

GENERAL EDUCATION FOR THE 1980's

K. Patricia Cross

Although my remarks this evening are printed in your program under the title "General Education for the 1980's," I am going to begin by switching a few words around and talking about education in general for the 1980's. From my perspective as an analyst and observer of national trends in higher education, the contribution that I might best make to your conversations throughout the rest of this conference is to set the future of general education in the context of the future of education in general.

This is the best of all possible times to stop and take stock of new directions, for I believe that higher education now stands at a significant crossroads. For the first time in its history, higher education is staring into an unknown future that will not be a simple extension of the familiar past. For two hundred years now, the forward thrust of higher education in America has been growth--more students, more faculty, more courses, more colleges, more money. But it is now painfully apparent that future planning will not be based on growth, and we do not know much about planning for other kinds of change.

The old growth model has reached the limit for some aspects of higher education and the point of practical absurdity for others. Consider

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the two most critical components of higher education--students and subject matter. Conceptually, if not yet practically, we have reached the limit in finding new groups of students to serve. And practically, if not conceptually, we have reached the point of practical absurdity in adding more subject matter to an already bloated curriculum.

It is hardly prophetic to suggest that before the end of this century, colleges will be serving ethnic minorities, women, poor people, prisoners, senior citizens, part-time learners, low achievers, and anyone else who wants to go to college. Up to now egalitarians have always been able to point to some segment of the population that could constitute a new clientele. The Morrill Act added the children of the working classes to the college student population. The GI Bill introduced the notion that a college education was a right rather than a privilege and that any young man who had served his country in time of war had a right to a college education. The community colleges followed up the notion that if education beyond high school was a right, then it should be made convenient and accessible to all young people. And the adult movement followed quickly and logically with the concept that education is not just for the young, but for everyone who has a need or a desire to learn. Thus, the ever-expanding student body has been a major characteristic of American higher education, and each wave of new students has brought with it sweeping changes in the national character of higher education.

It is worthwhile, I think, to spend a few minutes looking at four distinct phases of American higher education, on the grounds that

knowing where we have been will help put in perspective where we are going.

The first phase of American higher education was the aristocracy. Epitomized by private colleges such as Harvard and Yale, its purpose was to bring culture to the raw frontier. The curriculum was largely classical dedicated to the training of gentlemen, ministers, and teachers. The students came from established and well-connected families because it was assumed that the leaders of the future would come from the families of the leaders of the past.

The age of the aristocracy prevailed until the passage of the Morrill Act. Then the land grant institutions dominated the scene for more than 100 years, deriving their vigor from the mission of serving a new clientele, consisting largely of the bright, ambitious sons and daughters of farmers and factory workers. The purpose of the meritocracy was to meet the need for agricultural and industrial production for the growing nation. The task for higher education, as society saw it during the reign of the meritocracy, was to select the most promising young people and to prepare them for positions of future leadership.

The meritocracy peaked in the 1950's with selective admissions and scholarships based on grades and test scores rather than on financial need. When I graduated from high school, for example, the Illinois State Scholarship program consisted of a scholarship given to every high school valedictorian. The scholarship was a prize, not a form of financial aid. It, like professional salaries today, was a measure of one's worth and had nothing to do with financial need.

The prototypes of the meritocracy were, and perhaps still are, the great land grant universities. At its peak, the meritocracy was characterized by intense competition. Students competed for admission, for scholarships, for grades, for a bid to a sorority or a fraternity, for the honor of being homecoming queen, or the president of student government. There was constant pressure to prove that one's position in life was based on personal merit, and this applied not only to students but to institutions and faculty as well. Meritocratic institutions derived their prestige from the selectivity of their admission process, from the prowess of their football teams, and from competition for faculty luminaries who then set up competitive research institutes. The philosophy of the meritocracy, although weakened a little by the turbulence of the late 1960's, still prevails in many, maybe most, research universities most of which were founded during the rise of the meritocracy between 1850 and 1900.

