

Education for Diversity: New Roles for Student Personnel

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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 got what we bargained for.

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

But 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. This fundamental change in the purpose of post-secondary education 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 nonselective institutions.

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 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.

The provision of auxiliary student services is necessary, and even critical for many new students, but by itself, it is a timid and inadequate approach to egalitarian education. I believe that all educators of the 1970's and 80's, including personnel specialists, must be concerned about cognitive as well as non-cognitive development. The student personnel profession must join in full partnership with curriculum planners and teaching faculty to design and implement a new concept of education.

Because I envision sweeping reforms in the practice of college personnel work, I am not going to talk about how you can do better what you are already doing. While I do not deny the value of such an approach, you have other opportunities to read and discuss improved techniques of counseling with ghetto students or low academic achievers or women returning to college. I think that my more unique contribution is to think with you in totally new ways about a program of educational experiences designed for the coming egalitarian age.

At the practical level, we have accepted mass higher education. We have literally opened the doors of postsecondary education to everyone. 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 barriers of age, part-time student status, and geographical isolation. In making these arrangements for freedom of

access we have said everyone is welcome, none will be excluded.

But 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 different students 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.

For too long each level of schooling has been 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 high school predict grades in college, but they do not correlate very highly with later success or happiness in life, either vocational or personal. The educational system is geared to the preparation of an academic elite. But that is not our primary national purpose any longer--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 to cultivate intellectual

ability of the highest order, but we also need to cultivate outstanding capabilities in other areas of accomplishment.

Major questions are being raised now about the number of traditionally academically trained people that can be fully utilized by society. We are told that only 20 percent of the jobs of the 1980's will utilize what a college student learns. But in cities such as Miami, Florida, and New York City and in the state of California, between 70 and 80 percent of the high school graduates are entering college. If we achieved our goal of educating all these young people to meet traditional academic standards, we could conceivably end up with the most dysfunctional educational system the world has ever known.

Our options are really two, I think. Fortunately, they are not mutually exclusive. We can view higher education as a liberating experience that will enrich the lives of students outside of their vocations. There are many who would solve the coming crisis of an oversupply of college graduates by deemphasizing the vocational purposes of college and placing more emphasis on liberal education and on education for the increasing leisure time that lies ahead. If we follow this route and this one alone, however, we must be prepared to admit that our rhetoric about equality of opportunity is a false promise. We may as well face squarely the fact that for most people the real reason for the popularity of college is its presumed vocational advantage. People tend to use the experience of the past to predict the future. Because a college degree had obvious economic advantages when 10 percent of the population had one does not mean that it will have the same relative advantage when 50 percent of the population has one. If our hope for equality of opportunity through education is to have meaning, then we must look beyond the certificate to the usefulness of the education to the individual and to society. That means, I think, that we will have to find

better ways of developing the talents of individuals to fill the diverse needs of society.

Let us look at that challenge more carefully. We know that on any single dimension of human ability half of the students in the nation will be below-average--by definition. 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. There is, however, a way to reduce the number in the lower half, and that 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 the development of human potential.

By this time we know that there are individual differences in academic ability and that those differences are probably unrelated to the color of one's skin, or to height, or weight, or any other physical characteristic. Exactly how much of what we call academic aptitude is due to environment and how much to heredity is a question that defies our methodology at present. But the issue may not be that important. It is only important under the assumption that people with high academic ability are worth more than those with talents in other areas. If we persist in thinking that the ability to perform academic tasks is a measure of human worth, then we face the prospect of creating a new group of "disadvantaged" that consists

of all those with below-average academic aptitude. One would hope that we might have learned some lessons about the evil of disenfranchising at birth any group of human beings. We must begin now to look beyond academic ability as the sole determiner of human contribution. There are other talents of equal importance in creating a humane society.

Harvard's Jerome Kagan 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."* 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 those traits as the Spartans rewarded physical fitness."

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 United States 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

*Saturday Review--Education. Do the first two years matter? A conversation with Jerome Kagan. April 1973, 1(3), p 43.

