

The Learning Society

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Without attempting to be overdramatic, I will begin with the blunt assertion that I believe that if we could look back at the early 1970's from the vantage point of 1984, we would find that these years introduced the greatest change to occur in higher education in over a hundred years--perhaps ever. Most people today grant that we are in the midst of shifting from higher education as a privilege to higher education as a right, but the impact of that reality has not yet been felt by the majority of colleges and universities in this country.

Let me draw some contrasts between what many of us still stereotype--perhaps nostalgically--as the college experience and what we know to be the reality of the future if we look carefully at today's trends.

It starts with the change in the concept of college from exclusiveness to inclusiveness. Gradually at first, and now with increasing momentum, the barriers to college admission have come tumbling down. In the early days of private colleges, criteria for admission were social and financial. Those excluded were primarily those who lacked money for tuition and expenses. With the advent of public colleges, we began the meritocratic phase of higher education in which those excluded were those who lacked the high school grades and the test scores to indicate academic promise. With the increasing social sophistication of the country, we

realized that most barriers to further education were highly interrelated, operating to exclude quite consistently certain groups of people. With that realization, the national picture changed abruptly, and we found ourselves abolishing one barrier after another in rapid succession. The call for equality of educational opportunity brought the establishment of open-admissions community colleges at the rate of one a week throughout the late 1960's. Then we found ourselves actively recruiting previously excluded poor people, ethnic minorities, and women. Now we are looking for ways to abolish all other exclusionary practices including discrimination because of age, part-time student status, and geographical isolation.

Most public statements today have only one condition for participation in postsecondary education. Increasingly we are likely to say that our national policy is that anyone who wants to learn is entitled to two years of education beyond high school. As a matter of practice, however, we don't even exclude those who don't want to learn. Mounting pressures for college attendance have forced some reluctant learners into involuntary attendance at college. The Carnegie Commission has estimated that almost one-third of the undergraduates are "less than fully committed" and other studies have suggested that about 15 percent of the students are in college "against their own will" (Carnegie Commission, 1972, p. 51). Quite recently, pressures on students to attend college seem to have subsided, but pressures on colleges to recruit students have increased. Despite fluctuations from time to time, however, the long-term trend has been to increase the pressures for college attendance. We in higher education are as aggressive as any business in promoting the necessity of our services. In our zeal to bring about an egalitarian learning society, we advertise, we create college-motivation clinics, and we promise that we will soon pipe education

into every living room in America. Indeed, we are headed for a society in which it is going to be very difficult to escape participation in formal learning activities.

Since I am one of those missionaries who believes in education, my purpose is not to criticize our faith and our zeal. But I cannot help observing that education occupies a place in our society that must be akin to that enjoyed by religion in an earlier period in history. While not everyone is in agreement on the methods, procedures, and structures of education, nonbelievers who fail to profess faith in education as a universal good are rare indeed.

Most people want to learn and they want society to provide the opportunities. In a national survey conducted by Educational Testing Service last year, 80 percent of the adults between the ages of 18 and 60 said that they were interested in learning more about some subject, and one-third had actually engaged in some type of formal learning in the year prior to the study (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974). The respect for learning is widespread; people believe in it, and given appropriate opportunity, they practice it. Although individual colleges may still exclude those deemed unsuited to their particular educational creed, the national picture is one of great activity to embrace everyone in the new learning society. In the short space of 20 years, we have moved from a national policy of exclusion to inclusion in college admissions.

The second trend I want to talk about in connection with the learning society I shall label campus-expansiveness. Geographically, as well as conceptually, colleges are reaching out to include a broader community. Early in the history of higher education, colleges were deliberately located in small towns such as Ann Arbor, Ithaca, and Palo Alto away from

the hustle of the city. Faculty lived around the campus and students lived on the campus, and college was a community unto itself--its geographical isolation a symbol of its removal from the worldly concerns of the masses.

