

Needed Reforms in Postsecondary Education

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If you sometimes wonder, as I do, why higher education is so chaotic, let me suggest that at the national level where your attention is centered, almost nothing in higher education is the same as it was just 20 years ago. The chaos is not so much a function of surface changes in practices and procedures as it is of fundamental changes in purposes and goals. While we in higher education were still trying hard to achieve academic excellence which, you will recall, was the rallying cry of the 1950's, the signals were changed, and we were asked to turn our attention to remedial education and educational opportunity. The conversion of our basically elitist model of higher education to a system geared to the needs of all the people has not been accomplished yet, but there are some signs that we are beginning to make the changes necessary to accomplish our new purposes. Implementation involves a 180 degree turnaround from selecting students to fit the colleges we happen to have to creating colleges that fit the needs of the students who are walking through the opening doors.

I want to talk this morning about the impact of the demands on higher education to serve two groups of people not previously considered college material. One such group consists of low academic achievers who are gaining postsecondary opportunities through open admissions. A second group consists of adults and part-time learners who are gaining entrance

Prepared for the Health, Education, and Welfare Staff Seminar, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey, January 31, 1974.

to college through nontraditional alternatives. Numerically these two groups constitute the overwhelming majority of students new to post-secondary education, and they also represent groups whose problems are specifically educational rather than broadly societal--as is the case for ethnic minorities and women, for example.

For this analysis, I have attempted to pull together four separate ETS research projects to see what implications a synthesis of the findings has for national and institutional policy. I'll talk about my own studies on open admissions or low achieving students (Cross, 1971), about two national surveys done last year for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, one on the needs and interests of adults (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974) and one on the attempts of colleges to respond to those needs (Ruyle, Geiselman, & Hefferlin, 1974), and about a fourth study that was done for the California State Legislature (Peterson, 1973).

New Students

Let me talk first about what I have called New Students to higher education. For research purposes, I defined New Students operationally as those scoring in the lowest academic third of the high school graduating classes. While ethnic minorities are overrepresented among this group of low academic achievers, I found that the majority of New Students are the white children of blue-collar workers. Numerically, most young people scoring in the lowest third of the high school graduates on traditional tests of academic achievement are white, and most students enrolled in remedial programs in community colleges across the nation are white (Cross, 1971). Open admissions has opened the doors of postsecondary education; we now have new kinds of students with new needs on our doorstep and we aren't quite sure that we know what to do with them. By definition,

these are students who are not prepared to undertake traditional college study, and remediation has been our typical answer. It may be easier to change the students, we reason, than to change the colleges.

Research shows that as a group these New Students differ in consistent and significant ways from the students that higher education has served in the past. They differ in interests, abilities, and expectations from traditional college students, and there is little reason to think that traditional higher education will serve them well.

For example, most of us would probably feel reasonably well-served by a college having the following characteristics:

At college A there are many good students who try to get top grades. Professors expect them to study a lot, but frequently are willing to discuss such things as current world affairs and other serious topics outside of classes. The students enjoy going to concerts and lectures given on campus.

The New Students to higher education are not much attracted to this college. In my data on high school seniors, only 9 percent of the low achievers selected it as the college they would most like to attend (Cross, 1971). Rather, they preferred the following college description which was, incidentally, largely rejected by high achievers:

At college B students are preparing for a particular job or career. They are mostly interested in courses which train them for occupations they have chosen. Many of the students are working part-time to pay for their education.

There are other differences between traditional and New Students. New Students prefer interacting with people to interacting with ideas; they prefer the manipulation of concrete objects to the manipulation of abstract symbols. And their self-ratings indicate that they believe they have ability in these areas (Cross, 1971). But as desperate as society is for

people with interpersonal and mechanical skills, we have given young people very little opportunity to develop or to demonstrate these strengths anywhere in the educational system.

Gradually, colleges are recognizing that New Students may have different--not simply lesser--talents than traditional college students. Data collected last spring by Dick Peterson, an ETS colleague in the Berkeley Office, show that the California community colleges are emerging with a distinct sense of mission--one that is pulling the colleges toward the interests and expressed needs of the New Students they serve. Peterson (1973) administered the Institutional Goals Inventory (IGI) to faculty, students, administrators, trustees, and citizens of the local communities of 116 public and private colleges in California. Sixty-nine public community colleges were included in the study that asked the various groups to rate their college as it is and as it should be on 20 different educational goals.

