

How We Can All Be Above-Average

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Without much advance planning and without even articulating the change very explicitly, higher education has recently accepted a function quite different from that it performed in the 1950's and 60's. The difference between open admissions and selective admissions is basic, and it goes much deeper than the admissions office. The form of higher education is now out of phase with our new function.

Under the rhetoric of equal educational opportunity there lies the ominous fact that as soon as colleges forego the luxury of selecting students to fit colleges, they take on the obligation of designing colleges to fit students. In short, we have shifted the attention of higher education from the question of who should be admitted to college to how to educate those who come. This fundamental change in purpose affects open admissions colleges directly, of course, but the new philosophy of designing colleges to serve students pervades all of higher education today--selective as well as non-selective institutions.

Let's look at what has happened in just the last two decades. The 1950's represented the peak of the academic meritocracy. Almost suddenly

the post-war years brought an explosion of interest in college education, and the GI Bill made high educational aspirations for the majority of young men in America financially realistic. There were many more people wanting education than could possibly be accommodated by the colleges, and some choices had to be made. Since the former selective device of the ability to pay the tuition had been renounced--practially by the GI Bill and philosophically by a continuing trend toward democratization in higher education--it was necessary to find some fair way of deciding who should be admitted until the supply caught up with the demand. What could be more logical in the context of those times than to admit those who had the best chance of succeeding in college?

That decision plus the potential harvest of the vastly improved research capabilities of psychologists trained with the use of Federal funds during World War II spawned the admissions testing business. Basically what was called for was a formula that would predict which students had the best headstart on the kinds of abilities called for in college work. The idea was simple conceptually, although complicated methodologically. It called for creating a short work sample wherein the student would perform the same kinds of academic tasks in an hour or two that he would be expected to perform over a series of semesters in college. The closer the test corresponded to the reality of the classroom and the grading system, the more successful the prediction. Over the years, the accuracy of prediction was improved by making the tests easier for students who got good grades in college and harder for those who did not. In other words, higher education got more and more like itself. Successful applicants began to look more and more like successful graduates. Successful graduates went on to get Ph.D.'s and become faculty

members and administrators and so to perpetuate their species. It is not hard to see how higher education became focused on a relatively narrow band of abilities defined by the colleges and perpetuated by selecting applicants who fit the model.

Higher education has now embarked upon a new era. We no longer perceive our function to be primarily that of training an elite few to be the captains of industry and the intellectual leaders of the nation. Rather our task is to educate the masses, each to the full development of his or her potential.

As a practical matter, we have accepted that new function. We have literally opened the doors of postsecondary education to everyone. Huge Federal financial aid programs are well on the way to removing financial barriers; open-door community colleges, established at the rate of a new one each week during the late 1960's and early 70's, are well on the way to removing the barrier of poor academic records; the non-traditional studies movement that is sweeping the country at a phenomenal pace is well on the way to removing the last barriers of age, part-time student status, and geographical location. In making these arrangements for freedom of access we have said everyone is welcome, none will be excluded. There is no turning back.

The reason I say that higher education is now dysfunctional for the majority of students is that while we have welcomed all, we have not honestly made a commitment to educate all. The position that is defended by most "right-thinking" faculty members is that academic standards will be preserved and that no one will be graduated without meeting those standards. Now I have nothing against standards. I believe that they are an absolute necessity in education and in life. I believe that learning

is made meaningful by the pursuit of excellence--and that implies standards. The problem that I see in the conventional defense of the preservation of academic standards is that they were conceived in different times for different purposes and for a different student population than those we now have. We have not measured the standards inherited from other times against the new needs of society nor have we looked carefully at whether meeting traditional academic standards is the best way to develop the potential talents of the diverse student body that we now have.

We have known for a long time that each level of schooling is primarily directed toward preparing the student for the next level. High schools measure their success as educational institutions by how many of their graduates go on to college. Colleges measure their success by how many enter graduate school; graduate schools measure their success by how many continue in academic careers. Grades in college predict grades in graduate school, but they do not predict success or happiness in life. The educational system is geared to the training of an academic elite. But that is not our national purpose any more--although it is important to recognize that it may quite legitimately be recognized as the purpose of some institutions to select and educate people for academic leadership. We need an intellectual elite, but we also need people who achieve outstanding capabilities in other areas of accomplishment. We have not checked our definition of academic standards against the new needs of society.