Things are quite different today. Colleges pride themselves on being very much a part of the real world. College professors serve as mayors, run for President and negotiate world peace; students run for state legislatures as well as for city council. The boundaries between college and the real world grow fuzzy. Not only have students and faculty moved from campus activities into extensive participation in the broad social problems of the world, but the new strategy is to take the colleges to the people, either by locating them in population centers or by extending them into rural areas. This new geography of college location reflects the change from exclusiveness to inclusiveness, but it reflects something even more fundamental to the learning society. It recognizes that universities no longer serve as the repositories of all knowledge. Great cities are conceded to have some of the finest educational resources available anywhere. Metropolitan libraries, museums, symphonies, and business offices combine with rich cultural diversity to provide learning experiences unparalleled on conventional college campuses.

Where off-campus learning facilities do not exist naturally, they can be created through imaginative use of technology. Talk-back television permits isolated learners to join in class discussions conducted hundreds of miles away. England's Open University has successfully popularized the vision of a high quality scientific microscope standing alongside the blender in the well-equipped kitchen. Study commissions assure us that by the end of decade, cable television will be serving 40 to 60 percent of all American television homes and a videocassette player will be a

common sight in homes across the country (Walton, 1974).

The trend is as clear as it is steady. The college campus has burst explosively from its boundaries, and decentralization of learning is the major trend of our times. Even thoroughly traditional colleges are looking for new people to serve and new locations of operation. In a survey conducted last year for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Ruyle, & Geiselman, 1974) the investigators concluded that there were between 1000 and 1400 nontraditional programs in this country, most of them less than two years old and two-thirds of them in off-campus locations. Thus, one of the consequences of the decision to include rather than exclude people from postsecondary learning opportunities is the expanded campus that takes learning to the people. The two movements that I have described as people-inclusive and campus-expansive are fully underway and perhaps they have already been felt by most of us in this room.

The third great trend is just beginning. We have seen but the tip of the iceberg, but it will have a profound effect upon education as an enterprise, upon us as individual educators, and on society at large. And that trend, I shall label education-competitive and/or education-cooperative. I refer to the fact that in the new learning society, education is no longer a monopoly. Until quite recently, most learners were doing their learning in the regular school system. But for a number of years now, enrollments in the so-called educational periphery consisting of business and industry, government agencies, proprietary institutions, community agencies, and correspondence and television courses have been growing faster than those in the educational core. It is estimated that by the end of the decade more people will be learning from sources outside the established school system than in it (Moses, 1970).

So far, most of the educational periphery consists of nonprofit education of employers for employees, organizations for their members, etc., but if we are to believe the market surveys of recent years, there is a very large adult market out there with the ability, the motivation, and the money to pay for the kind of education they want. Entrepreneurs of business are not blind to the economic potential of the coming learning society. Stock in proprietary institutions has yet to fulfill the promise that some claim for it, but Business Week (September 6, 1969) has advised readers that investment in proprietary schools may be a "sweet number for investors and acquisition-hungry corporations (p. 74)." Indeed, there are now some 10,000 schools in this country that make greater or lesser amounts of money by training people for jobs. These business schools, barber colleges, radio and TV repair schools, etc., together with 750 correspondence schools enrolled nearly three million students in 1972 and took in about \$1.5 billion.

In the education-competitive cycle there is a give and take in which smaller, more flexible institutions rise first to meet changing conditions, followed by the more staid and cumbersome establishment. If the demand is great enough and the response of established institutions slow enough, totally new institutions will be created--as witness the appearance of the land-grant universities and later the community colleges and most recently the Open Universities, the Empire States, and perhaps in the near future, the regional examining universities recommended by the Newman Task Force (1971).

The learning society is likely to accelerate the education-competitive phase, at least in the beginning. In this transitional period we are in a buyer's market. Supply has caught up with demand, and students are in a

position to get what they want. There will be a certain amount of threat to established institutions as well as a certain amount of stimulus for reform. The threat right now is that of declining enrollments, and the stimulus for reform is the promise of new learning markets consisting of all those previously excluded from higher education.

