

The Elusive Goal of Educational Equality

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If I could have my choice of when to live and work in the world of higher education, I would choose the 1970's as the most interesting and exciting era that has occurred in the past 50 years or is likely to occur in the next 50. For I believe that we now stand at a significant cross-roads in the history of higher education. Sometime around 1970, we could look back on a system that took as its major claim to fame a truly remarkable physical growth. Few questioned either the desirability or the direction of that growth.

The final report of the Carnegie Commission (1973) refers to the post-World War II years as the Golden Age of higher education, but I wonder if history won't find those years more akin to the turbulence of adolescence than to the golden years of maturity and wisdom. In many ways, higher education has had a difficult adolescence. We have experienced rapid physical growth--growth so demanding that we have had little time or energy left for raising more profound questions about our future. We have faced the encouraging, but still adolescent, problems of integrating parts that were growing at different rates. Like most adolescents, we have bumped against the problems of authority in the form of taxpayers and legislators and alumni who felt we may have grown too big for our britches. We have

Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, San Diego, California, October 10, 1974.

even struggled briefly with the acne of campus eruptions. They were good years in many ways, full of the exuberance and energy and natural optimism of youth, but they were not the golden years, and I am not sorry to see them pass.

The decade of the 70's will not, I think, be the golden years either. They are more likely to be the seeking years in which we face the problems of our own identity. Who are we and what does the future hold for us? Like post-adolescents who have attained physical maturity, we are likely to waver between brashness and timidity as we seek to find our place in the world. These will be the years of self-study and evaluation. While it is hard to see what lies ahead for individual institutions, we have great faith in the collectivity that is higher education. Some institutions, like some young people, will make it big; others will teeter on the brink of insecurity and self-doubt. Some of the decisions made in these years will be wrong--some fatally so--but most institutions appear to possess the vitality to profit from errors, to grow in maturity and self-confidence, and to develop uniquely and distinctively--free to establish their own identity.

Such freedom has not been characteristic of higher education in the past. We are constantly reminded of the increasing homogeneity of higher education (Martin, 1969; Hodgkinson, 1971). Again, like insecure adolescents, we seem to feel more comfortable trying to look and act like everyone else. But things are changing now. Research shows that people perceive real differences in the emphases and priorities of different kinds of colleges (Peterson, 1973), and there is a growing interest in educational innovation as colleges seek distinctiveness. Many colleges are now more interested in what Empire State College or Ottawa University in Kansas or El Centro Community College are doing than they are in what the older prestige models of Harvard or Stanford

are doing. The present plateau in physical growth is giving higher education the opportunity to get itself together and to think seriously about goals and purposes. For most colleges, these years of the 1970's are raising profound questions about identity.

Higher education, individually and collectively, derives its identity from three sources: some comes from our heritage; some is a product of the times in which we live, but most of our identity is a function of decisions that we make. If I do say so myself, our inherited identity is good; we come from good stock. There are not many rascals among our ancestors, no incurable heritable strains of disease, and only an occasional eccentric aunt or odd uncle. As to the identity that has been thrust upon us, we can acknowledge that we are the offspring of parents that have been considered pillars of society; people look to us for leadership in solving all manner of problems of the community. They expect us to be knowledgeable--sometimes beyond our capabilities--and they expect us to be generous--sometimes beyond our resources. For the most part, people expect us to be like the older generation of colleges, preserving their standards in the face of social change which has been rapid enough to make some standards unwise and others impossible.

There is much concern today about the preservation of academic standards. But there is considerable truth in the wisdom that reminds us that we can never go home. Standards we surely need, but the problem lies not so much in the preservation of the old as in the creation of standards more in tune with our emerging identity.

Our problem with identity is this: In the meritocratic era of the 1950's and 60's we had, or quite universally aspired to, an identity of academic excellence. And as long as the demand exceeded the supply and the

egalitarian conscience of the public lay dormant, we could select students that would enhance and strengthen our image. The identity crisis came when we could no longer select the student body that created the image we wished to project. The image of the establishment of higher education is threatened, not so much by the highly visible issues of affirmative action and civil rights, as by the relatively quiet influx of large numbers of students with poor academic records into open-door colleges. As I talk about New Students today, I am referring not to the ethnic minorities or to women or to older part-time students, but rather to students of any color or age who are ill-prepared for traditional college study. It is this group that presents the threat to our older image. For educational egalitarianism has a flavor of mediocrity about it that is a jolt to a self-image that aspires to academic excellence.

