

AAHE Panel: How can we help freshmen become more effective consumers?

9:00 - 10:45 Tuesday, March 21, 1978

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INTRODUCTION

There was a time not very long ago when developing effective consumers of education would have been unnecessary and perhaps even undesirable because students had so little choice. Most went to the college that they could afford and that would admit them. Once on campus, they had some choice in subject matter and with some ingenuity, they could pick the time of day but there weren't many instructional alternatives to a lecture - discussion class, and students of my generation didn't have many choices to make with respect to student services. If you wanted financial aid, a job, a room, personal counseling, career information or anything else that wasn't directly related to classes, you went to the Dean of Women's office. With no disrespect intended that intrepid woman, it would have presented a problem had I been a knowledgeable consumer of such things as the quality of career counseling or the matter of the University's responsibility for providing services for students with weak academic backgrounds.

Today, the scene is different in almost every respect. Students have incredibly expanded options. They can take courses in a variety of formats, from Keller plans to encounter groups, and they can utilize a range of services, limited largely only by their knowledge about the existence of the service

that would prove useful at any given time. But students need to know not only about the vastly increased options available, but enough about themselves and their needs to make wise decisions.

Between my generation, when college students had relatively few options, and today when they have a bewildering array of choices to make was a period (probably most people are still in that period) when the emphasis was on providing information about available options via print. Consumerism was limited to telling people what was available through devices such as the publication of catalogues, orientation handbooks, and directories of student services, or national publications about colleges such as the College Board Handbook and Cass and Birnbaum's Guide to American Colleges.

But the concept of consumerism implies an interaction between the user and the product. Knowing that a Cadillac is a good car is not enough in the age of consumerism. Today's consumers also need to know what it is good for and whether it meets their particular needs.

In other words, in addition to knowing about the cost and the availability of various educational options, today's students need to be able to analyze themselves and their needs as learners.

The issue of consumerism becomes even more important as we think about lifelong learning and ponder the implications of the conference theme, *Lives in Transition*. How do we prepare students for lives of constant transition and how do we help them to become effective consumers of lifelong educational opportunities? The choices are going to be staggering. Should they opt for independent learning or interactive learning? credit or non-credit? institutionally determined course of study or self-determined? for the up-to-date and comprehensive career information generated by a computer or for the warmth and insight provided by a human counselor?

Just a small glimpse of the probable future, should awaken anew our anxieties about how well we are preparing University freshmen to cope with even their immediate futures -- from the next week to the next 4 years. How well do they understand the role of education in their own personal development? How much do they know about the vast resources for learning -- in the classroom and out -- offered by today's university? How well do they understand themselves, their educational goals, their needs, and their learning styles?

Were I, as a responsible educator, to choose between having students learn subject matter, some of which will become obsolete between their freshmen and senior years, and learning how to become an effective consumer of education, I would most certainly opt for the latter. Yet I suppose the typical college freshmen spends 50 hours learning subject matter to every one hour learning about themselves and their educational opportunities.

The University of Nebraska and the University of South Carolina have concerned themselves with the education of effective consumers. The programs share a common goal, but they are quite different in emphasis and approach. Since my role here today is a secondary one of setting the stage and reacting to some issues raised, I'd like to move quickly to the primary contributors, Dr. Eugene Trani of the University of Nebraska and Dr. John Gardner of the University of South Carolina.

REACTION

Two quite different approaches to making students more effective consumers of their own education have been presented. It seems to me that the major differences reside not in the goals as much as in the content of the two courses. That observation would certainly surprise some discipline-oriented professors who occasionally profess difficulty in finding any content in courses that are student-oriented as opposed to discipline-oriented.

I'm going to risk alienating my colleagues on the platform by stating the differences more blatantly than they would in order to highlight some issues.

1. It seems to me that the USC is somewhat more interested in helping students learn about the University and its services whereas UN is more interested in having students learn about themselves and individual approaches to learning. The concept of consumerism, of course, implies both. The consumer needs to understand the nature of the available product or opportunities as well as his own requirements. Both of my colleagues, I'm sure, would maintain that they are concerned about helping students to understand their own needs within the educational environment. Nevertheless, there is a difference, I think, in whether consumer or product is given priority.
2. USC is more concerned with the non-classroom aspects of education -- opportunities for learning outside of formal classroom instruction, whereas UN's major focus is on learning in the classroom.
3. Third, the content of the USC course is geared more to the immediate future of the student -- to survival, retention and adaptation to the USC environment over the next one to four years, whereas the UN course is

geared to a longer-term orientation to lifelong learning.

4. Finally, I think I detect a difference in mood of the two programs. The USC course seems to me to emphasize the importance of making students happier, more satisfied consumers of the SC educational experience. The UN course, in contrast, seeks to make students more critical consumers of instruction -- or at least that was my none-too-subtle intention in writing the proposal. Dr. Trani is a more skillful, more patient administrator than I, and I suppose the course is as successful as it is at Nebraska primarily because he has deemphasized my contentious Ralph Naderish approach to consumerism.

Nevertheless, while I have the floor, it seems a propitious time to make the observation that I think students are much more likely to bring about real instructional reform than programs in faculty development. But students need to be far more discriminating consumers if that is to happen.

At present, students are too kind and too content with the quality of university teaching. Unlike their professors, they seem to feel no obligation to protect standards by grading their professors on the curve. The average professor on almost any campus get a good B+ for his or her efforts -- which must mean -- arguing as faculty argue against grade inflation -- that inflationary grading is rampant in student evaluations of teaching. Thus I make no apology for arguing that an effective consumer is often a critical consumer -- which makes it very difficult for the educational establishment to provide good consumer education in credit-bearing courses taught by fully credentialed professors. Its comparable to asking General Motors to develop more discriminating automobile buyers.

So much for the differences between the two programs. Actually, there are probably more similarities than differences. The similarities seem to me to be related primarily to their common role as "innovations" on fairly traditional campuses.

1. Both, for example, are externally funded and probably somewhat peripheral, in the minds of many faculty, to the central mission of the University.

Thus both have to be concerned about establishing credibility and legitimacy, and both have used all the symbols of credibility -- attracting respected professors as teachers, seeking credit, and conducting evaluations.

2. As one interested in innovation, I might toss in the gratuitous and cynical observation that the 1 to 2% of University funds used for innovative programs are always subjected to fairly rigorous evaluation, whereas the remaining 98% may never be evaluated. If the standard lecture class were to be subjected to evaluation with respect to any known learning theory or research, it would flunk the test and any faculty committee convened to judge its usefulness would have to conclude that the research evidence failed to support conclusively the value of the course. But innovations have to make the case for their existence. And both the UN and USC programs are justifiably concerned about evaluation.

3. Finally, both programs are student oriented and both cross disciplinary lines. Once again, I might observe that most innovations seem to be student-oriented. That may simply be a commentary on the entrenchment of the discipline-oriented model. If one wants to do something different, one almost has to move in the direction of greater concern with students and their learning because it would be hard to make education

more discipline-oriented than it already is. Both the USC and UN programs, however, start with the student rather than with the discipline.