

Fitting Colleges To Students

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Nationally almost nothing in higher education is the same as it was just one short decade ago. It is difficult enough just to do the old things better or to do them for more people or at less cost, but it is understandably bewildering to discover that the goals of the 1960's are no longer the goals for the 1970's. It now appears that we should not only abandon some of our old goals, but that we should try hard to improve in the opposite direction. Selective admissions and the demands for academic excellence have given way to open admissions and the cry for equality of educational opportunity. Attention to the training of intellectually elite graduate students has done an about-face, and our interest is now centered on educationally disadvantaged undergraduates. The fierce competition for distinguished faculty members at the professorial level has turned into a cool sifting through hundreds of applications to fill a job at the level of assistant professor. Institutional autonomy and competition have given way to coordination by state superboards. Faculty individualism is being replaced by collective bargaining. And the role of playing hero to a proud and adoring public has given way to defending ourselves to a critical public demanding accountability. As the saying goes, If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, you don't understand the situation.

The situation I want to talk about today concerns the impact of the 180 degree turnaround from selecting students to fit the colleges we have to creating colleges that fit the needs of the students who are walking through the open doors.

This national goal involves more than an answer to the pragmatic question of how to convert our elitist model of higher education into a system that will serve the masses. The fact that we are asked to do it represents a fundamental change in the purpose of higher education. When technology was young and educational resources were scarce, it seemed reasonable to use limited facilities to educate young people who had demonstrated intellectual promise. The expectation was that they would use their advanced education and knowledge to improve the quality of life for everyone.

By and large we got what we bargained for. A relatively small number of well-educated scientists and businessmen have created a seemingly unending supply of the comforts and luxuries of technology. The problem we face now lies not so much in the further discovery and production of material goods as in better distribution systems, broader-based knowledge, and greater concern for the individual. The way to raise the standard of living in this country is no longer to train a few leaders but rather to educate the masses.

But higher education was never designed to educate the masses. There are those who contend that it should not be. The goal of full equality of educational opportunity, however, has been endorsed by educators, legislators, and the general public with such unanimity that elitism in higher education has become a pejorative phrase. Furthermore, events have moved us beyond debates about who should go to college. At some point in the 1960's we made a dramatic change from college for the minority to college for the majority of

high school graduates. According to Census data, 58 percent of the 1972 high school graduates entered a degree-credit program in a college or university, and that represents a marked shift from the one-third that continued their education one short decade ago (American Education, 1973). Students that we used to dismiss as "not college material" constitute a growing proportion of the college population.

Contrary to popular belief, the major barrier to higher education in the educational meritocracy of the 1960's was not race or socioeconomic status per se, but lack of academic achievement as that achievement is nurtured and measured in the American school system. True, ethnic minorities are overrepresented among this group of low academic achievers, but the majority of what I have called New Students (Cross, 1971) are the white children of blue-collar workers. Numerically, most young people scoring in the lowest third of the high school graduates on traditional tests of academic achievement are white; most students enrolled in remedial programs in community colleges across the nation are white (Cross, 1971); and even in New York City, with its heavy proportion of ethnic minorities, most students gaining entrance to City University of New York under the open admissions practices are white (Miller, 1972). Open admissions and a national network of public community colleges have opened the doors of postsecondary education; we now have new kinds of students with new needs on our doorstep and we aren't quite sure that we know what to do with them. By definition, these are students who are not prepared to undertake traditional college study, and remediation has been our typical answer. It may be easier to change the students, we reason, than to change the system. But subgroups of students are arguing in various ways for change.

New Students are a force for change in higher education primarily through a method of passive resistance. They have not bought what we have

offered in the way of education. The idea is well expressed in the old wisdom that goes, One can no more say that something has been taught when nothing has been learned than that something has been sold when nothing has been bought.

There are, however, other groups of students new to higher education that have been more vocal and more insistent in making demands that higher education fulfill the national promise of equality of educational opportunity. Ethnic minorities, and more recently women, have refused to accept the premise that an old and venerable system of higher education, designed primarily to serve the needs of white upperclass males, cannot and should not be changed to meet the needs of the full spectrum of learners.

But women and minorities have fought first and foremost for the right of access to traditional institutions and only secondarily for fundamental change. In part, of course, the goal has been to achieve what the majority culture has always had; there has been some fear to ask for anything different because different might mean inferior. Access alone implies very little change for colleges. It affects admissions procedures and financial aid, but it leaves the curriculum and the classroom, which form the heart of education, virtually unaffected. It is only when one assumes that the institution has an obligation not only to admit, but to educate each person, that we begin to talk about the relevance or irrelevance of traditional education.

And on this note, higher education has picked up a group of highly articulate and vocal critics. Our so-called traditional college students, the very people that higher education was originally designed to serve, have been in one way or another expressing dissatisfaction with higher education for the past decade.

