

CHANGING STUDENT POPULATIONS

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Given the depressed and depressing atmosphere surrounding education these days, it may be necessary to remind ourselves that although the schools of the 1950s were widely admired and well supported, only half of the young people were staying in school through the twelfth grade. By 1964 the proportion had grown to two-thirds, and by 1970, three-fourths were graduating from high school. Boosting the high school graduation rate from 50 percent to 75 percent in just two decades is a phenomenal achievement, and it means not just more high school graduates, but different kinds of students that reflect more accurately a cross section of the American public.

For higher education, the change followed a similar pattern; colleges extended the proportion of young people served from one-fourth in 1952 to a third by 1964 to half by 1970. With increasing numbers came greater variety. In the competition of the 1940s and 50s, colleges usually selected students who had already demonstrated that they were prepared to learn what colleges were prepared to teach. Today students select colleges; colleges are less and less likely to

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select students. Indeed, nationwide, half of all students entering college today enter open-door community colleges.

Even before we get a good handle on learning how to teach more representative populations of young people, however, we are discovering that our task does not end with educating the children of all of the people, but rather with educating all of the people -- many of whom are parents and grandparents. Because of the rapid escalation of educational attainment in recent decades, the reservoir of older people to be educated is exceptionally large at this particular time in our history. Never before and probably never again, will the intergenerational differences in formal schooling be so great. Eighty-four percent of today's young people between the ages of 20 and 24 have completed four years of high school or more. For their parents (age 45-49), approximately two-thirds have completed high school, but for the grandparent generation (age 70-74), only 38 percent have graduated from high school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977).

Clearly, the individual of any age without a high school education or its equivalent is handicapped in making it in today's world where knowledge is exploding fast enough to create and wipe out entire industries within a single decade. People of all ages must, of necessity, become lifelong learners. No education will last a lifetime, and no educational program will be immune from constant change and evolution.

I would like to comment this afternoon on two student populations that seem to me most likely to require major change in the way we teach and structure education. For want of better terminology, I am going to label these two groups "basic skills students" and "adult

part-time learners." While no one seems to take offense at the labeling of adult part-time learners, the group that I am calling basic skills students has been subjected to a great variety of labels -- disadvantaged, remedial, New Students, high risk, developmental, non-traditional, basic skills, and underprepared -- to mention the labels in rough chronological order of their occurrence in the literature. I use the term "basic skills," to suggest that these students are severely limited in life choices because they lack the basic skills essential for lifelong learning. In an earlier era, they might not have graduated from high school and almost certainly would not have gone on to college.

My own research for the past decade has been concerned with describing the characteristics, motivations, needs, and interests of student populations newly aspiring to college, primarily poor students -- economically and educationally -- and adult part-time learners (Cross, 1971, 1976, 1981). In the studies of low achievers, I reanalyzed data from four large national data banks, ranging in size from 9,000 to 63,000 students, to compare attitudes, abilities, and interests of high school seniors scoring in the lowest third on traditional tests of academic achievement with those from the top third.

The lowest third, I called New Students because they were "new" to higher education. I labeled the top third "traditional" students because the populations they represented had been going to college before the great explosion of open admissions colleges in the 1960s. The majority of New Students are the white sons and daughters of blue-collar

workers, although ethnic minorities are overrepresented among low-performing high school seniors. Whatever their color, New Students are typically first-generation college students. Neither they nor their parents know what to expect from college, but their hope is that it will lead to better jobs and greater choices in life.

I found highly significant differences between New Students and traditional students in self-concept, interests, and in attitudes toward school (Cross, 1971). Young people who graduate from high school in the lowest third of the class look at education differently from those who have been more successful in school. They derive little satisfaction from their studies, and they are twice as likely as top-third students to say that they feel tense, nervous, or shy in class. They rate themselves "below average" on almost any characteristic related to school work, agreeing, we might observe, with the teachers who have graded them throughout their school years. Community college teachers who have worked with these students in remedial education classes say that "low intelligence" is not the primary reason for their dismal school performance. Rather "lack of effort; has quit trying" seems to be the culprit (Cross, 1971).

