

QUALITY AND THE OPEN DOOR: A RESPONSE
TO THE MIAMI-DADE REFORMS

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I think you will understand both Bob's presentation and my response better if I begin my remarks by pointing out a major difference in the way we approach community college problems. When Bob says "Community colleges should . . ." he means Miami-Dade is already doing it or has a clear method for doing it. When I say "Community colleges should . . ." that's what I mean. Accountability for a community college president is different from that for a university professor.

I'm afraid Bob's modesty could lead you to believe that this is just another paper. It isn't. It's the Miami-Dade program for reform. Thus my response is not just to Bob's presentation here, but to the program being implemented at Miami-Dade.

I'm not going to pretend that you will get a critical appraisal of the Miami-Dade program from me--at least not until the final one third of my response. I am an unabashed fan of Miami-Dade Community College. It is the "can do" college for

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the 1980s. Quite simply, Miami-Dade is bringing about the marriage of the two ideals of American higher education--quality and equality. It has been a long and difficult courtship. A lot of people said that it would never work. You can't have quality if you let just anyone into a college, and you can't have equality if you keep certain people out. To date, our efforts to merge quality and equality have been less than successful in both open door and selective institutions. When the community colleges responded to the demand for educational opportunities for the poor, minorities, and students whose academic accomplishments barred them from other opportunities, they were successful in attracting a disproportionate share of America's disadvantaged. The "coming slums" of higher education, sniffed some of their critics. When so-called prestige institutions failed to attract, admit, or serve anywhere near their proportionate share of the disadvantaged, they were charged with elitism and racism. Nor could colleges win by opting for a little prestige and a little social responsibility. No sense of identity or mission there.

If we can keep the ship of higher education afloat in the 1980s, we may be able to pull off a shipboard marriage between quality and equality in both selective and open door institutions. Certainly many selective institutions are working harder than they ever have toward the three R's of the 1980s--recruitment, retention, and remediation. And many open door institutions are

working harder than they ever have toward the three E's--equality, excellence, and equilibrium.

Extensive reform usually upsets equilibrium, at least temporarily. But my sense of things at Miami-Dade is that their reform is moving along with a sense of direction and purpose that adds stability, despite the fact that they are attempting to change some deeply entrenched practices in higher education. It is a toss-up, I think, as to whether it is more upsetting to try to change the practices or the purposes of education. On the surface it would appear that changing purposes should be far more disruptive than changing practices. However, the purposes of higher education today are radically different from those of the 17th century, while classroom practices have remained undisturbed for centuries. Were John Harvard to walk the Harvard Yard today, he would be completely bewildered by the curriculum, the students, and the campus, but he would feel right at home in most of the classrooms.

Miami-Dade's reform, if it goes the whole way, which I hope it will, is going to change the practices of higher education to serve rather traditional purposes. At the heart of Miami-Dade's innovation is the nontraditional practice of individualization. I say individualization is nontraditional because the traditional system of education rests on the basic premise of group instruction. Any teacher or administrator who has tried to introduce

individualization into an American classroom knows from sad experience how all-pervasive the assumptions of group instruction are. The assignments of students and teachers assume reasonably homogeneous classroom groups, as does funding, the counting of credits, the scheduling of classes, even the architecture of campuses. In fact, we are so enslaved by the tradition of group-based education that in order to recognize individual differences, we had to devise the grading system. Grades are just about the only things in traditional education that are individualized. Students are judged individually, but in all other respects they are treated as a group. In any given classroom, the group has the same assignments, the same methods of instruction, the same amount of time to accomplish the learning tasks. Reality comes at the end of the semester when we acknowledge that while teaching may have been the same for all members of the group, learning was not. Some students learned very little and received D's while others learned a lot and received A's.

What Miami-Dade is trying to do is to make sure that all students learn a lot--excellence for everyone--which is what it will take to make it in a world in which mastery of the basic skills is becoming an absolute necessity. Miami-Dade's initial step toward that challenge has been to change the administrative rather than the instructional practices of education--although anyone who knows the Miami-Dade program has to be impressed with how

rapidly faculty have developed enthusiasm and expertise in individualizing instruction. But Bob has placed considerable emphasis in his remarks today on the importance of controlling student flow, which is an administrative function. The basic idea is to diagnose where students are when they enter Miami-Dade and to devise a realistic program for each student. To the extent that the diagnosis and prescription are accurate, Miami-Dade can then hold firm to their expectation that each student has a fair opportunity to succeed. Students will be given every possible assistance to meet the raised expectations. What they will not be given is college credit; they'll have to earn that.