Many of you are aware that the Carnegie Commission and the Federal government have recently revised their already gloomy statistics about future college enrollments to even gloomier forecasts (Watkins, 1973). The reason they had to revise them, of course, is that straight-line predictions based on birthrates are not usually very accurate. Too many factors intervene to place any great confidence in long-range forecasts about who will attend college. In recent years, for example, the number of young men entering college directly from high school has fallen sharply--from 63 percent in 1968 to 53 percent in 1972 (Young, 1973). That factor was not foreseen in the earlier projections. We had become accustomed to predicting steady increases in the proportion of high school graduates entering college. The end of the draft, the employment picture, and other factors changed that, and revisions have become necessary.

Today there is, once again, one of those unforeseen factors emerging in the statistics. If the trends of the past three years with respect to the adult learning market continue unabated, it will have considerable impact on higher education--one that will affect future enrollment figures. The enrollment of adults and part-time students is on the rise--especially in community colleges, and research conducted for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study indicates that there is a massive move on the part of colleges to attract adult learners. In the space of only a few years, between one-fourth and one-third of the colleges in the country have intro-

duced new flexibilities and new programs--usually aimed at the part-time adult learner. The movement generates its own energy. More offerings on the part of colleges stimulates more interest on the part of potential learners. Even in these early stages of the learning society, the research suggests that there are roughly 14 million adults in this country who say they would like to take college-level courses (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974). If colleges continue to open new opportunities and if even one-third of the potential learners enroll, a few years hence we will be revising our enrollment projections upward again.

While we can see the start of the learning society we are not quite sure yet whether it is real and enduring. If, for example, the Carnegie Commission felt that industry and government would take seriously their recommendation to grant regular, paid educational leaves of absence to adult employees and to provide a national endowment of two years of subsidized postsecondary education to be cashed in at any time, would they still be pessimistic about future enrollments?

I, for one, take seriously the possibility of the learning society. One of the most significant signs of the arrival of a new era in education is the pervasive trend toward what I shall call the education-cooperative phase. Yes, we are competing for students in this buyer's market, but at the same time we are beginning to share the education of students with nonprofessional educators.

The cooperative phase is related to, but quite distant from, the campus-expansiveness phase that I described earlier. By identifying an emerging cooperative phase, I mean to suggest that higher education will share rather than expand control over student learning. Historically as the country has wanted more education, they have looked to colleges to

provide it, and we have responded through expansion of programs and facilities. Now it looks as though we will expand into the community through cooperation rather than mere extension. Education through cooperation represents a much bolder step into the learning society than does education through expansion.

The signs of the emergent cooperative phase are clearly visible. Getting a vice-president of the Bank of America to teach a course in banking is illustrative of a new interest in adjunct professors. The use of para-professionals is indicative of a desire to spread educational responsibility into the broader community. The rapid growth of peer counseling and peer tutoring programs gives formal recognition to the notion that students help educate fellow students. With the advent of the learning society, we are not nearly as jealous of our prerogatives as professional educators as we once were. But we should not fail to recognize how significant the willingness to include community people as teachers as well as students really is. In the true learning society, all are learners and all are teachers. We teach what we know and learn what we do not know.

The education-cooperative phase is reflected not only in our redefinition of who may teach, but the spirit of cooperation is incorporated into an increasing number of program efforts. University Year for Action, experiential learning, and cooperative education are all examples of programs that share the teaching function. Cooperative education, for example, is one of the most rapidly growing programs in America. Colleges introducing the cooperative plan are making explicit their commitment to share the education of their students with the broader community, especially employers. Officially, cooperative education is defined as a plan which integrates classroom experience with practical work experience and makes

satisfactory performance in both a requirement for the degree. The rate of growth of cooperative programs has escalated sharply in recent years. In 1960, there were only 35 cooperative education programs; by 1971 there were 225; today the number of cooperative programs is near 400, with another 200 in the planning stages (Cross, 1973).