There is considerable agreement that we are entering an no-growth era. The jobs of the future will deemphasize growth and production, and will turn instead to the performance of service functions. We need

people to work with people. And yet colleges today are ignoring that need. In fact, the defenders of the academic status quo feel quite self-righteous in rejecting extracurricular activities, dormitory life, and social interaction on campus as "Mickey Mouse." And the student personnel profession has gone right along with them and attempted to achieve professional status through making dormitories and extracurricular activities more "academically oriented." This overemphasis on a single dimension of human development removes the final vestiges of opportunity for achievement and recognition for mediocre and poor scholars--which, after all, is the majority as we move toward universal access. Even if we were all capable of becoming good scholars, we must raise the question of how many scholars society can use. We are told now that only 20 percent of the jobs of the 1980's will utilize what a college student learns. Putting these observations together, I conclude that we need to re-evaluate how well the academic model is serving the needs of society or of students.

I conclude that we must give more attention to societal needs of the future and to assessing the range of human talent with a view to revising our concepts of "standards." I see no need for talking about lowering standards with the advent of mass higher education. No one wants to do that, least of all higher education's newest students who have nothing to gain by earning a devalued degree.

So let us turn our attention to some realistic thinking about educa-

tion for diversity. We know that on any single dimension of talent half of the students in the nation will be below average. Naive egalitarians have the notion that working with the bottom half will somehow raise them to equal status with the top half. Well, unfortunately, status in the society is relative, and on any single measure there will always be a lower half. The only way to reduce the number in the lower half is to expand the number of dimensions along which talent is measured. Statistically speaking, on any single dimension, only half of the people will be above average. If, however, talent is measured on two dimensions, then 75 percent will be above average on one or the other dimension. If three independent talents are assumed, the statistical probability is that 87.5 percent will be above average on one of the three dimensions. In reality, human abilities tend to be modestly related, but we can certainly give more people the chance to excel, while at the same time creating a society enriched by diversity, if we take a new look at what we mean by standards.

To date, typical intelligence tests, which are closely related to academic aptitude tests, which in turn are closely related to academic achievement, cover about one-tenth of the high-level human talents that have been identified (Taylor, 1968). We have devoted more than 50 years to research on IQ and almost no major effort has gone into the measurement and development of other talents. We think we know that intelligence is distributed normally in the population, that it is distributed equally among the races, and that it is in part an inherited characteristic. Let us assume that eventually we are able to eradicate the disgraceful social injustice done to our fellow human beings who were born with a different color of skin. Are we then to face the prospect of a new group of

"disadvantaged" who happen to have been born with lower IQ's than average? Is it somehow less evil to disenfranchise at birth a new group of human beings? We must begin now to look beyond the IQ as the sole determiner of human contribution. There are so many talents of equal importance in creating a humane society.

Harvard's Jerome Kagan (1973) goes so far as to say that he wants "children rank-ordered on the basis of humanism as we rank-order on the basis of reading and mathematics" (p 43). He claims that schools exist to serve the needs of society, and that the greatest need now is to restore faith, honesty, and humanity. Thus he says, "I am suggesting in deep seriousness that we must, in the school, begin to reward these traits as the Spartans rewarded physical fitness" (p 43).

While I agree with Kagan that we must reward the characteristics that are valued by society, I don't think we make progress by replacing one unidimensional system with another--although perhaps we all have more equal opportunity to be good humanitarians than we have to be good academicians.

In my book Beyond the Open Door, I suggested that we might begin gearing education to the needs of society by matching the cultivation of individual talents to societal needs in a three dimensional model patterned after the skills needed in occupations as they are defined in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. The U. S. Employment Service, after devoting some 40 years of research to the effort, has determined that the world's work can be described by three major functions--work with data, work with people, and work with things. Most jobs consist of combinations of the three functions, and each is classified in the Dictionary according to the level of skill required in each of the three areas. Thus the job of research psychologist requires very high level skills in dealing with

data and low level skills in dealing with people and things. A teacher, as you might suspect, requires high level skills in working with people and data (a better word, I think, would be knowledge) but low level skills in working with things. The work of an auto mechanic is rated high on the need for data (or knowledge) and the ability to work with things, but low level skills in working with people are required.