The 1950's brought the third great era in American higher education-- the age of egalitarianism. The mid-twentieth century looked much like the mid-nineteenth century as the newest colleges in the nation once again took on the task of implementing change in the mission of higher education. The community colleges, built at an unprecedented rate throughout the 1950's and 60's, were established in the interest of social justice and equal opportunity. The most urgent need of the nation was no longer to educate an intellectual elite for positions of leadership, but to deal with growing social problems through the education of the masses.

Much as the meritocracy had questioned the assumption that family position entitled one to an education, so egalitarianism challenged the meritocratic assumption that an education was won through academic competition. True to their egalitarian mission, the community colleges were distinctively non-competitive. Admission was open to all; scholarships were based on financial need rather than on academic performance; there were no sororities or fraternities, no queen contests, no big time football, no faculty prima donnas competing for national visibility through research and publication.

Change is always hard, and perhaps it is especially difficult in education because faculty have usually come from the cream of the crop of a previous era. The faculty of my generation, for example, grew up in meritocratic homes, and we did all our early learning in meritocratic schools and colleges. Deep somewhere within the learning of our past lies the unshaken conviction that quality rises to the top through competition. It is difficult for most of the faculty members of my generation to see quality in the non-competitive atmosphere of the community colleges. But let us remember that the same phenomenon was present when the aristocrats of an earlier era looked upon the riff-raff of the meritocracy. To the aristocrat, quality was a matter of breeding. "You can take the boy off the farm and send him to college, but you can't take the farm off the boy" was a familiar putdown of the new breed of college students of my parent's generation.

The fourth phase of American higher education--the age of consumerism--began around 1970. Consumerism was sparked by the sudden change in supply

and demand between colleges and students. From the sellers' market of the 1950's in which students had to please colleges in order to be selected, we moved almost suddenly, to the buyers' market of the 1970's in which colleges have to please students in order to be selected.

The Commission on Non-Traditional Study, in its report, Diversity by Design captured the philosophy of consumerism and set the theme for this conference when it called for a new attitude in higher education which "puts the student first and the institution second, concentrates more on the former's need than the latter's convenience, encourages diversity of individual opportunity rather than uniform prescription, and deemphasizes time, space and even course requirements in favor of competence and where applicable performance. . . ."

(Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973, p. xv).

The age of consumerism is the last frontier of the growth model. Seeking new clientele to fill the seats left vacant by the dwindling supply of 18 to 24 year olds, colleges began to recruit adult part-time learners. Some colleges, addicted to growth as the only model for institutional vitality, have been fooled into thinking that adults represent an inexhaustable supply of college students. But part of the adult boom of the early 1970's was simply the old familiar World War II baby bulge moving now into their adult years. Between 1969 and 1972, the growth in adult learners increased by a substantial 21 percent but between 1972 and 1975, the most recent years for which figures are available, growth slowed to a modest 8 percent.

The adult education movement rises naturally out of the egalitarian thrust that has characterized higher education all along. Once community colleges were established within commuting distance of almost everyone, it was a natural step to remove age as the last remaining barrier to educational opportunity. This final step in the evolutionary process of educational change through expansion of student groups carries society's message, dimly perceived as yet, that higher education is no longer charged with the mission of selecting and preparing an elite group of young people to be the leaders of tomorrow. Rather, the new mission is to help all citizens cope with the demands of living in a complicated society and to improve the quality of life through education. Higher education has very little experience with that mission. I will return to the implications of that challenge later. The point for now is that the egalitarian thrust that has brought wave after wave of new students into higher education, and with them growth and change, will play itself out during our professional lifetimes. We will have to find new forces for change and renewal.

Expansion of the curriculum has followed essentially the same pattern as growth in enrollments. As enrollments grew by including new segments of the population, so curricula expanded by adding new fields of study. The land grant movement expanded the classical curriculum to include the applied subjects of agriculture and the mechanical arts; community colleges expanded the interpretation of "applied" to include vocational subjects such as auto mechanics and cosmetology.

Adult education goes beyond vocational courses to add avocational subjects to the curriculum.

The problems of the bloated curriculum have been exacerbated by the explosion of knowledge within each course of study. Instead of academic disciplines fragmented only to the extent that experimental psychologists share no common vocabulary with which to converse with clinical psychologists, we are rapidly approaching the point where the subbranches of clinical psychology have almost nothing in common. Libraries are moving from shelving bulky books to storing microfiche to pondering a new technological version of the old philosophical question, how many books can be stored on the head of a pin?