Now that the disruptive protests of the activists have seemingly abated, we appear to be moving into a period of boycott and indifference to higher education. Statistics just made available in an article in the Monthly Labor Review (Young, 1973) claim that the proportion of young men entering college directly from high school has shown an alarming drop from 63 percent in 1968 to 53 percent in 1972. There has been no corresponding drop among women and ethnic minorities. Thus, the national constituency of colleges is, in fact, changing. Temporarily at least, we seem to be losing some of our old constituents.

Attention to the needs of one further constituency as we move toward mass higher education will complete my enumeration of the types of students to be served in the future. Then I would like to move to a discussion of what a serious commitment to serve these groups will mean to the future of higher education.

The group that is giving us the least trouble right now are the adults and part-time students who represent the vanguard of the new learning society. Research recently completed at Educational Testing Service (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974) reveals that 80 percent of the adults in this country between the ages of 18 and 60 say that there are new things they would like to learn, and a substantial number--about one-third--actually participated in formal learning experiences of some sort last year. That represents a learning force of about 32 million adults, most of whom are finding instruction in the periphery of education--through on-the-job training, home study, private lessons, workshops, and the like. But 26 percent of this sizeable group of learners are pursuing further education in the various segments of the public and private school system.

Adults with full-time family and job responsibilities will undoubtedly

constitute the most rapidly growing constituency for higher education in the years ahead, especially if the non-traditional studies movement continues its present phenomenal rate of growth. Colleges and universities have been slow to recognize the potential of this group of learners, but once it occurred to financially hard-pressed colleges struggling with declining enrollments, that adults presented relatively few problems and a vast new resource of students --with the money, ability, and motivation for higher education--the moves to accommodate them have proceeded with incredible speed.

There are many changes that will be required of colleges as we make the transition from an elitist to an egalitarian postsecondary education. So far we have done just about everything possible to avoid facing the issue. By that, I mean that we have concentrated our reform around the edges--in the non-academic offices of colleges. The admissions office and its necessary confederate, the financial aids office, have undergone the greatest change. Then once the recruitment and access routes were eased, the counseling offices and their confederates, the remedial programs, were geared up to get the new learners ready for traditional classrooms. Counselors are supposed to correct motivational deficiencies and remedial teachers to correct academic deficiencies. Then it is up to classroom faculty to complete the molding of the new learners in the image of the old.

About the closest thing to reform in the classroom is coming about as the result of the non-traditional studies movement. The task here, however, is usually perceived as one directed toward delivering the traditional course to new places, and less frequently, by new methods. It is clear now, however, that the reform movement is getting closer and closer to the classroom door. While some faculty are resisting change under the guise of upholding academic standards, others are uncomfortably aware that elitist education for the masses is not a satisfactory solution.

Because so many have assumed that admissions offices, financial aid formulas, counselors, remedial courses and more broadly the community colleges will protect the bachelor's degree from substantial change, let me simply assert that all of those changes in student services are necessary but they are hardly sufficient. I would like to devote the remainder of my remarks to the possible impact of the new egalitarianism on the curriculum.

Almost all of the constituencies of higher education are critical of the present course content that forms the heart of the traditional--especially the liberal arts--curriculum. Some insight into specific criticisms can be gained by looking at some research conducted for the California Legislature last year by Dick Peterson of Educational Testing Service (1973). He administered the Institutional Goals Inventory (IGI) to faculty, students, administrators, trustees, and citizens of the local communities of 116 public and private colleges in California. Each constituent group was asked to rate their college as it is and as it should be on 20 different institutional goals.

One of the largest discrepancies between is and should be ratings of students attending the seven campuses of the University of California occurred over the goal of academic development, which is defined by the IGI as the acquisition of knowledge in the academic disciplines. University of California students are representative of higher education's traditional college students; they are high academic achievers, primarily from the middle and upper socioeconomic levels. But they feel that the University is overemphasizing the importance of the acquisition of knowledge. They say academic development presently ranks 3rd in the list of priorities whereas it should rank 14th out of the list of 20 goals.

This criticism is not unique to university students. Students on all

types of California campuses--private and community colleges, state colleges as well as universities--agree that the goal of academic development is overstressed. Community college and private college students say it receives top priority on their campus whereas it should be ranked 9th in the list of 20 goals. We do have a problem when our present students across the broad spectrum of academic ability give our major activity such low priority. Community college faculty are as dissatisfied with the traditional emphasis on academic content as their students are, but University of California faculty--their reputation for liberal politics notwithstanding--are fairly content with the traditional emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge. They see only a 3 point discrepancy between the way things are and the way they ought to be, whereas their students see an 11 point gap.

The rejection of academic development by students 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. Faculty, too, are concerned about instilling learning skills and appreciations in their students, but we often forget that it is love of learning rather than content mastery as such that is the enduring value of education.

