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NEW STUDENTS IN THE NEW WORLD OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION*

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Higher education faces a profound crisis of purpose. Only a few short years ago, within easy memory of most of you, higher education was giving full allegiance to the goal of academic excellence. Selective admissions became a skilled operation nationally as well as on local campuses. Talent searches were launched to seek out the academically gifted, and scholarships were awarded to those who could demonstrate that they were already among the best educated young people in the nation. Institutional success was measured along narrow dimensions of academic excellence--by mean SAT scores, number of National Merit Scholars, percent of students entering graduate schools, number and size of research grants, and the scholarly productivity of the faculty.

Looking back, I think most could agree that we were remarkably effective in creating a system of higher education that pursued the goal of academic excellence with enthusiasm and effectiveness. We provided the nation with a brain trust that could compete with that of any country in the world. And the engineers and businessmen that we graduated led us to unprecedented scientific achievement and the production of material necessities and luxuries undreamed of by previous generations.

Is it any wonder that we are thrown into a period of confusion and adjustment when the nation seems to say. Stop, you've done your job too well. Supply has outstripped demand. For the present, at least, we have too many teachers, too many graduate students, too much emphasis on science and technology. Furthermore, you've selected the most privileged young people, added the full benefits of a remarkable advanced education to their advantages, and in so doing created an intolerable gap between the haves and the have nots.

We are now asked not only to stop what we have learned to do so well, but to turn around and see how fast we can make progress in the opposite direction. We are now to give our attention not to the academically gifted but to the educationally disadvantaged. Money is available for remedial education but not for graduate study. Financial assistance to students is to be based on need not on academic ability. Faculty members are to give more attention to teaching and less to research.

These pressures for change are not random or unrelated. Rather they are the visible elements of an underlying change in the purpose of postsecondary education. In the 1950's and early '60's, a basic purpose of higher education was to provide

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the nation with a cadre of leaders who would use their advanced training for invention, production, and the advancement of knowledge that would raise the standard of living throughout the country. We now have the resources and the material benefits to provide comfort, if not luxury, for all. Our need now is not so much for further invention and production as for better distribution systems, a broader-based education, and more concern for individuals. The way to improve life for everyone is no longer to educate a few for positions of leadership but rather to educate the masses to their full humanity.

But higher education was never designed to educate the masses. There are those who contend that it should not be. But events have moved beyond that debate. Most high school graduates now enter college. In fact the proportion of students entering college from the upper academic half of the high school graduating classes is now so high--over 75 percent--that there are not many academically well-prepared students left to recruit from any strata of society.

A group of young people that we used to dismiss as "not college material" are now walking through the open doors of colleges, and they constitute a growing proportion of the college population. Numerically, most of the students graduating in the lowest academic third of the high school classes are not ethnic minorities but rather are the low-achieving white sons and daughters of blue-collar workers. For one reason or another, these students have not done well in school; they are students who by definition are not prepared to do college work.

To date, our fairly simplistic solution has been to establish remedial programs in the hope that we can get these students ready to perform the standard academic tasks that constitute our concept of a college education. We have concentrated on changing students to fit what we have to offer without seriously engaging the question of whether the "ability to do college work" as it is presently defined is the measure of the best education that we can offer to these and other students.

According to some recent research, there are widespread feelings that the standard college learning experiences are not the best education that we can devise. Last spring, Richard Peterson, of Educational Testing Service, undertook a study for the Joint Committee on the Master Plan for Higher Education of the California State Legislature (Peterson, 1972). He administered the Institutional Goals Inventory to faculty, students, administrators, trustees, and citizens of the local communities of 116 private and public colleges in California. Each group was asked to rate their college as it is and as it should be on 20 different institutional goals.

The data show that students on every type of campus agree that the present emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge in the academic disciplines is over-emphasized relative to other important goals.* Students in the community colleges, state colleges, and private colleges of California say that emphasis on academic development ranks Number One in importance on their campus, whereas it should rank somewhere down in the middle in the list of 20 goals. Undergraduates at seven

*Experience with is and should be ratings is that respondents almost always think the institution should be doing better than it is in absolute terms. The comparisons used here, however, are rankings which indicate the importance of goals relative to one another.

University of California campuses think the acquisition of academic knowledge is overdone, too, but they say that research and advanced graduate and professional training is given even more attention. If they had their way, university students would place academic development 14th in the list of 20 goals. We do have an identity problem when students across the spectrum of academic ability give our major activity such low priority.