And so educational change based on growth and expansion is ending. The growth in students has reached its natural end. At least I cannot think of any segment of the population which, by its inclusion, will bring change to higher education.

The question of the continued expansion of the curriculum is more controversial. Theoretically, I suppose, there is no absolute limit to the specialties that can be added to the curriculum. In my view, however, an educational model that aims to pass along the heritage of human knowledge in the form of subject matter content is rapidly reaching the point of practical absurdity.

The expansion of campus boundaries has also been characterized by the old familiar growth model for change. From the small residential liberal arts campuses of the aristocracy, we moved to the massive campuses of the land grant universities. The community colleges

then extended the concept of campus beyond the quadrangle of college buildings to include community as campus. The non-traditional consumer movement has completed the evolutionary expansion of college campuses, culminating in the university without walls which advocates the use of the world as campus.

What does higher education do for an encore when we teach all of the subjects to all of the learners using the world as our campus? The education of the future will be different in kind rather than different in degree from the education we have known, and we need new models for thinking about new kinds of education.

Clark Kerr (1977, p. 41) has made the interesting prediction that nothing much is going to happen to change higher education until the year 2000 since, "higher education is tenured in by its faculty and walled in by its physical plant for the next quarter century." Dr. Kerr's prediction is based on the experiences of the past, which indicate that growth is the inducer of change. All of the major change throughout the history of higher education in this country has been brought about through establishing new institutions and bringing in new people to do a new job. We have not generally been very successful in teaching old dogs new tricks. We did not try to convert Harvard or Yale to teach agriculture and engineering, for example. We established land grant institutions.

Likewise, we did not try to convert the land grant institutions, which over the years had grown increasingly selective, to the mission of open admissions. We established community colleges with new faculty and new purposes.

Dr. Kerr may be right in his assumption that growth accompanied by new people and new institutions is necessary for change. My assumption about change is different, however. I believe that educational institutions, whether public or private, are the creations of society and that external pressures create change in social institutions. By and large, regardless of opportunity, institutions do not reform themselves unless they are very uncomfortable with their existing situation. At the present time, I think there is enough discomfort in academe to predict change rather than no change over the next 25 years. While many in the establishment hope that the change will be a return to the good old days when students learned what professors felt comfortable teaching, I cannot think of much social change that has returned to earlier times. Somehow the old answers are never appropriate for the new questions. For example, although there are some faculty, who would if they could, return to more selective admissions, somehow that is not the problem any more--at least not for society. The problem now is perceived to reside in the exit standards of prior educational efforts rather than in the entrance requirements for further opportunity. The solution to that problem seems to call for improving teaching and learning rather than for improving admissions tests and tightening up on selection. Those were

meritocratic answers to the problems of students who could not read at the college level.

In any event, I suggest that changing social needs are a necessary and sufficient force for educational change. Thus if we would predict the future for higher education, let us look to society and its needs rather than to higher education and its vested interests. What are the problems facing the nation and the world in the foreseeable future? Without any pretense at special omniscience in these matters, let me cite three major problem areas that all of us read about in the newspapers every day: energy, health, and world peace. Each of these problem areas may have two possible pathways to solution--one through science and technology; the other through citizen understanding and cooperation.

There are those who maintain that society will solve today's problems as we solved yesterday's problems--through scientific discovery. We need not worry about energy, they say, because nuclear and solar energy will replace fossil fuels. But Jimmy Carter and the national leadership are warning us that the solution to the energy problem lies as much in citizen understanding and cooperation as in scientific discovery. A nation which constitutes 6 percent of the world's population cannot continue to consume 40 percent of the world's resources.

Similarly, the health professions will continue to seek cures for cancer through scientific discovery. But at the same time, citizens

need to understand that smoking and other pollution of the environment are major causes of cancer, and people will need to change their personal and societal habits if cancer is to be eradicated. As for world peace, there was a time when our national policy assumed that peace could be assured through the invention of ever more terrible deterrents. But as a world society we must recognize that we can no longer maintain world peace through depending on science to invent and produce advanced weaponry. World peace calls for a change in the attitudes of the citizens of the world.