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 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 the task of education be to develop the student's greatest talent to the point of excellence and that we also prepare him or her to live in today's world by developing at least minimum competence in the other two areas. Students would have the option of selecting the area or areas in which 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, but he would also be required to develop minimum levels of 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.

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 study 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. 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 good 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. My research on New Students showed that students who did not do very well in school had little opportunity to demonstrate other talents, and they learned to think of themselves as "below-average people." In our single-minded pursuit of academic excellence in the 1950's, we even tried to stamp out the so-called frills of education such as athletics, music, and leadership activities, which gave some young people their only opportunity for recognition for outstanding performance. Fortunately, the peer culture and the student personnel profession maintained a more balanced perspective and permitted the emergence of some diversity of talent.

People need to feel that they have a speciality--that they are doing something better than most other people could do it--and society needs this diversity of talent. Our present interpretation of academic standards fails to provide for the basic needs of either the individual or of society. There is no need for talking about lowering standards with the advent of mass education. No one wants to do that, least of all higher education's newest students who have nothing to gain from a devalued degree. What we should be talking about is raising standards and expanding the dimensions for outstanding achievement.

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 the curricula on the

basis of their strengths, not to select them out on the basis of their weaknesses.

I think all that is necessary to implement my proposed model for educational diversity is that we ask each student to select his area of excellence with the understanding that tough standards will be imposed. He can start anywhere 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 emphasis. Indeed, anyone may pursue excellence in any area once he has met competency requirements.

We already have the rudiments of the knowledge and things areas in our present 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

tools and materials. 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 out, of courses, in this area, while some "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. As a matter of fact, two young men in New York City have already started some remediation in this area. The September 24, 1973 issue of The New Yorker describes the Knowhow Workshop that exists, according to its founders, to liberate people from feelings of helplessness and dependence on others when they can't fix things in their homes. Apparently remediation at Knowhow Workshop can be quite exciting. The New Yorker writes,

We first heard about Knowhow last spring, when a friend of ours, a woman writer, enrolled in the basic course, Foundations I. She reported to us regularly, and with enthusiasm, on her progress, and once she phoned us at midnight to talk about her class in electric wiring. From the sound of her voice, she was experiencing what they call an altered state of consciousness. 'It's wonderful,' she said. 'I've always literally been scared to change a light bulb. Like Thurber's grandmother, I thought electricity was leaking out of the sockets. Do you know what I've been doing since I got home tonight? Putting a dimmer on every light in my apartment!' (p. 31).

Although this is human interest stuff for The New Yorker, I am frank to say that I think this student's rudimentary knowledge of electricity and her thrill in putting her knowledge to work is every bit as important a learning experience as what she might have had in a standard course in history or English.

We have some models for remedial as well as advanced curricula in the knowledge and things areas. We need to develop a human relations curriculum. Let me outline one possible model as a starting point. I shall use the field of psychology as my entering wedge 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.

One of the reasons we don't yet teach human relations skills in college, despite repeated warnings that society has urgent needs for people trained in this area, is that we don't really know how to teach the subject 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 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, of course, be granted for demonstrated proficiency in either learning option.

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 have made my proposal very specific this evening, not because I wish to defend this particular model as the model that will solve all our problems, but because I hope to get educators to stand back and take a fresh look at some of the assumptions that we have made into eternal verities. Equal opportunity means more than the opportunity to develop mediocre competence in the area of someone else's strength. It means the opportunity to develop one's own talents to the point of excellence. Most people today speak of education for diversity as though it were education by diversity. We are willing to entertain the idea that people can learn the same things by different methods or in differing amounts of time-- although goodness knows we are slow to implement even those obvious facts. Even when we do implement them, it is with the implicit understanding that some students will take to traditional academic learning like a duck to water, while others will struggle to remain afloat. Nevermind that our sinking duck can run like a gazelle or fly like a swallow. What we are not yet ready to concede is that running or flying is as good as swimming and that our world is better for the existence of all three talents, appropriately used.

The field of student personnel has important contributions to make to the new education. The new 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.

Personnel workers of the future must practice their profession in an integrated philosophy of education that is concerned with in-class as well as out-of-class experiences of students. 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.