

The Challenge of Open Admissions

The challenge of open admissions is moving to center stage in American higher education, with considerable doubt about whether colleges are ready to play their new role. It is estimated that 99% of the community colleges and more than half of all four-year institutions today are already open admissions colleges. Most community colleges voluntarily accepted the assignment to provide educational services to anyone who wanted to attend college; some community colleges even showed considerable dedication and missionary zeal for serving the new clientele. For increasing numbers of four-year colleges, however, there is not much choice. They are closet open admissions colleges. Embarrassed to admit publicly that they accept all comers, they harbor reluctant and even resentful faculties, ^{specialists} who prepared in their disciplines to spend their lives in a "community of scholars" or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof. ^{who wanted}

To many educators newly faced with the challenge of open admissions, the most difficult task is teaching students who are ill-prepared to learn what most college faculty members are prepared to teach. But as many community college teachers have discovered, teaching the bottom half of the class isn't so bad if you don't have to deal with the top half at the same time. The problem with open admissions is that it vastly increases the range and diversity of skills and motivations. ^{RULE OF THUMB.} I believe that dealing with diversity in the classroom is ^{a major} ~~the number one~~ problem in

Harvard Reading Seminar Series, Cambridge, Mass. Nov. 12, 1980

higher education today, and there is every evidence that it is going to get worse before it gets better. It is going to get worse for two reasons. First, more colleges are of necessity becoming open admissions colleges, and second, the fastest growing clientele, namely adult part-time students, represent greater diversity in background, skills, and goals than the more traditional eighteen year old student population.

The structures of traditional group instruction assure homo-
 geneity, ~~but our inability to cope with student diversity has not~~ *Altho there are clear signs that educ has not been able to cope with diversity*
~~we haven't been forced to develop new approaches,~~
~~been apparent so far~~ because diversity is easily accommodated in
 periods of expansion. The easiest solution is to add new people,
 new programs, even new colleges to serve those who are "different."
 Accommodating diversity through expansion doesn't complicate any-
 one's life because new people are added to do new things, and
 existing personnel are not required to adapt themselves to the
 change. The problem we face today is that diversity is continuing
 to increase while volume is steady or falling. The expansion
 model is not appropriate under these circumstances, and so the
 work load generated by diversity is working its way into the
 typical college classroom, ~~creating a demand for change on the~~
~~part of teachers.~~

I attribute much of the low morale and disaffection of college faculties today to the breakdown of the add-on model. It is a model designed to handle diversity when there is volume to go along with it. The add-on model is expensive, and it is hard to justify adding new staff and new programs when student volume is not increasing. The problem we face today is that diversity is continuing to increase while volume is steady or falling. The add-on model is not appropriate under these circumstances, and so the workload generated by diversity is working its way into the typical college classroom, creating a demand for change and leaving frustration and unhappiness in its wake.

The problem can be made clear through the use of an analogy that occurred to me as I made my ^{way} familiar trek to the ~~San Francisco~~ airport recently. For some years now, we have been busy building new access ramps onto the superhighway of postsecondary education. ~~When the new traffic threatens to cause congestion in any area, we simply add a new lane to the superhighway.~~ There is no real problem as long as the new traffic is traveling at roughly the same rate of speed and going in the same direction as the existing traffic. The problem comes when the new access ramps pour a vastly increased diversity of vehicles and drivers out onto the highway.

What we have on the postsecondary highway now is, to say the least, colorful in its variety. There are VWs and Cadillacs and Peterbilt trucks; old clunkers, sleek and powerful race cars, stock cars carrying an incredible mix of mismatched parts; and lately a few classy vintage antiques have appeared on the scene. Added to the variety of vehicles, we have slow drivers who want to travel in fast lanes, drivers whose only past experience is on country roads, drivers who can't read road signs, drivers whose attention is completely occupied elsewhere, and drivers who don't know where they are going.

Until this diversity forced itself on our attention, there were few crossroads at which colleges were forced to slow down, read the signs, and contemplate new directions. Now, however, the highway seems full of signs reading "caution," "yield," "slow down," and "do not enter." There is concern now that colleges, especially community colleges, have taken on more than they can handle, and conference themes abound with titles such as "Can the Community College Be All Things to All People?" and "Setting Priorities and Making Choices."

