivation, and the capacity for college study. A third factor that enhances the growth of nontraditional alternatives is the demand for accountability. Nontraditional education is a bold attempt to challenge many of the false assumptions of traditional education, primarily those related to time and place requirements. 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.

The almost frightening challenge of nontraditional alternatives is that education will eventually be measured in terms of competencies achieved rather than in terms of pathways traversed. As soon as we develop the capacity to measure education as a characteristic of student achievements instead of college offerings, we will have a new definition of higher education--one that centers attention on the learner.

That, of course, is where most student personnel administrators would like to see it. But that emphasis makes further demands for greater professionalization of student personnel workers. It calls for increased emphasis on diagnosis and tailor-made learning experiences. And that means greater familiarity with measurement and with individualized learning and guidance systems. Nontraditional studies also calls for greater procedural flexibilities, some shifts in counseling emphases to accommodate

the more mature student, and a less parochial college attitude as the campus expands to meet the world.

Part-time learners like New Students will place new demands on the institution. I hope that student personnel workers will guard against being used by traditionalists to advise students on how to adjust to the college--equally important is your role in advising the college about its adjustment to the needs of the nontraditional student.

The third group of students that personnel workers must be concerned about are the so-called traditional college students. The most elite of this group have become so disenchanted with the institutions of American society that they have formed a counterculture. And you don't need to be told that one of the targets of the counterculture is higher education. Strangely enough these vocal and articulate critics are just the kind of students that traditional higher education was designed to serve. But today these young people, whose college educated parents have been able to give them material advantages as well as an intellectual heritage, claim that higher education is no longer relevant to their personal needs or to those of society.

What do they want? Well, what they say they want is greater relevance. One can quibble over the inarticulateness of that word, but I think it is fairly clear that they are asking for problem-oriented education. They want to be able to answer questions--about what to do to make the world a better place for human beings and about themselves and their role in life. The world seems beset with problems that our great faith in knowledge leads us to believe can be solved. We need a cure for cancer; an answer to the too rapid use of the world's natural resources; individual and collective

attention to the problems of the despoiling of the environment. And we desperately need better ways of dealing with the problems of the widening gap between the have's and the have not's. This generation of traditional college students--young people who come from the type of families that historically have sent their sons and daughters to college--have grown up free of pressing worries about material matters. They have been given everything their relatively affluent parents can buy with money, and the problems they see are human and social.

Most young people, rich or poor, want a better life than that of their parents, and for many traditional college students living in suburbia that means less dependence on tranquilizers and alcohol, closer human relationships within the family, less rigid class distinctions between men and women, between blacks and whites, and between the country club set and the family across the tracks. For students interested in those questions, we do indeed seem to be lecturing on navigation while the ship is going down.

There is no doubt in my mind that the search for relevance and meaning raised by the counterculture combined with the reality orientation of adults and New Students will seriously challenge the outmoded notion of an undergraduate education that serves primarily as a screening device for graduate study. The isolation of academic departments will, I think, have to give way to more integrated and meaningful learning experiences. The new emphases on teaching of undergraduates on interdisciplinary problem-focused curricula such as urban studies or ecology, and the integration of the academic experience with life are all trends

of the future that will make postsecondary education more responsive to the needs of the new clientele.

Finally, let me say something about the fourth group of new students entering colleges in increased numbers--those who have been systematically denied full equality of educational opportunity through discrimination on the basis of race, or sex. These categories cut across the other three that I have discussed. Individual black students and individual women, for example, will be helped by the reforms suggested for New Students, part-time learners, or the counterculture. And affirmative action plans now have teeth plus consciousness-raising value. But the role of deans who work with students is extremely complicated with respect to the assimilation of these previously excluded students. So far, we have been so concerned about the questions of access for these groups that we have worked more with the students than with the colleges regarding adjustment to one another. Actually adjustment must be mutual. Whether student or college should modify their ways with regard to any given matter is a problem calling for perspective and judgment. Too often, I fear, the underlying philosophy of the counseling profession has been to accept the need for individual adjustment as a given. In the educational setting, counselors can do more to change the environment than counselor training programs admit. My plea is not to stop helping students find answers to their problems in the environment in which they find themselves. But if most women or most blacks find the same old problem over and over and over again, then it may be that the problem resides in the environment and not in the individual.

In summary, I have suggested this afternoon that personnel workers

cannot effectively serve students by working only with students. I see personnel workers of the 1970's working in that crucial and sometimes uncomfortable slot between student change on the one hand and institutional change on the other. Such a role demands a total educational philosophy and it means that personnel services can no longer be considered an auxiliary organization sitting on the periphery of the education of the student. We used to say that the concern of personnel deans was the out-of-class education of students. More and more, that is where the action will be. Let us hope that personnel deans will be there too with the expertise and knowledge to make a significant contribution.