It should surprise no one to learn that a young person, who proceeds through school a rather obvious failure at what is assumed to be the major job of young people, has given up trying when the result of effort rarely results in the teacher's reward of an A or in the admiration of peers. For the educational system, rooted in its traditions of semesters and the bell-shaped curve, there will always be a lower third. And that lower third will probably continue to think poorly of themselves and of school until they experience success as a result of their own efforts. That, I believe, is the major

lesson learned from the research and experience of the past several decades. Our educational task, while enormously difficult and complicated, would seem to involve in some form the following ingredients: (1) to set learning tasks that are realistic for the individual, (2) to structure the tasks so that it is clear what is to be accomplished, (3) to maintain high expectations of performance, and (4) to provide the necessary help, but to permit students to reap the rewards of self-satisfaction as a result of their own efforts.

Both schools and colleges are incorporating these ingredients into programs designed to serve basic skills students. Because I am more familiar with programs in higher education than in secondary schools, however, I will comment briefly on the impact of these students on educational practices in higher education.

(1) Most colleges and universities (81 percent according to Carnegie surveys) now have remedial programs in reading, writing, arithmetic, and other basic skills. Furthermore, such programs are almost as prevalent in selective universities as in community colleges (Stadtman, 1980).

(2) Some form of individualization of instruction (e.g., PSI, CAI, video cassettes) is now offered in almost all (89 percent) institutions of higher education (Stadtman, 1980). Most colleges and universities, regardless of their admissions selectivity, have learning laboratories and learning specialists to help students at all levels of ability improve academic skills.

(3) Diagnostic testing and placement are seen as increasingly important, and there is much less hesitancy to require students to take tests or remedial work than there was a decade ago. The permissive

rhetoric of the 1960s that "students have a right to fail" has given way to the accountability rhetoric of the 1980s that "schools have an obligation to succeed."

(4) Faculty are more articulate in defining needed competencies and more creative in using a greater variety of teaching methods. Furthermore, I see a growing number of college teachers who get their intellectual kicks out of tackling tough pedagogical problems.

(5) Colleges are less easily intimidated by students who are unwilling to do the necessary work. Miami-Dade Community College, for example, is systematically raising expectations for remedial students, with reported increases in both student and faculty morale (McCabe, 1981).

Now let us turn to the second new student population that is exerting a major impact on education -- adult part-time learners. Unlike basic skills students, who tend to be accepted reluctantly by educators, adult learners are desired and courted. Schools and colleges are finding themselves in fierce competition with one another as well as with other agencies of society for what is quite blatantly called "the adult market." It is estimated that about one in three American adults is engaged each year in some form of "organized instruction."

To meet the demand, there are five leading providers of educational services for adults -- community organizations, two-year colleges, four-year colleges and universities, employers, and grade and high schools -- each with between ten and twenty percent of the market. Employers and professional associations are also major providers of education for adults. It remains to be seen whether or how the balance will shift in the years ahead. There is a growing sense of unease over the

organization and delivery of adult education, and providers who paid little attention to one another in more affluent days are now uncomfortably aware of the growing competition. Within universities, civil war is breaking out between extension divisions and the so-called "main campus" over whether services to adult part-time students should be decentralized into the various departments or centralized in extension divisions (Frandsen, 1976). There are also new turf wars between colleges that used to be friends; 80 percent of the institutions polled in a recent Carnegie survey admitted that they are experiencing competition from other colleges (Stadtman, 1980). In California, the competition between school districts and community colleges for adult programs resulted in a recent recommendation for binding arbitration in cases where turf fights cannot be settled amicably. Universities are finding themselves in big-time competition with professional associations such as the American Management Association and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, both of which have educational budgets running into millions of dollars (Stern, 1979). If educators are counting on their academic credit monopoly to win in the battle shaping up over adult learners, they can forget that advantage of an earlier era. Most adults don't care about academic credit, and many of the most prestigious adult programs, California's Continuing Education of the Bar or Harvard's Advanced Management Program, for example, carry no credit. Colleges seem to recognize that fact of adult life, and within the last ten years, more than a thousand colleges have newly entered the non-credit educational market.

If, however, adults do want credit for their learning, there are now plenty of ways to get it. Eighty-four percent of all colleges now grant credit for CLEP examinations (up from 35 percent

in 1970); 41 percent grant credit by assessment of experiential learning (up from 14 percent a decade earlier) (Stadtman, 1980). Most also accept the credit recommendations of the American Council on Education's Office of Educational Credit for courses offered by employers or through the military services. In addition to having more options for college credit, adults can also choose among a new variety of degree-granting providers. Within commuting distance of my home in Boston are four new degree programs developed by agencies for whom education is a secondary activity -- a consulting firm, Massachusetts General Hospital, a computer laboratory, and the American Institute of Banking. The degree offerings of these agencies range from Associate to Master's degrees. Indeed, there is so much going on so fast that traditional educators are finding themselves in a new intensely competitive and entrepreneurial ball game.