The implications for education posed by these societal problems seem obvious. While we will continue to educate scientists, we can no longer put all our eggs in that basket. Citizens will need to involve themselves personally in the solution to our collective problems. Fortunately, and probably not accidentally, the mission of the new learning society coincides with the urgent need for all citizens to understand the relationship between their personal lifestyles and the future of the human society.

Institutionalized education has not yet really understood nor accepted this challenge. In the absence of institutional leadership, other forms of education are rising to meet the need--which is not very different from the rise of the land grant universities to meet society's need for production or the rise of the community colleges to meet society's demands for social justice. Where do we learn about the great problems of our society?--not usually in college classrooms

where discipline oriented professors perpetuate their graduate specialties--but increasingly through television programming which provides, not only up-to-the-minute news coverage of events such as the Alaska pipeline and the North Atlantic oil spill, but also superb background information through outstanding programs such as Bronowski's Ascent of Man and John Kenneth Galbraith's Age of Uncertainty. Whatever we know about the realities of the world's problems, most of us learn through the mass media of television, radio, newspapers and magazines.

Colleges and universities, of course, will continue to educate specialists, both before and after they are embarked upon their careers, but even more important is the responsibility to educate citizens to their role as lifelong learners.

What does one need to be a lifelong learner? Those of you who have made a commitment to liberal and general education know the answer to that question. The habit of lifelong learning is formed primarily through the stimulation of curiosity. Before schooling ruined learning by insisting that children learn for no better reason than to get a better grade than the next person, people learned because they wanted to know. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that education is addictive; the more we know about almost anything, the more our curiosity is stimulated to learn more. One of the most significant findings to emerge from the research on adult learning is the fact that the more education people have the more likely they are to

participate in further learning activities. This finding emerges without exception in study after study (Cross and Zusman, 1978).

In one sense that is heartening. It means that education must be doing something right. But the dark side of the coin is that those who were turned off by their learning experiences in the schools and who left the school system earlier than their better educated peers are also turned off to adult learning. The national survey of adult learning interests sponsored by the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974) found that 91 percent of college graduates were interested in further learning compared to only 55 percent of those with elementary school educations.

The learning society must be concerned with the lifelong curiosity of all citizens. And it does not do much for the learning society when meritocratic education sends the message to substantial numbers of citizens that they are not really "college material." In the competitive scheme of the bell shaped grading curve of the meritocracy, half of the people are going to be below average learners-- by definition. While it may be a responsibility of education to continue to identify the top academic half, it is also a profound responsibility of education to encourage lifelong learning for all citizens. I do not believe that we can do that by telling half of our students that they are inadequate learners. One of the really tough missions of general education is to stimulate curiosity and to demonstrate to all students that they can and should be successful lifelong learners.

Those of you who secretly hanker to teach classical education to a bright and selected student body should have been born 35 years earlier when the curriculum of the aristocracy was merging with the selected student bodies of the meritocracy. As I see it, that is not the mission of general education in the 1980's. The mission is to provide both the skills and the motivation for lifelong learning for the majority of American citizens. This is the special mission of general education because it alone can fuel the curiosity to learn from everyday environments. Most of us do not live in a world of disciplinary specialties, and it is hard to learn from our environment when learning is associated entirely with the disciplinary specialties of the standard college curriculum. It has been said that trying to put together a world from the academic disciplines is like trying to make a rabbit from rabbit stew. Once carved up, the pieces are no longer recognizable.

When I speak of a lifelong learner, I am talking, not necessarily about a person who takes adult education courses, but rather about a person whose curiosity is stimulated and fed by the vast informal network of educational opportunity which exists in profusion in the everyday world. General education, if it is to meet the needs of the lifelong learner is practical, relevant, and intimately related to the everyday concerns of common people. General education at its best stimulates curiosity and enables people to learn from their environments--and

that means work environments as well as cultural environments. Viewed from this perspective there is no sharp distinction between career education and general education, although there may be a legitimate distinction between job training and education. The distinction is not in the nobility of the undertaking nor in the capacities of the students, however, but rather in the immediacy of the application of learning to a specific task.