Their rejection, however, should not be interpreted as anti-intellectualism. Students are strongly supportive of activities that place more emphasis on the development of the appreciations and skills of learning. They recognize as important goals such as these: instilling a commitment to lifelong learning, creating the desire for self-directed learning, and developing in students the skills of analysis and synthesis. Significantly, faculty, administrators, and trustees agree with students; they too would like to de-emphasize the acquisition of knowledge in favor of stressing the utilization and appreciations of learning.

The IGI data indicate that there is widespread recognition that the cart has run away with the horse--that the academic disciplines have become the end rather than the means to quality education. With the explosion of knowledge and the realization that facts and information learned in college will not last even a decade beyond graduation, a shift from the acquisition of knowledge to the development of learning skills and appreciations should be one of our top priorities. The difficulty, of course, is that no one knows how to teach appreciation and attitudes very well. But it must be admitted that we have placed a lot of obstacles in the way of our finding out. We might start to seek some answers, for example, by questioning the sacred assumption that higher education should be organized around academic departments. It is said that had the Edsel been an academic department it would be with us yet.

In decrying the emphasis on the academic disciplines, I am not suggesting that students can learn to think in the absence of anything to think about. But I am suggesting that intellectual enquiry implies that we start with problems and seek information that helps in their solution rather than starting with the information and hoping for a problem that can use what we have learned. Problems, it seems, are found all around us--within academic disciplines, across academic disciplines, under the hood of an automobile, in the health problems of the poor, and in the library of the scholar. Equal educational opportunity seems to me to call, not for exposing all students to a standard body of information, but for helping each individual to develop the capabilities to solve the problems that are of importance to him or her.

A good place to start problem-oriented learning is with the problems that are of concern to college students. The students in Peterson's California goals study showed extensive dissatisfaction with the lack of attention presently given to the personal development of students. Students on all types of campuses agreed that colleges should give the goal of student development top priority. But the students enrolled in community and private colleges gave their institutions higher marks for accomplishment of this goal than did students at state colleges and universities. Students on university campuses, for example, say that the goal of helping students to develop as people presently ranks eighteenth in the list of twenty goals, whereas it should rank fourth in importance. Unfortunately, the university is not likely to do much about student wishes for reform in this area. The power structure of the university--faculty, administrators, and regents--indicate on the IGI that there are many things they think more important than student development.

The community colleges and private colleges, on the other hand, can marshal

substantial support among their faculty, administrators, and trustees for a strong emphasis on the non-cognitive aspects of learning. Historically, many private colleges have built a reputation as intimate communities offering a high degree of personal attention. But the very high interest of the community college faculties and administrators in student development is an encouraging sign of the willingness of public higher education to accommodate the developmental needs of students. It is sometimes hard to know, of course, what people have in mind when they endorse a goal of student development. The IGI defines it quite specifically as helping students to do the following things: identify and pursue the accomplishment of their personal goals, develop a sense of self-worth and self-confidence, achieve deeper levels of self-understanding, and develop open and trusting relationships with others. It is these goal statements that the community college faculties are accepting as part of their responsibility. Given such encouraging support, however, the question arises as to how we go about accomplishing these goals. Traditional higher education doesn't have much experience in establishing the kinds of programs that are designed to help people become better and happier human beings.

Student development is not something that can be left to the counseling staff. The development of self-confidence and self-worth, for example, are major problems for many community college students. I suspect that the most realistic path to self-confidence consists of succeeding at tasks that are worth doing. Establishing the tasks of education and setting the standards for performance are the responsibility of the total educational community; they cannot be done by counselors alone.

I doubt that we can work effectively toward the personal development of students without permitting them to work and study in the fields in which they have some realistic hope of excelling. Traditional college students have always done well in school, and evaluation of performance along narrow dimensions of traditional academic education has not done great harm to their sense of self-confidence and self-esteem. But students who are in college today only because of open door admissions practices have always been below-average performers in school--and society permits young people no other occupation. Thus it has been extremely difficult for these students to discover special talents, let alone develop them. Until we can get away from emphasizing only two of the known human talents--verbal and quantitative skills--we are not likely to fulfill our egalitarian goal of offering all people the opportunity to become self-confident and self-actualizing people. The more broadly we can define talent, the more opportunity we give people to be above-average. Statistically, it is possible for only fifty percent of the population to be above-average on a single dimension of talent. If, however, we value two unrelated kinds of ability, seventy-five percent of the people can be above-average on one or the other of the two dimensions. If we make room in society for recognizing three different talents, eighty-seven and one-half percent can be above-average on at least one of the three abilities. Actually, of course, most abilities are correlated, but we can surely expand the opportunities for more people to be talented by expanding the dimensions of learning. Students and the society at large will benefit if the new egalitarian higher education can be redefined to mean high levels of performance rather than high levels of academic abstraction. The development of strong interpersonal skills, for example, may be a much more important objective for many new students and for society than the development of mediocre academic skills.