These three skills--specific knowledge, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work with things--it seems to me, are necessary not only to occupations, but to life in our society. Few of us want to or can avoid working with people, although some of us enjoy interpersonal relations and are more skillful at it than others. We all need knowledge about the increasingly complex world in which we live. We need to be able to read, to understand what we hear, to express ourselves orally and in writing, to have some understanding of quantitative concepts and of science. In other words, we all need those skills typically taught in school. And finally, the technological revolution has made it imperative that everyone have some understanding of how things operate.

To date, educational institutions have concentrated on developing knowledge skills. The development of the ability to work with things has been considered a second-rate activity and has been undertaken by vocational education. And the ability to work with people has been considered unteachable and best left to chance--although a few student personnel types and even fewer academicians in psychology and sociology have taken the job seriously and have attempted to devise learning experiences in interpersonal relations.

I propose that we take a broader view of education and define it as the preparation of people to live in today's world. To do this we

need to forget about rigid hierarchies that rate the manipulation of ideas as the greatest good while working with one's hands is for those who can't work with ideas. As for the ability to work sensitively with people, well that hasn't even made it into the credit-granting curriculum yet.

Specifically, my proposal is this--that every person be required to meet high standards of performance in at least one of these three basic skills and to develop a basic competence in the other two. Students would have the option of selecting the area or areas in which they were going to pursue excellence. The traditional college student who has interest and ability in the manipulation of ideas would pursue excellence in the traditional college curriculum, while developing competence in working with things and people. Future sculptors and future auto mechanics would pursue excellence in the manipulation of tools and materials, but would develop basic competence in traditional academic subject matter and in working with people. The development of interpersonal skills would no longer be left to extracurricular activities and to chance but would be consciously developed so that future counselors, receptionists, and salesmen could pursue excellence in human relations. No skill would be considered better or higher than any other; all are equally important to our society.

The advantage of this scheme in our egalitarian future is that it recognizes individual differences and gives more people an opportunity to make real and valued contributions. The advantage of the scheme educationally is that it permits us to establish realistic standards of performance. The best we can do at present, given our elitist form of higher education and our egalitarian function, is to be tolerant of those

who cannot meet academic standards. Proposals to abolish grading are an example of this tolerance. And, I guess if we must rate people for unidimensional talent, the abolition of grading is the only way to avoid the stigma of failure for the lower half. But this doesn't fool anyone. Both the non academically-oriented student and the public consisting of teachers, peers, and employers know that he fails to measure up.

Happily young people are flexible creatures, and the peer culture has created rewards outside the establishment for the popular student leader and the knowledgeable car buff. But those who develop these talents generally do so without assistance. Indeed, many teachers look with distain on non-academic interests that are pursued to the point of excellence as obsessions that interfere with study. And yet, the pursuit of excellence is likely to be the most important learning experience in the lives of any of us.

My proposed reform of education casts a new light on remedial education. All of us have weaknesses--not just the so-called disadvantaged--and all of us need remediation. Consider, for example, the bright academically-oriented son of a surgeon who is elected president of the student body but is totally dependent on others to tell him how things work. He is disadvantaged when it comes to working with things, and he has many of the same symptoms as the academically disadvantaged. His life circumstances cast him in a situation where his father knows nothing about mechanics and lacks even a basic vocabulary to help his son learn. In his home environment, someone else mows the lawn, does repairs around the house, and sees that the car is running well. Just as there are few good books in the homes of the educationally disadvantaged, so there are few good tools in the homes of the mechanically disadvantaged. I do not

propose that remediation for the high-risk mechanic should consist of learning to fix his own car if he has no interest or talent in that direction. But I do suggest that he should be exposed to some remediation in learning about how things work. There are college professors of my acquaintance whose total dependence on others to tell them what goes on under the hood of their car is just as sad as the failure of the poorly educated to understand the cost of buying on credit. Neither is equipped to make informed decisions about important realities of their lives.

Nothing would be more salutary, I think, than to develop the kind of learning society in which the able academician but poor mechanic tutors the slow reader but able mechanic in exchange for tutoring in auto repair. Each would be teaching in his area of excellence and learning in his area of proposed competence.