The other goal statement on which students express a marked dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs is on attention to the personal development of students. Personal development is defined by the IGI 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 relation-

ships with others. University students claim that the University gives this goal 18th priority whereas it should rank 4th. Community colleges students think attention to student development is even more important; they would rank it 2nd in the list of priorities, but they are somewhat better satisfied that their colleges are doing something about it. And indeed, it is apparent that the faculty of community colleges do accept the responsibility of their college for the personal development of students. They rank it 3rd in importance which is very close to the second place given it by their students. University students, however, receive no such support from their faculty; University faculty are willing to see emphasis on personal growth move from 14th to 10th place, but that is a long way from the shift from 18th to 4th place called for by their students. Incidentally, laymen from the communities surrounding University campuses are with the students on this one; they think personal development should move from its present 17th place to 4th place.

It seems then that the University faculty that represent the bastions of traditionalism, if not elitism in higher education, are faced with growing pressures for change in this area. I doubt very much that the personal development of college students can be left to the counseling staff or to the dean of students. The development of self-confidence and self-worth, for example, are major problems for young people and especially for many of the new students--low achievers, ethnic minorities, and women. 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 can not be done by counselors alone.

Let me move now to another pervasive criticism of the traditional

liberal arts curriculum. Virtually all of the subgroups of students--new and old--are emphasizing the importance of the usefulness of knowledge. And, I think, the programs of RIT are right on target here. What is useful may differ from group to group, and different words are used to express the needs. Traditional students, for example, are likely to talk about the "relevance" of education, whereas New Students may talk about education for better jobs. Adults who are not yet really into criticizing the curriculum are the most utility-oriented of all.

A survey of the learning interests of adults conducted by Educational Testing Service for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Carp et al, 1974) revealed that the learning preferences of American adults can be characterized as largely personal and pragmatic. They are primarily interested in learning how to perform better those tasks that face them in their daily lives--job competencies, home and family responsibilities, and the constructive use of leisure time. Contenders for the top place in the learning priorities of adult men are vocational courses, investment, home repairs and physical fitness, in that order. Women rank sewing, gardening, business skills, crafts and child development as their top priorities. And the preferences of college graduates do not differ much from those of the general population. Courses in the humanities for women and in the fine and visual arts for men are included among the top three learning preferences, but it is quite clear that the majority of the noncaptive adult audience seeks learning, not for its own sake or for its liberating influence, but for its utilitarian value.

The newest learners of the younger generation reflect the pragmatic orientation of their elders. Young people who have not been successful in the traditional academic curriculum can hardly be expected to be pursuing further education for pleasure. They hope to get the training and/or

credentials that will lead to a better job. Likewise, the emphasis of women and ethnic minorities is on better jobs. Education is a means to an end for most people; it is an end in itself for very few. Colleges serving most of the new learners have read the message loud and clear. In the IGI research in California colleges, vocational preparation was listed as the number one priority by community college students, administrators, trustees, and lay community, and it was ranked second by community college faculty. Furthermore, there was virtually no discrepancy between the is and should be rankings of vocational preparation on the part of any group of raters. The consensus seems to be that community colleges should be and are giving vocational preparation top priority.

Quite significantly, neither students nor faculty members of the University of California rate vocational preparation very high; the students say it should rank 11th and the faculty 15th. But traditional college students have their own brand of utilitarianism in education; it has been flying under the banner of the demand for relevance--although the present condition of the job market, especially for white males, seems to be placing a new value on something they have taken for granted in the past. One can quibble over the inarticulateness of the word "relevance", but I think that it is fairly clear that students are asking for problem-oriented education. They want to be able to deal with 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, aspire to a better life than that of their parents, and for many traditional college students living in suburbia that doesn't mean material things like cars and clothes. Rather it 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.

Perhaps it all boils down to designing education to help individuals solve the problems that they see as pressing. For blacks, it may mean education for professions and better jobs and upward social mobility. For some women it means learning how to carry out the traditional female roles more effectively--how to enhance home life and raise children. But for an ever-increasing number of women it means learning how to enter the world beyond the home through challenging jobs and enriching intellectual experiences. For young people, the near-universal problem is personal growth and development--finding themselves intellectually and emotionally in a world that is changing so rapidly that there is little content that we can teach that is as important as the tools for continued learning. For students who have low academic ability and little academic interest, educational reform calls for seeking their strengths and through development of these, creating a pool of diversified talents for the society of the future.

We have, I suggest, given up the narrow pursuit of academic excellence as a universal national goal. There is a legitimate need for some people and some institutions to concentrate on academic excellence, but if we are to devise an education to meet the needs of all the people we must give attention now to a broader interpretation of excellence. There is no need to talk about the lowering of standards with the advent of mass higher education. No one wants a devalued college degree, least of all higher education's newest students. To water down an academic experience in an attempt to serve the masses is to distort one form of excellence. Rather, we must now turn our attention to finding ways to help a diversity of students pursue excellence in the development of their--not our--greatest talents.

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