If we blow away the nostalgia that surrounds the pleasant ring of the words "academic excellence" we will discover the unpalatable truth that our identification with academic excellence was more the result of the work of the admissions office than of the teaching faculty. The lesson we learned during the meritocracy was that if you start with quality you will end with quality if you don't do anything to destroy it. It is a little like cooking or building a house. If you select good materials and approach the task with a workmanlike attitude, then you don't need to be a creative cook or an imaginative builder to turn out a desirable product. But we need to be imaginative educators today because we can no longer select the student body that makes us look good by conforming to what we know how to do.

Education is beginning to place the emphasis on process rather than on selection. We are entering an era that challenges us as teachers and educa-

tors. We don't know much about the teaching/learning process, but we are beginning to experiment. There is a new excitement in the air as classroom teachers talk across disciplines with one another about the Keller Plan and PSI and self-paced, modular learning. But underneath a prevailing spirit that shows a new willingness to tackle the means of education, lurks the uneasy feeling that we have lost sight of the ends. What is it that higher education is supposed to do for everyone who decides to go to college?

As I study various programs designed for new learners, I think I see three quite different assumptions about the ends of egalitarian education. The earliest and still quite prevalent assumption is that equality of opportunity should lead to equality of outcome--that if we can somehow provide the opportunity, the new learners will end up with the achievements and rewards that traditional college graduates have enjoyed in the past.

The means to this end is to provide remediation until the new learners can profit from the same type of education that has been offered in the past to selected student bodies. This mode of thought arises quite naturally from the old meritocratic concept that faculty in the academic disciplines have a right to expect that the students they teach will be selected--or corrected--until they are ready to learn what the faculty member is prepared to teach. Remedial programs today are often segregated educational ghettos with a faculty and a mission quite different from that of the parent institution. By and large, the attitude has been that if remedial programs can get students ready for college, we can go about business as usual, secure in our conscience that we are providing equality of educational opportunity and that academic egalitarianism is just a matter of time.

Model I, the Remediation Model, approaches egalitarian higher education a little embarrassed by individual differences. It attempts to "correct" individual differences at the point of entry into college. This approach to academic egalitarianism is not unlike our earlier approaches to social egalitarianism in which we tried to blend ethnic differences into the melting pot. The best tactic for the ethnic caught in the melting pot approach to equality was to attempt to "pass" into the majority culture--a task considerably easier for the white or light ethnic than for those of more distinctive color.

Despite its obvious limitations, the melting pot approach was not the total failure that is sometimes assumed from today's perspective. Thousands of immigrants did pass into the majority culture, and many of us are testimony to the fact that equality can be achieved through eradicating cultural differences. But it works only for those who are close to the borderline. The Irish passed more completely than the Jews, who were assimilated more easily than the Chinese, who in turn, faced fewer problems than the blacks.

The analogy for education is obvious. Remedial education will help those on the borderline of acceptable academic achievement to pass into the standard curriculum. But there are some students--from rich homes and poor, from white homes and black, from suburbs and reservations--who cannot or will not be assimilated into the academic mainstream. For these students, remediation is not the answer to educational equality. We have enough experience and enough research now to know that it is not a question of whether remediation works or does not work. Rather, we can conclude that it works for some--to date, a disappointingly small minority--and not for others.

And so we are just starting a second major experiment with egalitarian

education. Model II accepts individual differences as an educational challenge. It permits individual differences at entry to college and then attempts to devise multiple processes and treatments that will reduce or eliminate differences upon exit from college.

There are at present two major approaches to our latest frank acceptance of individual differences in learning. One acknowledges differences in the amount of time required by individual learners; the other recognizes differences in learning styles. It is the acceptance of individual differences in learning rates that is promoting innovations such as flexible scheduling, self-paced modules, and mastery learning. Differences in learning styles or preferences are recognized through the introduction of alternatives such as computer assisted instruction (CAI), the use of peer tutors and faculty mentors, and experimentation with a wide variety of learning media and teaching strategies.

These new concerns for individualizing instruction are a direct outgrowth of the search for ways to deal with the increasing diversity of mass postsecondary education. They are understandably popular answers to academic egalitarianism because they concentrate on the elimination of invidious comparisons by varying the treatment and proclaiming eventual equality for all who attain the desired level of mastery. I label Model II the Educator's Model because it comes to grips with the teaching-learning process while striving to preserve traditional academic standards.

I want to spend a little time discussing Model II because it is an important and emerging approach to egalitarian education. While I do not think it is the final answer to equality of educational opportunity, I would like to encourage the growth of this model. As far as I can see,

its only problem is that it does not go far enough. Like remedial education, it is unlikely to bring about the equality that it promises, but no doubt it will help another group of people to pass into the academic mainstream.