The three goals that community college students think their college should give top priority to are 1) vocational preparation, 2) individual personal development, and 3) the creation of a sense of community, cooperation, and trust on campus. And very significantly, community college faculty, administrators, and trustees agree with them that these should be the three top priority goals.

There has been much concern over the last few years about the increasing homogenization of higher education--of community colleges becoming more like four-year colleges and four-year colleges aping the universities. These data seem to represent an encouraging turnaround from that trend. Certainly, the model of the community college that is desired by the people most concerned with it does not look anything like the present University of California as viewed by its constituencies.

Peterson's data show that students, faculty, administrators, and regents of the University of California are in virtually unanimous agreement that the three top goals of eight campuses of the University of California presently are research, graduate training, and knowledge in the academic disciplines. It should be noted, however, that the constituencies of the University of California are not necessarily happy with this stereotype of the University. They, too, want some changes. While they are not as united on where they want to go as the constituencies of the community colleges, it is reasonably clear that they want the primary emphasis on intellectual and aesthetic development and the creation of a stimulating community of scholars. This represents a different and, I think, appropriate emphasis from that desired by students and others closely associated with the community colleges.

If the community colleges are to move toward the distinctive mission that is desired by constituents, some changes will have to be made. We can get a feel for student perceptions of where improvements should be made by looking at the discrepancies between what students think their college should be doing and what they think it is doing. Perhaps the greatest single source of student dissatisfaction is found in what they perceive to be a relative overemphasis on the importance of academic development, which is defined by the IGI as the acquisition of specific knowledge of the academic disciplines and the preparation of students for advanced academic work. Students across the 69 community colleges say that academic development ranks 1st in emphasis whereas it should rank 9th among the 20 goals. As a matter of fact, students in all types of colleges feel that there is an overemphasis on the acquisition of academic knowledge, but the community colleges are the only segment of the California colleges

where the power structure--faculty, administrators, and trustees--agree with students on the desirability of a substantial deemphasis.

This criticism of higher education's obsession with the traditional academic disciplines, however, should not be interpreted as anti-intellectual. There is another IGI goal that is labeled Intellectual Orientation, and it is concerned with the development of attitudes about learning--helping students to develop the competency for rational analysis of problems, a commitment to lifelong learning, and a desire to engage in self-directed learning. Students feel that not enough attention is given to the development of these attitudes.

A third area of student unhappiness with their college experience concerns the lack of attention given to individual personal development. Students in all kinds of California colleges feel that not nearly enough attention is given to helping them understand themselves. They would like more assistance in the development of self-confidence, in setting and achieving personal goals and in improving their relationships with fellow human beings. Community college faculty and administrators are much more likely to feel that developmental goals such as these should take precedence over other goals than are university faculty and administrators. Thus, if we are to be responsive to student desires to grow and develop as persons, we may have to start in community and private colleges where the goal of student development receives the most support from the power structure.

Adults and Part-time Learners

Now let me turn to an analysis of how well higher education is serving the needs of a second large group of new clientele--adults and part-time learners. Last spring the Commission on Non-traditional Study

commissioned a large-scale research project to assist them in making their recommendations. One major element of the design consisted of a national survey of the learning desires and experiences of adults between the ages of 18 and 60 (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974). A second element was a survey of colleges asking what provisions and plans they were making for nontraditional study (Ruyle, Geiselman, & Hefferlin, 1974). A comparison of the wishes of American adults with the offerings of some 1200 two- and four-year colleges and universities furnish the data for my analysis.

The first question to be answered is, Are we offering the content that appeals to adult learners? And the answer is, Not quite but we are moving in the right direction.

The first choice of learning options among adults across a wide array of educational backgrounds is occupational and career education. Apparently in response to this market, nearly two-thirds of the institutions offering anything in the way of nontraditional study provide occupational and career training. As a matter of fact, it is the most common option offered to nontraditional students by all kinds of colleges and universities--two-year and four-year, public and private.

After this considerable consensus on the importance of occupational education, adult priorities and college offerings show a wider gap. Understandably, perhaps, the second most common offering of the colleges is the traditional curriculum taught off campus, occasionally by innovative methods, but more frequently in the conventional classroom format. But the traditional academic fare of the social, biological, and physical sciences come off rather badly in adult preference rankings--not I

suspect because they are inherently dull or uninteresting subjects but because they are typically taught as preparation for professional scholars, and not many of the new clientele have any interest in becoming professional scholars.