Remedial education might be a fact of life for all of us, but it should not assume the tremendous importance and dreadful inequality that it does at present. Education as it exists today permits those who have high academic ability to concentrate on their strengths and ignore their weaknesses, while it condemns others to concentrate on their weaknesses and ignore their strengths. Is it any wonder that high academic performers show greater self-confidence and higher self-esteem than low academic performers? Personally, I doubt the effectiveness of counseling sessions designed to build the self-confidence of low ability students. Self-confidence comes from doing important tasks well, not from being told that other people have the same problem, or that it doesn't matter, or that you are a fine person anyway and should learn to accept your limitations.

I am not making this proposal just to get educators to stand back and

take a fresh look at some of the assumptions that we have made into eternal verities--although needless to say, I would be gratified if I accomplished that purpose. But my aspirations are higher than that. I think my proposal can be implemented.

Those of my generation will remember a song that urged us to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. That, basically, is what I am urging. To do this we need to select people into curricula on the basis of their strengths, not to select them out on the basis of their weaknesses. It would be nice if we had diagnostic instruments that were as good in the "things" and "people" categories as those that exist in the knowledge category. That will come when we consider these areas important enough to give them the same research effort that has gone into diagnosing academic aptitude. In the meantime, I think all that is necessary is that we ask each student to select his area of excellence with the understanding that tough standards will be imposed. He can start anyplace he wants to. Remediation will be provided in all three areas. Thus a student deficient in academic skills may still elect it as his area of excellence but with the understanding that it may take longer to get his degree and that he will have to meet the same standards as others pursuing academic excellence. Grades, honors, tests, and all the other trappings used to measure performance in the academy will be applied to the area of excellence. Such measures, of course, will be appropriate to the skill being evaluated. Written tests may be appropriate in evaluating knowledge skills, for example, whereas one might use oral tests of listening and speaking for interpersonal skills and performance tests for those striving for excellence in working with things.

In the area of competence, however, there will be no grades except

pass-fail. Either the student is certified as meeting minimum standards of competence or he takes remediation until he is. Since all students are exposed to all three areas, a student may find that he is doing better in one of his areas of competence than he is in his area of excellence. He may then change his emphases. Indeed, anyone may pursue excellence in any area once they have met competency requirements.

We already have the rudiments of the knowledge and things areas in academic and vocational education. But we need to recast vocational education in the image of excellence, i.e., these are not second-rate students but first-rate performers in the realm of understanding and manipulating things. We have remedial programs for academic deficiencies, but we need to create remedial programs for mechanical deficiencies. To do this, we need to define what it is that the American consumer needs to know about how things work to make intelligent decisions. Some of our present "disadvantaged"--those from blue-collar homes--may proficiency this area, while some of our "A" students may face an uphill struggle. Not a bad situation for either group. We would expect a large number of women in this remedial program. But since they are the primary purchasers of goods and services, that's not a bad idea either.

The area of interpersonal relations needs more work perhaps than the other two. But data from students indicate that it would be a very popular curriculum, and there is no doubt about society's future need for it. In a research study of California colleges, Peterson (1972) found that students were universally dissatisfied with the amount of attention presently given in higher education to their personal development, which includes, of course, interpersonal relations. Students generally think that personal development should rank first or second in the educational

priorities of their colleges--above academic development which they rank anywhere from fifth to twelfth in importance.

This is where student personnel administrators come in. The development of interpersonal skills has to be accomplished through practicum experiences. Student personnel workers are trained--or should be trained--to work with interpersonal relations in a field situation. Furthermore, they are familiar with the natural laboratories (dormitories, student organizations, etc.), for developing people-to-people interactions. Academic social scientists and student personnel workers and counselors should cooperate in developing a viable program to promote both competence and excellence in working with others.

There are those who will scoff and reject the "non-academic" role I am proposing for colleges. Let people develop non-cognitive skills elsewhere, they will say, such is hardly the business of colleges. But the educational system has, for better or worse, accepted the obligation of preparing people for life in our society and for meeting the needs of society for well-educated citizens. We have developed no viable alternative structures. Mass education is different from anything we have previously faced in higher education. We will have to find totally new models. I believe that the time to begin is now.

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