The concept of mastery learning is the basic ingredient of Model II. Ben Bloom, hailed as the father of mastery learning, claims that "95 per-cent of the students . . . can learn a subject to a high level of mastery (for example, an A grade) if given sufficient learning time and appropriate types of help (Bloom, 1971, p 51)." The optimistic ring of this kind of statement has tremendous appeal to academic egalitarians, and there is more to mastery learning than idealistic promise. It works--for some students in some subjects.

At the level of higher education, the concept of mastery learning has been incorporated into a more sophisticated learning model known as PSI (Personalized System of Instruction) or the Keller Plan (Keller, 1968). The Keller Plan has been sweeping across the country and across academic disciplines at a phenomenal rate. To the delight of some of us who occasionally grow cynical about the relevance of much of the content of higher education to the practical problems of today, the Keller Plan was devised by a psychologist who simply applied his academic knowledge about human learning to his teaching. An overly brief synopsis of the Keller Plan would look like this: It breaks the material into small, clearly-defined objectives, permits each student to proceed at his own pace, requires mastery of one unit before proceeding to the next, furnishes immediate positive reinforcement, and provides for the personal-social interactions that we know are important to motivation. Research evaluations are generally positive. Students are enthusiastic, and learning and retention of content is as good or better than that occurring in conventional classrooms. Thus,

there are scientific as well as humanistic reasons for promoting PSI and other derivations of modular mastery learning.

Equality through mastery learning is predicated on the assumption that while the time required for learning may vary, the final result will not. Through the simple expedient of diversifying the treatment we can proclaim equality in the outcome. But the time required for learning does categorize people into fast and slow learners, and pragmatic employers if given a choice between two equally competent people, are quite likely to give the good jobs to the fast learners and the lesser jobs to the slow learners. Furthermore, the dimension of time is as biased as any measure yet devised to categorize learners. What is perceived as equality today because it permits people to reach equal academic attainments may be seen as inequality tomorrow because some must spend five years in college whereas others may graduate in three years.

In the strange world of higher education, it is not these limitations, however, that are impeding the advance of mastery learning. Rather it is the very idea that 95 percent of the students in a course could be worth an A. Ironically, it is the notion of academic equality itself that disturbs us. But even the most thoroughgoing advocate of the traditional educational meritocracy must be bothered by the existing situation in which a student in the top one percent of the college-going population can make a C at a highly selective college while his lowest quarter peer may make an A at a less prestigious institution. Nevertheless, all logic to the contrary, the concept of mastery learning is experiencing rough treatment in some colleges because it comes into direct conflict with grades and the sorting functions traditionally performed by higher education.

More recent than the attempts to vary the time for learning are the

attempts to deal with the different learning styles of students. Although research on cognitive styles is at least 25 years old, its application to education is quite new and frankly experimental. Researchers concerned with cognitive styles are studying individualistic ways of perceiving, remembering, thinking, and solving problems. We know, for example, that some learners perceive the elements in a situation, processing information methodically and analytically, while others perceive the whole and take an intuitive approach to problem solving. Such learning preferences are relatively stable throughout life, and their importance to education is obvious. Herman Witkin, an ETS colleague and a pioneer in research on cognitive styles, maintains that

While relatively little research has been done compared to what is possible and needed, it is already clear that cognitive style is a potent variable in students' academic choices and vocational preferences; in students' academic development through their school career; in how students learn and teachers teach, and in how students and teachers interact in the classroom (Witkin, 1973, p 1).

The notion of learning styles has two highly appealing features that make its emergence now especially welcome. In the first place, it recognizes the fact that teachers, too, have distinctive cognitive styles that affect their teaching. Some outstanding faculty lecturers, for example, are justifiably irate over being told that lectures are "out" and discussion groups are "in" for the New Students. The concept of learning styles permits both students and teachers maximum opportunity to develop the teaching/learning styles that are effective for them. There are some teachers, however, who are challenged by how students learn; we might call them cognitive strategists. Harvard's Jim McKenney, for example, claims that by using cognitive strategy he can help both analytical and intuitive students become competent computer

scientists--a subject that we used to think reserved for analytical engineers.

The second attractive feature of the concept of learning styles is that it is the best answer yet to our quest for egalitarian education. Measuring education on a bell-shaped grading curve is increasingly unpalatable because it condemns half the class to below-average status. The mastery learning approach of permitting time rather than achievement to vary has admirable educational advantages, but it still fails to meet egalitarian demands, since we know that a fast learner is better than a slow learner. But cognitive styles, for the moment at least, are value free. We can't really say whether an intuitive learner is better than an analytical learner. Each style has its merits.

The point I wish to make, however, is that educators working with cognitive styles or with mastery learning share a common goal--to attain equality of output through varying the process. In either case, academic standards would be preserved by the expedient of varying time and/or method. This brings me to Model III.