The only major programmatic reform in higher education to parallel the growth of cooperative education is the nontraditional studies movement. These two movements have much in common. Both have been around for a long time but their growth has taken on dramatic proportions recently. Adult education and extension services, which are still the heart of the non-traditional movement, are certainly not new; and cooperative education is a distinctively American invention introduced nearly 75 years ago. But three-quarters of the cooperative plans now in existence were established since 1960, and almost two-thirds of the nontraditional programs have come into being since 1970. Cooperative education makes part-time workers out of formerly full-time students, while nontraditional studies makes part-time students out of formerly full-time workers.

Thus, the blurring of time demarcations between students and adults heralds the arrival of lifelong learning and of the learning society. The notion that a young person should devote full time to completing his education before embarking upon his adult role in society is about as old-fashioned as the notion that an adult has left his school days behind forever.

One of the reasons we are no longer as anxious about young people taking a break between high school and college is that it will be increasingly easy to effect smooth transitions in and out of postsecondary education. Only ten years ago, we felt that a student was lost to higher

education if he dropped out of college. Today, the prestigious Carnegie Commission that reflects mainstream American education fairly well, can recommend, with scarcely a flurry of excitement, the encouragement of stop-outs from college. Lifelong learning has always been a nice phrase, but it is now approaching reality.

Higher education has, in the past, operated within fairly well-defined boundaries and limitations. The learning society breaks loose from those boundaries and learning pervades the entire community. There are some important distinctions between the pre-learning society where we are at present and the mature learning society--toward which we are moving quite rapidly. Let me draw some contrasts.

First, the pre-learning society devotes considerable attention to determining who is eligible for admission to college. The learning society places no limitations on who may enter college; all people are eligible for learning at the level that seems useful for them.

Second, the pre-learning society has clearly specified requirements for teachers. The mature learning society welcomes as teachers all who have knowledge or skills to share with others. A bank executive may teach banking; an auto mechanic may teach auto repair; a businesswoman may counsel women seeking re-entry to professional education. In principle, the openness toward teacher qualifications has already been accepted by the establishment in the form of adjunct professors, paraprofessionals and peer tutors.

Third, the pre-learning society emphasizes accreditation for the official houses of learning. The learning society emphasizes the use of learning resources wherever they are found--in the home, on the job, in proprietary institutions, in museums, in a foreign country. In short, the pre-learning society is concerned with procedures, structures, qualifications

and standards. The mature learning society is more concerned with learning itself. Those of you who have been following the work of the Carnegie Commission will recall that the harshest criticism the Commission has received to date came on just this issue. In a paper cleverly entitled "The Six-Million-Dollar Misunderstanding", Donald McDonald (1973) criticized Clark Kerr and other Commission members for devoting thousands of pages to the structure and arrangements of higher education while giving very little attention to learning itself. I suspect that McDonald has identified the task of the next national commission on higher education. It will have to ask the hard basic questions about what higher education is doing and why. The learning society that lies ahead is too all-pervasive to absorb all of our energies organizing it. We are going to have to turn our attention now from us and our concerns with the institution to students and their educational needs. Theodore Levitt (1960) wrote a perceptive view of the decline of the railroads that has some messages for education. He said that the railroads stopped growing, not because passengers and freight declined, not because the need for transportation declined, but because they were railroad-oriented instead of transportation-oriented. They were more concerned with running the railroad than serving the customers. They were more concerned with products and procedures than with customer needs. Our pre-learning society is institution- and product-oriented. The learning society will be student-oriented.

You may or may not like the sounds of the new learning society. To some it will smack of a society without standards where charlatans may prey upon a public eager for education. What will happen to the college degree if we become so free of requirements that unqualified students enter our colleges and uncredentialed teachers offer instruction and uncertified institutions present courses of study?

Perhaps we must face the reality that the legitimacy of the learning society awaits the development of better measures of learning. Only when we can measure what the student knows rather than how or where or from whom he learned it, will we be free of excessive concern about the procedures of learning and able to concentrate on the outcomes of learning.