There has been much talk and some documentation of the increasing homogenization of higher education. The criticism has been that the community colleges were just aping the traditional models of the past. I have been among those critics, but Peterson's IGI data--admittedly from only one state--give me hope that the community colleges are beginning to carve out a distinctive mission for themselves

They are expressing an interest in doing something much different from turning out mediocre academicians. Students, faculty, administrators, trustees, and the local citizenry of the community colleges show remarkably high agreement on the goals that they would like to see their colleges pursue. As a matter of fact, they show higher agreement on what their colleges should do than on what they are doing. The university community, on the other hand, agrees very well on what they are doing, but they show less unanimity when it comes to setting goals for the future. This finding seems to me to reflect the crisis in purpose for higher education. The traditional universities agree on what they are doing now, but they are struggling to reach agreement on what they should do in the changing world of higher education. In contrast, the new community colleges agree upon their future role in the new egalitarian education, but they need to gain experience and to reach agreement on the priorities of present programs.

The University of California constituencies, for example, agree wholeheartedly that their present emphasis is on research, advanced graduate and professional training, and on student acquisition of knowledge in the academic disciplines. They are not quite as united on what role the university should play in the new world of postsecondary education--except that the university should be an intellectually-oriented community.

The community colleges, on the other hand, were established with certain ideals in mind about what they should accomplish. Thus people are reasonably clear about purpose. Three goals are invariably at the top of the list for all constituent groups of the community colleges. They are the vocational preparation of students, the creation of a community characterized by openness and trust, and attention to the personal development of students.

If the constituencies of the community colleges and the University of California are able to attain the high priority goals that those associated with each campus are in substantial agreement upon, we would have two quite different institutional profiles that would be described something like this by the goal statements of the IGI.

The community colleges would concentrate on helping students decide upon personal and vocational goals and would provide specific occupational training as well as opportunities for self-exploration and the development of self-confidence and interpersonal skills. Education would take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation. Meeting the cultural, educational, and employment needs of the local community would also be an important objective.

The University of California would concentrate on creating an intellectually stimulating environment in which faculty and students pursued scholarly inquiry and cultural activities in an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation. Students would be helped to develop a commitment to self-directed, life-long learning. The training of graduate and professional students would continue to receive important emphasis.

These are two very different profiles. They represent the directions in which the students, faculty, administrators, and trustees associated with the two classes of colleges would like to move. Whether these contrasting purposes and environments are good or bad depends on your point of view.

There are two diametrically opposed arguments regarding the value of community colleges in opening educational opportunity. One contends that the community colleges are not different enough from traditional institutions and that they therefore fail to serve their uniquely different clientele (Cross, 1971; Corcoran, 1972). The other contends that they are too different and therefore likely to brand their students as different from, and inferior to, the graduates of traditional higher education (Karabel, 1972).

The latter argument would take us in the direction of greater homogenization of postsecondary education so that graduates would be indistinguishable one from another, in terms of credentials at least. The other position takes us in the direction of greater diversity and into the task of designing new and different educational experiences for different kinds of students. Advocates of each position accuse advocates of the other of wanting to resist change in traditional education--one by diverting "new students" into community colleges so that traditional institutions will not have to change, the other by assuming that all students can be served equally well by traditional education. There is no easy answer to this debate since the argument for open admissions to all institutions hinges largely on public attitudes. If the public thinks that a university education is better than a community college education, then for many practical purposes, such as employment, it is.

I suggest, however, that the business of educators is to educate. Students and society will be the losers in the long run if we permit education to be used as instruments for credentialling and certification rather than as instruments of education.

I believe that we should strive for maximum diversification in the education of the new world so that we can maximize our chances of educating our diverse new clientele. Postsecondary education is too big and too influential now for us all to do the same thing at the same time. Earlier we all pursued the model of academic excellence, thus ignoring or relegating to second status the needs of educationally disadvantaged students. Today, the excitement and the action is in serving "new students" to higher education, but let us not make the error of ignoring the need to improve education for traditional and academically gifted college students. Diversity in institutions is needed to provide for the enormous variety present in our new clientele, but diversity in emphasis is also needed for national health and stability.

It is, perhaps, too early to tell how smoothly we are making the transition to universal postsecondary education. We know that we have a long way to go before we can claim that there is a new world of postsecondary education for "new students."

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