And so higher education is now telling itself that there are some decisions to be made. The first decision, I suppose, is whether the old highway design can handle all this diversity and, with reasonable efficiency, carry it where it is going. If it can't, then the decision gets down to where we are going to put traffic diverters and what access ramps we are going to close. It is, of course, hard to find a college these days that is interested in shutting off the flow of traffic into the institution. Even the hard job of teaching developmental students is infinitely preferable to no job at all. But even if a ^{h.e.} ~~community college~~ wanted to reduce student ^{diversity} ~~density~~ by placing some limitations on who could enter the superhighway, it would probably be politically impossible to close access ramps without providing acceptable alternatives. No ~~special interest~~ group that has lobbied for access to education is going to stand quietly by and see their access ramps closed. They would rather be on a clogged highway going nowhere than denied access altogether. Anyway, the taxpayers are going to see the problem as one of inefficient and outmoded highway design and traffic directions, and not as one of overcrowding--and, of course, at this particular time in history they ^{probably} are right.

So let us assume, in the first instance, that we are not going to close access ramps--at least not on any broad national scale. There is some tendency, however, to set up vehicle inspection stations on the ~~access ramps~~ *approaches to the highway*. A majority of states now have some form of minimum high school competency standards, some of which deny a diploma to students with grossly inadequate basic skills. These inspection stations will presumably screen out vehicles that have no hope of traveling any significant distance on the educational highway without breaking down. But the standards of the inspection stations are so minimal and the whole endeavor subject to so much criticism that it is doubtful that such screening will do much to alleviate the congestion. Moreover, tightening high school graduation standards has little impact on adults, who constitute the fastest growing segment of higher education, and represent even greater diversity in educational backgrounds and goals than eighteen year olds.

So let us next explore the possibility of helping faculty members deal more adequately with diversity in their classrooms. That too is going to be difficult. The assigned task of the classroom teacher is comparable to that of a traffic cop who is asked to meet twenty assorted vehicles of widely varying speed and states of repair and to escort them in a convoy to the next exit. They must all stay together throughout the trip; all must start and exit at the same time; and no one may stop along the way for repair or rest without going back to the beginning and joining the next convoy. That image is roughly comparable to taking a group of twenty diverse students at the beginning of the semester, insisting that they all move at the same pace through the same subject matter, exiting "on time" (our time, not necessarily theirs) without compromising anyone's academic standards.

If the convoy system worked, it would in fact ease congestion on the highway. There is no big problem in escorting twenty cars, all in good condition, all traveling at 50 miles per hour, all with drivers attending to the task, to the next exit. The problem increases in direct proportion to the amount of variation in the convoy. If, for example, in your convoy of twenty cars expected to travel at the 55 miles per hour speed limit, you have two cars traveling at 45 miles per hour and one at 30, you can even deal with that situation by expecting the 30 mile per hour vehicle to drop out and slowing the convoy down just a little for the 45 mile per hour cars. But picture yourself escorting a group of twenty cars where two could keep up if they had a wheel alignment, three have such erratic speeds that you can't tell what is wrong without stopping the whole convoy to analyze the situation, two don't want to go to the next exit but they like driving on the highway, three are out of gas and out of money to buy more, two have never been on a superhighway before and are scared to death, and two want to travel ~~65~~ miles per hour instead of 55. Anyone who is or has been a classroom teacher should feel some empathy with the problem. It is patently unrealistic to expect anyone to escort such a diverse group of travelers to a common exit in a predetermined amount of time. And yet that is what we expect of college teachers who are using a highway designed for the more homogeneous groups that characterized higher education in an earlier era.

Some colleges have devised ways of dealing with this diversity, and they work--or at least they help when diversity is not too great and the resources are not too limited. Unfortunately, both of the common methods for dealing with diversity lead to increased costs. Nevertheless, it is possible to either reduce the size of the group or add more personnel to handle the diversity.