This brings me to a further observation about education in general in the 1980's. No one in this room this evening needs to be told that today's education is vocationally oriented, and as we are beginning to discover the new adult learners are just as vocationally oriented as the younger generation. Since many people, on and off the campuses, think of education as preparation for a job, some are arguing that higher education should be consciously deemphasized on the grounds that it is now clear that the labor market cannot absorb any more college graduates. The so-called "oversupply" of college graduates is variously estimated to run between two and eight million people by 1985, and according to recent surveys by the Department of Labor, one-fourth to one-third of American workers already feel overqualified for their jobs (Best and Stern, 1976). This problem is exacerbated by society's continuing concern for bringing women and minorities into the ranks of professional and college educated workers and by the new push to abolish mandatory retirement. Furthermore the baby bulge generation is now between 20 and

30 years of age, and as we move into the 1980's there is a predictable "promotion squeeze" as this huge generation of workers tries to compete for the relatively few leadership positions vacated by the much smaller older generation.

The problem is serious, and no amount of trite reassurance that there is no such thing as an over-educated society will solve the problem. I can think of three possible solutions; there are probably more. One is to restrict educational opportunity through decreasing the funding of students and institutions. This is possible and even likely if present trends are permitted to continue until the level of frustration reaches crisis proportions. But deliberate restrictions on educational opportunity would be a desperation measure because it flies in direct opposition to the American egalitarian ideals of equal opportunity.

A second solution is to shift the whole society from a "linear life plan" to a "cyclic life plan." Stated simply, the linear life plan is the tendency to go to school in youth, work during mid-years, and retire in old age. The cyclic life plan would redistribute the basic activities of life so that people would participate in modules of education, work and leisure throughout their lifetimes (Best and Stern, 1976). A version of the cyclic life plan is already underway in France and Germany where workers are subsidized in order to return to school periodically. In Europe, this form of adult education is known as recurrent education. It inserts

extended periods of education into the middle years of life, thereby making room for a younger and older workers to participate in the labor market.

A third possible solution to the reality that human capacities for achievement are likely to surpass society's opportunities for work lies in the concept of lifelong learning. In contrast to the linear life plan in which education, work, and leisure are sequential or the cyclic life plan in which they are rotated, lifelong learning implies that education, work, and leisure go on concurrently throughout life.

It seems to me that in the United States, deliberately or not, we are embarking on what I call the "blended life plan." There is a dramatic increase in the number of part-time learners in colleges, and there is also an increase in the number of part-time workers in industry. The thing that gets squeezed out in our achievement-oriented society is any conscious provision for leisure. But that seems to be coming. One of the most rapidly growing segments of adult education is recreational learning--learning to ski, sail a boat, learn a language for travel and so forth. And recent research indicates that when workers are given a choice of more income or more free time they are shifting in the direction of more free time (Best, 1976). Thus, before the turn of the century, we may see substantial increases in the number of people who consciously

seek a blended life plan. General education is essential preparation for such a future.

In conclusion, general education for the 1980's fits naturally into education in general for the 1980's. People will need to continue to learn throughout their lifetimes. They will learn, not necessarily through formal classes, but from increasingly rich environments. The mission of general education, as I see it, is to equip people to become lifelong learners. That means stimulating curiosity about the world, its people, and its problems. It means helping all students--not just a select few--to have successful learning experiences. It means striving for a better balance between cognitive and affective learning. General education cannot stop with the relatively simple task of teaching subject matter content; it must be concerned with developing attitudes, values, and appreciations. But general education for the 1980's must also provide the basic skills to make people more self-sufficient as learners. It must demonstrate that learning is a constant and pleasureable accompaniment of life.

Those are not easy tasks, and they are especially difficult in the waning days of the meritocracy with its emphasis on competition, subject matter content, and vocationalism. But there is reason to think that the old values of the academic meritocracy are being reformulated for the twenty-first century, as surely they must be if education is to serve the needs of the learning society.

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