Frankly, I'm not sure what all this activity portends for the relationship between schools and higher education. The field is so much bigger than both of us that if we don't hang together we may very well hang separately. Perhaps the unique obligation that school and college educators share is that of helping students, whenever they are with us, become competent lifelong learners. That means three things:

First, teaching, to the best of our ability, the basic skills that permit adults to continue to learn from a wide variety of opportunities. We have already spent considerable time on that issue, and I will not repeat the toughness of that assignment here.

Second, we need to promote the attitudes and values that contribute

to an interest in continuous learning. There is already a sizeable difference in the educational participation rate between the well-educated and the poorly-educated, and that gap is growing. A college graduate is more than twice as likely to be engaged in adult education as a high school graduate, and a high school graduate is more than twice as likely as a non-graduate to be a participant. All studies of adult participation in educational activities show that the more formal education people have, the more interested they are in further education, the more they know about available opportunities, and the more they participate. In short, learning is addictive; the more education people have, the more they want, and of course the better their position, politically and economically, to get what they want.

The worry is that there are many forces pushing in the direction of making adult education even more elitist than it already is. Many young professionals, for example, have little choice about continuing their education. States and professional associations are requiring members of certain vocations and professions to participate in continuing education in order to retain or renew their licenses to practice. Forty-five states require continuing education for optometrists, and a few states are setting up continuing educational requirements for all licensed vocations. Managers and young executives represent another group that are frequently under considerable pressure to gain further educational experience, either through employer-sponsored programs or through tuition reimbursement plans. In contrast, less well educated people in the society are less likely to be pushed to participate; they are less likely to be paid or reimbursed for participation, and

they are less likely to be given time off or employer encouragement. Thus, educational advantages and disadvantages have a way of piling up to create their own upward or downward spiral, toward or away from participation. Most studies show that a greater discrepancy exists between the well educated and the poorly educated on measures of interest than on measures of participation. The irony of that is that as new opportunities become available, the well-educated will rush to take advantage of them while the undereducated will stay away in droves. At least that will be the case if the entrepreneurial mode continues to operate in which providers design and market their services to the most receptive markets.

Up to now, there has been a tendency for public policy to support educational programs for the economically and educationally disadvantaged. The problem comes in attracting adults who may have left school early precisely because they were unhappy and unsuccessful there. They are unlikely to return to learning programs that remind them of their early misery and embarrassment in school.

Formal education is surely the most critical part of the learning society. It develops the skills and forms the attitudes that make lifelong learning probable or improbable. As educators, we need to think more carefully about everything we can do to avoid creating a hard core undereducated that are alien to the new opportunities that are part of the learning society.

The third responsibility of formal education is to develop discerning consumers of lifelong education. It is a virtual certainty that adults in the Twenty-first Century will have an unparalleled choice of educational opportunities. They will need to know how to select the

program that best meets their needs. That means knowing the advantages and disadvantages of the options available, but it also means knowing something about themselves as learners. I suggest that it should be a solemn responsibility of the compulsory school system as well as higher education to teach students to be more self aware of how they learn and which educational methods are working for them.

There is reason to think that the presence of a critical mass of discriminating learners in the society would stimulate the education industry in much the same way that gourmet cooks or physical fitness buffs have sparked remarkable vitality in the industries that serve them. Without question, knowledgeable cooks with developed tastes have stimulated the imagination and improved the quality of the cooking and dining industry. The more people know about foods, cooking, and nutrition, the more imaginative and responsive the industry must become. The gourmet cooking movement has demanded and received a tremendous response from restaurateurs, manufacturers of cooking equipment, cooking schools, and publishers of specialized cookbooks and magazines. A similar analogy can be made in certain sports. The more knowledgeable runners and joggers are regarding their needs, the more likely they are to demand forty varieties of running shoes over the all-purpose sneaker of a decade ago. Ten years ago, the sneaker industry would have said that there was no market for greater variety in active sport shoes. The difference between yesterday and today is that the society now consists of large numbers of runners and joggers and tennis players able to assess their individualistic needs and willing to pay large dividends to the industry responding.

In closing, I leave with you this question: which came first, the demand for greater variety and sophistication in cooking equipment and running shoes or the imagination of producers and marketers who saw new needs and responded with creativity and imagination to first meet and then enhance the demand?

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