Model III may be labeled the Pluralistic Model for egalitarian education. Whereas Model I recognizes individual differences upon entrance to college and tries through remediation to erase such differences before the end of the first year, Model II permits individual differences throughout the college years, but hopes to certify that there are no differences upon exit from college. Model III, however, proclaims that equality and individual differences can co-exist compatibly--that learners can enter college with differences, can proceed through college in varied ways, and can exit from college with different competencies. To use the melting pot analogy, Model I doesn't care for lumps in the melting pot; if they can't be dissolved in a year, they must be cast aside. Model II doesn't like lumps either, but

it recognizes that some lumps can be melted by higher temperatures and some by longer cooking. But Model III likes lumps. It aims, not for the melting pot, but for the salad bowl as an end product; differences in texture and flavor are clear, but they work together to enhance and complement one another in the total product.

We are just starting our experiment with truly pluralistic educational outcomes. The bridge between Model II and Model III is under construction now and is popularly known as nontraditional education. The many experiments classified, for want of a better term, as nontraditional originally came into being in response to pressures for more egalitarian access to higher education. But nontraditional study is more than an access model. With its roots in Model II, it recognizes individualistic learning needs by proclaiming that if the lifestyles of learners cannot be adapted to the lifestyles of colleges, no harm will be done by putting some of the burden for adjustment on the colleges. To date, the majority of the nontraditionalists have concentrated on new ways of making available a rather traditional curriculum to a previously excluded clientele (Ruyle & Geiselman, 1974). This moderate wing of the nontraditional party represents a form of Model II education for it stresses maximum flexibility in the processes and procedures of education while insisting on traditional standards of output. Understandably, many nontraditionalists are especially concerned about the preservation of academic standards, on the probably quite realistic grounds that until their alternative methods are accepted, the quality of their output must be above question.

But once the educational focus is on the learner, as it is in Model II, it is hard not to proceed to Model III. And there is a rapidly growing liberal wing of the nontraditional party that encourages us to go all the

way in recognizing individual differences. They point out that society and individuals would be better served by the development of the widest possible diversity of talent--affective and social as well as cognitive. Experiential education, learning contracts, competency-based education and project learning are examples of approaches that can promote the development of individual talents. While out-of-class learning can be tied to the traditional curriculum by granting credit only for the standard academic components of the learning, such a limitation is not necessary and is more characteristic of Model II than Model III education. Pluralistic education emphasizes individual initiative in setting learning goals, and at its best, it leads the student into lifelong self-directed learning.

Pluralistic education, by its very nature, defies measurement along a single dimension, and the performance of one student cannot easily be compared with that of another. Thus, it is sometimes charged that pluralism has no standards. But comparison is no more essential to educational pluralism than it is to cultural pluralism. There is no need to say that one culture is better than another, only that each strives to be the best of its kind and that it is true to its own nature. The standard for pluralistic education is individual excellence, a goal sadly missing from much of today's mass education. Model I and Model II students are usually urged to meet minimal standards of academic achievement. They can, and frequently do, consider their education completed upon meeting the basic requirements for the degree. But Model III students educated to the pursuit of excellence find that education does not end with the degree. When personal achievement and development are internalized as goals, the motivation for learning is lifelong.

The continuum I have talked about this noon is one of increasing recog-

dition of individual differences in learners. But Models I, II, and III also move along a continuum of institutional change. The Remedial Model demands only that we allocate resources to remedial programs whose task it is to prepare students so that the rest of us can do what we have always done. Model II, the Educator's Model, demands massive change in procedures and in instructional methods, but it leaves academic departments and disciplines intact. Model III, Pluralistic Education, requires all of the changes incorporated into Models I and II, but it also requires new alternatives in the curricula, new measures of achievement, and new standards for individual accomplishment.

This is a tall order for change, involving profound and difficult questions about the future of higher education. The big questions seem to me always to return to the search for identity. What should we be teaching and how can we develop new standards that will guide us in doing it well? We can't do everything; what are the tasks to which we can legitimately give our attention? How can we offer a curriculum of substance that will give each student a realistic opportunity for self-realization through striving toward some form of high personal achievement? There are no easy answers to the implementation of Model III, but I am convinced that we owe it to ourselves and our world to make a serious study of the alternatives.

The theme of this conference is "The Search for Alternatives," and there are many ways to organize the search. I have chosen to cast the goal of educational equality as the prime mover of educational change. It was egalitarian motives that stimulated the search for alternate routes of access to college. It is still an egalitarian motive that is pushing the search for alternatives in the instructional process, for it is now apparent that access alone will not result in equal educational opportunity. In

the near future, I believe that the search for the elusive goal of educational equality will move us into greater encouragement of alternative outcomes for education.

8/30/74

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