The most obvious discrepancies between learner preferences and institutional offerings occur in recreation and leisure time activities. Only 9 percent of the institutional programs emphasize these learning activities whereas 63 percent of the people who say they'd like to learn more about something, would like to learn about such things as crafts, sports, travel, and the performing arts.

The learning preferences of American adults can thus be characterized as personal and pragmatic. They are primarily interested in learning how to perform better those tasks that face them in their daily lives--job competencies, home and family responsibilities, and the constructive use of leisure time.

At the present time, most colleges and universities are perfectly sincere in wanting to take their education to the people, but there are serious questions about what it is that we should take. If we take the traditional academic disciplines, we will be catering to a very small minority, and nontraditional education may become quite elitist. On the other hand, most educators feel some responsibility to attempt to raise the level of educational sophistication, and the question is whether we can do that and also give people what they say they want. It seems there is much to be done in making education more interesting and meaningful to adults.

To date, the challenge of the nontraditionalists has appeared to center on questions of credit and instructional methods, but the data

indicate that the public is better satisfied--or at least more accepting--of traditional methods than of traditional content.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the conservative tastes of the American public regarding methods of instruction fit very well the generally conservative approach of higher education. Lectures and classes are the preferred method of learning for the largest number of adults, and they are the most common form of teaching even in non-traditional programs.

The instructional methods that rank second to traditional classes in the preferences of students as well as the offerings of institutions are internships, cooperative education, on-the-job training, and field work. These methods call for the integration of learning with living.

Before lifelong learning becomes a reality, however, we have many hurdles to clear--both to enable institutions to offer attractive programs and to enable people to participate. Adults who say they are interested in learning find many obstacles hindering further education. Cost is the single most important barrier. While men's problems in finding money for education seem roughly related to their economic status and educational background, women's do not. Women, regardless of educational background, perceive cost as a major barrier to further study--even though as a group they profess somewhat greater interest in continuing their education than men do.

Time, of course, ranks as a large barrier to adults who have job and family responsibilities, and I guess there isn't much that higher education can do about offering no-effort learning. But looming third on the horizon of barriers to learning for adults is a perceived

discrimination against part-time learners. Over one-third of the adults who say they'd like to engage in further learning say they are stopped from taking a course because they don't want to go to school full-time. Now this is something that institutions have done something about; the overwhelming majority of institutions now offer a degree to part-time students. They just don't tell people about it. Only a little over half of the programs even have literature available, and only about one-third attempt to recruit through the most popular learning area--occupational contacts.

As a matter of fact, it looks as though there are rather substantial information gaps in a number of areas. A surprising number of adults say that courses they would like to take are not available, and there are also complaints that there is no information available about the courses that are offered. Some part-time students still maintain that classes are not conveniently scheduled. Other excuses that people give for not continuing their formal learning that seem based on misunderstanding or are easily corrected are the red tape involved in getting enrolled and the strict attendance requirements.

As for the reasons that institutions give for not offering non-traditional alternatives, the barriers seem largely internal rather than external to the institution. Most institutions, for example, perceive a ready market for nontraditional programs. Very few think that recruitment of students or faculty would be any problem, nor do they think there is a lack of need or that students are not ready for such alternatives. While accrediting agencies, licensing standards, employers, and graduate schools are sometimes blamed for the unwillingness

of colleges to experiment, our respondents did not see these external agencies as a threat. Rather, the difficulties they see are internal-- faculty resistance, institutional concern about academic standards, and the difficulty in assessing nonclassroom learning.

An ideal of the domain of learning that constitutes a college education exists in the minds of educators. It is this image, consisting largely of specific knowledge of the academic disciplines, that makes adjustments in procedures seem minor when compared with the threat of change in content. Yet most of the new learners, young and old, express some dissatisfaction with the content of traditional education. New Students want more attention to vocational preparation and to personal development. Adults, too, want to be able to see the immediate applications of education--to careers, to family life, and to leisure-time activities.

There are educators today who claim that the demands of traditional college students for greater relevance in education is dying down. But if the old students are tired of the battle, they will soon find fresh troops to join the cause. The term may be hackneyed, but "relevance," by whatever name, places powerful demands upon education to prove its worth to a new and pragmatic clientele.

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