What makes the Miami-Dade program so exciting is their willingness to look at every problem with the optimistic belief that there is a solution. That is why I call them the "can do" college. If there is any college in the country that had a really good excuse for not tackling the tough problem of improving quality right now, it is an open door college of more than 50,000 students, with a majority of minorities, set in the midst of one of America's fastest changing communities. Individualization of anything, including counseling and advising which has been the traditional stand-by for attention to the individual needs of students, would have seemed totally unrealistic. Perhaps that is why this reform had to come from Miami-Dade where it is so patently clear that the old ways are not going to work anymore. But one also

has to recognize the fortuitous circumstances that brought together in one institution a twenty-year tradition of innovation, a need that could not be ignored, the genius of Bob McCabe, and the technology and decreasing costs of computers.

The enormous attraction of the Miami-Dade reforms is that they are the "now" solutions to problems that people have. Any promise to improve quality without giving on equality is going to be greeted with enthusiasm--maybe to the detriment of other things we should be thinking about.

Now I am entering the final third of my response and my promise to raise some questions about the Miami-Dade model. The Miami-Dade reform is basically a traditionalist's approach to reform--which is to preserve traditional education by improving it. One traditional measure of quality in community colleges is the number of successful transfers. That is the old junior college concept, but much of the current criticism of the quality of community colleges revolves around the transfer issue. Ed Gleazer, past president of AACJC, has been promoting a community college of the future in which the numbers of students transferring to four-year institutions is a minor measure of success. Gleazer's vision calls for the community college to provide leadership for community development and community service.¹

¹Gleazer, Edmund J. Values, Vision, and Vitality. Washington D.C.: American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1980.

He is not distressed by the drop-in, drop-out, occasional students who use the college to satisfy their own needs for lifelong learning. His criteria for success would be the extent to which the college met the requirements of the community and of lifelong learners rather than the extent to which students meet the requirements of the faculty.

Traditionalists are inclined to believe that education should be orderly. There are courses to be taken, requirements to be met, standards to be achieved. The ultimate order was found in the traditional college of yesteryear in which the ideal full-time student spent four years on the campus pursuing a course of study approved by the college, and graduating "on time" without any stop-outs or other irregularities. To traditionalists, one of the great appeals of the Miami-Dade program is that they are bringing order to the chaos in which community colleges find themselves with a growing majority of part-time students, part-time faculty, few students who graduate on time, and few who transfer to a four-year institution.

What I am asking you to think about is not whether Miami-Dade should pursue their model, but whether other community colleges should. Or should some colleges strike out in bold new ways to develop a community college that serves different purposes? It is quite possible to adopt Miami-Dade's procedures for individualization but to apply them to a different set of priorities.

No college can do everything at once, and the priorities at Miami-Dade right now are the traditional ones of developing a core curriculum, setting universal standards, facilitating the transfer process, attracting outstanding students, and most recently working with high schools to improve secondary education. I have no quarrel with these priorities. They strengthen the role of the community college in the vertical dimensions of the standard educational system.

There is, however, a horizontal dimension for community colleges that is emerging as we move into the Learning Society. The priorities of the horizontal dimension call for working with local industry to develop appropriate opportunities for continuing education for workers, working with local government to identify problems and to develop education programs to address those problems, establishing lifelong learning relationships with adults in the community, and working with community agencies to improve the quality of life for the undereducated as well as the well-educated.

In conclusion, I think community colleges have some tough decisions to make in the 1980s. It may be that the united sense of mission that built the community colleges is ready to diverge now into different paths of development. Or it may be that this is the time to restore the credibility of the community colleges through working on traditional standards that everyone--faculty, students, legislators, and taxpayers--understands, and then to

introduce new models when public priorities change. I am inclined to think that within a decade or so we will need an institution that ends up where the community colleges were once headed. The question is should we be developing some strong models for the horizontal dimension of education as well as the vertical dimension?