Attention to the outcomes of learning moves us quickly to evaluating education in terms of student learnings rather than college offerings. Someone said it long ago, We 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.

We are in the business today of selling a content-laden education. We teach content and we measure content--not because we equate the educated person with a walking encyclopedia--but because we don't know how to teach the appreciations of learning and the intellectual skills of problem solving. I am not suggesting that students can learn to think in the absence of content to think about. But neither can they learn to think when the goal of education becomes the mere accumulation of information in the academic disciplines. The explosion of knowledge has now reached staggering proportions. Every 40 minutes, there is enough new information added to the nation's libraries to fill a 24 volume set of Encyclopedia Britannica. The United States government alone generates 100,000 reports and publishes 450,000 articles, books, and papers annually. Even the scholar can keep up with only a limited amount of knowledge in his or her academic discipline.

Students generally seem quicker to recognize the folly of a content-heavy curriculum than are faculty. In an ETS research project involving the goals of California colleges, Peterson (1973) found that an over-

emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge in the academic disciplines was a major source of student dissatisfaction. Students at eight campuses of the University of California said that the University presently gives the goal of academic development 3rd priority whereas it should rank 14th in a list of 20 educational goals. Faculty are harder to convince; while they, too, admit that the accumulation of academic knowledge is overdone, they would move it from its present rank of 4th place to 7th.

The dissatisfaction of students with the content demands of their education should not be interpreted as anti-intellectualism. On the contrary, students complain that not enough attention is given to the development of intellectual attitudes. They criticize the University for too little attention to helping students develop the competency for the rational analysis of problems and for failing to help students develop a commitment to lifelong learning and to self-directed study. These goals are surely elements of the emerging learning society. And they are goals to which we shall have to give increasing attention in the decades ahead.

Our task in the learning society is to develop people who are able and willing to continue their learning; it is not to transfer course content from books and faculty to students. Such an education shifts attention from the curriculum to the students--from running the railroad to serving the customers.

A learning society that is student-centered will be greeted with enthusiasm by many. On the surface, it sounds right. Many college administrators, especially those in the student personnel professions have long called for student-centered learning. But now that we see it on the horizon, it is becoming clear that such a future calls for change of sufficient magnitude to be distinctly uncomfortable for administrators who have directed their primary attention to running the railroad. Orderly

procedures and neat administrative arrangements may not be possible and they may not be desirable in the new learning society. Permitting students to wander in and out of colleges throughout their lifetimes is by nature a messy procedure. Providing alternative routes to the degree turns evaluation and recordkeeping into a registrar's nightmare. Helping students to assemble a learning program that meets their individual needs is incredibly difficult--pedagogically and administratively.

Although most personnel deans claim that their work has always been student-centered, the fact is that in most colleges, personnel administrators devote more attention to helping students adjust to the demands of the college than they do to helping colleges adjust to the needs of students. 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. It takes no special insight to observe that admissions officers spend more time telling prospective students what the college offers than they do telling college policy makers what students need and want. Access to students is easy for personnel administrators; effective access to the levers that create college policy is much more difficult. But the approach of the learning society requires more fundamental change than can be accomplished by tinkering with the machinery. For example, I suspect that college practices

that attempt to meet the decline in college applications with single-minded recruitment efforts on the part of the admissions office are flirting with short-range disappointment and long-range disaster. It is increasingly unlikely that admissions offices will be able to sell the college of the 1950's and 60's to the students of the 1970's and 80's. If, by some unfortunate stroke of fate, the college secures the services of supersalespersons in the admissions office, then the college may be protected from the necessary discomfort that will force a long-range look at the needs of the new learning society.

Some colleges have already looked the emergence of the learning society squarely in the eye and are beginning to feel both the discomfort and the exhilaration of change. Others continue to have a comfortable demand for their services, while worrying just a little about whether their future will be as bright as their past.

I suspect that the future will be different for all of us as we work in concert with students, with faculty, and with local and worldwide communities to create the opportunities for lifelong learning that herald the arrival of the learning society.

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