In remedial education, for example, one of the more effective methods is to teach in very small groups so that individual diagnosis, prescription, and personal attention are possible. Or one can maintain the basic size of the group and deal with diversity through adding specialized services such as counselors, financial aid officers, peer tutors, basic skills specialists and the like. Both of these methods have been used extensively in dealing with diversity of learning ability in open admissions colleges. But since both methods lead to increased costs because of the increased teacher-student ratio, they are not likely to be looked upon with favor in the years ahead. As almost everyone knows by now, the first things to go in a budget crunch are specialized services and the so-called luxury of small classes. Thus, the old highway design is outmoded and increasingly unsatisfactory.

But if the old design sounds bad for teachers, pity the students destined to travel this outmoded highway. To illustrate the situation from the perspective of the student, let us assume that the highway between my home in ~~Berkeley~~ and the ~~San Francisco~~ Airport is designed and operated like a traditional college. I arrive at the access ramp where I am told that I must wait until five teacher-escorts and a hundred cars are ready to go to the airport. With justifiable indignation, I might complain that I don't need an escort, all I need is a map to tell me where I am going, some road signs to direct me, and a speedometer to inform me of my rate of progress. Patiently, the director of traffic tells me that since my escort knows the way, there are no road signs or maps, and since the group will be traveling at a uniform rate of speed, I don't need a speedometer. All I need is to stay with the group, trust the leader, and do as I am told. Frustrated, I might ask why I have to wait for five escorts and a hundred cars. Why can't I enter the highway when one escort and twenty cars are ready to go to the airport? I should have known

the answer to that one, of course. All five ~~airport~~ escorts are at the ~~San Francisco~~ Airport now and will not be back to escort me and my group for an hour. The reason for that is that the toll takers ~~on the bridge~~ collect tolls every hour on the hour, and so all of the escorts and their groups have to be there at the same time. It is, I am told, administratively impossible to handle the toll booths in any other way.

Resigned to what appears to me to be bureaucratic inefficiency, I spend my time observing, with rising interest and some sense of unease, my fellow travelers. One, a self-confident business executive, about 35 years old, driving a snappy sports car, assured me that she could go as fast as the speed limit permitted, and she left no doubt that she could be half way to the airport by now if she didn't have to wait for an escort and people like me. Meanwhile, an elderly gentleman in a beautiful old car said he had plenty of time and would really rather be taking a country road, but there were no maps and no road signs and he didn't know how to get to the airport by any route except the superhighway. Off to one side of the group was a very shy young driver who didn't say anything but his engine was sputtering badly, and I had the impression that he hesitated to go get it fixed because he was too shy to ask for help. Each new driver and car added to the interest and colorful diversity of our group that was preparing to travel the unknown highway.

Finally our escorts arrived and we all started off down the highway trusting in our escort and hoping we could stay with the group. Through the rearview mirror, I saw the shy driver pull off the highway as his engine died. I don't know whether our escort even noticed, but if he did there wasn't much he could do about it anyway. Meanwhile I caught a glimpse of the white knuckles on the mahogany steering wheel as the elderly gentleman, frightened but game, pushed his car to 55 miles per hour. I doubted that he was enjoying

the trip and I knew that the travel was more important to him than the destination. Then much to my horror, my car began to make odd noises. Not being shy, I informed our escort who listened to the car for a few minutes and said it didn't sound too serious and suggested I try to keep up with the group. If the noises got worse, he said, I should request a tutor-mechanic to ride along with me and see if we could fix the problem while we traveled along. Well the noises did get worse. I was fortunate and was able to get a tutor fairly quickly, and as we rode along, I tried to listen to the noises, answer the questions from my tutor, and keep my mind on the speed of the group and its destination. While it was nice to have someone along with me who was lending help and support, I was only too aware that I had dropped from the middle of the convoy to the tail end, and I was getting worried. I didn't think that the noises in my car were my fault, but I wasn't sure. Perhaps they were the fault of the highway system for building bumpy roads or the fault of the people who last serviced the car, but I had a deep-down nagging feeling that maybe there was something wrong with me and my driving ability.

Halfway to the airport, there was a sizeable bump in the road which was labeled with the only sign on the highway. It said "midterm," and it jarred me enough so that the red warning light went on on the dashboard. Alarmed, my tutor and I decided I better stop at the next service station for repairs. My escort was understanding and helpful. He directed me to the service station, called ahead for a appointment, and suggested that when things were fixed, I could join the next convoy to the airport.

~~Needless to say, I might or might not have made it to this meeting if our highway system were run like our schools. I am fairly certain that I would not~~ ^{the airport}

face my next trip with any great confidence or enthusiasm, despite the knowledge that the woman in the sports car arrived at the airport without incident or problem. I am also fairly sure that I would complain bitterly about the inefficiency of the highway system, despite the kindness and understanding of my escort, my tutor, and the people at the service station.

Now, getting an education is admittedly somewhat more complicated than driving a car. But the difference is not as great as we commonly believe. Driving an extremely complicated and lethal machine through a complex maze of signs and directions over hundreds and thousands of miles of roads varying in size from two to eight lanes across unfamiliar terrain is no simple task. Yet almost everyone in our society learns how to read a map, how to follow directions, how to gauge their progress, how to tell when they are lost, how to recognize warning signs, and some even know how to diagnose and repair their vehicles. Our highway system would simply become unworkable were we to create the dependence among drivers that we have created among learners in postsecondary education.

~~I believe that our educational system is very close to breaking down. It was designed in a different era to serve a different student clientele. There is no end in sight to long-term and increasing diversity, and things will get worse not better for almost every college in the country. We have reached the point where tinkering with an outmoded design for education will almost certainly prove inadequate. Students can, should, and must assume more responsibility for their own learning. We can no longer afford escort service, and even if we could, the escort notion violates so much of the research on effective learning that we must find other alternatives. Educators can and should spend less time escorting convoys and more time marking the route, helping students determine destinations,~~

Okay, so what kinds of new designs can handle diversity? Among the first of the options that should be considered as we move into the learning society is having students assume more responsibility for their own learning. We can no longer afford escort service, and even if we could, the escort notion violates so much of the research on effective learning that we must find other alternatives. Educators can and should spend less time escorting convoys and more time marking the route, helping students determine their destinations, providing maps of the alternatives for getting there, diagnosing and repairing learning problems, and in general designing a new educational system that can handle student diversity at reasonable cost. If we have any intention at all of implementing the ideal -- indeed the modern necessity -- of lifelong learning, we are going to have to prepare college students for their futures as adult learners capable of defining their objectives, exploring the options, and assuming more responsibility for the direction of their ^{own} learning activities.

A second method for dealing with diversity is to use technology for individualizing instruction and for making it cost effective. Why is it that voices are commonly raised in horror at the cost of individualized instruction, but few cost-conscious critics raise questions about the redundancy of eighty English teachers at the University of Illinois all lecturing, with widely varying skill and preparation, on roughly the same topic? My point is not that the University of Illinois should replace English teachers with machines; it is that education would be more cost effective if everyone and everything in education did those things that they do uniquely well. Great lecturers might lecture to thousands; great tutors might tutor one. Machines provide unique opportunities for self-pacing; computers are capable of individualizing everything from testing to ^{assignments} ~~prescription~~. Telecourses offer quality control not often

Faculties bring rigorous standards to telecourses, but¹² they remain reluctant to observe the Teaching U seen in education. colleagues, let alone criticize them.

These seem to me ~~to be obvious and~~ minimal ways of meeting diversity in the classroom. Ultimately, I believe that we will have to rethink and revise the structures of education to escape the tyranny of the semester. An educational structure that is premised on the assumption that time and methods of instruction are constants for any given classroom of learners, while level of achievement is a normally distributed variable ranging from A to F, results in a society in which some people are well educated while others are poorly educated. We might do better to absorb diversity by letting time and teaching methods vary while holding achievement constant.

I've been around ed long & I see massive change is inevitable, and yet, I think that we are essentially stuck & face squarely the problem of diversity in classroom - I'd like to hear your solutions &