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BREAKING THE BARRIERS OF CULTURAL DISADVANTAGE AND CURRICULUM IMBALANCE.

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THE POSITION TAKEN IS THAT THE CURRICULAR CHANGES THAT HAVE BEEN MADE AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL TO PERMIT EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS (USUALLY NEGRO) TO ATTEND COLLEGE ARE ONLY PALLIATIVE BECAUSE MOST ADMISSION PROCEDURES ARE TOO INFLEXIBLE TO CONSIDER THE EFFECTS OF A DISADVANTAGED EDUCATION IN THE LOWER SCHOOLS ON A STUDENT'S SCHOLASTIC RECORD. ON THE OTHER HAND, SOME WELL-MEANING COLLEGES PRACTICE REVERSE DISCRIMINATION AND "INSTANT NEGRITUDE" (TOKENISM) AND ACCEPT DISADVANTAGED MINORITY GROUP STUDENTS WHO MAY NOT BE ABLE TO DO COLLEGE WORK. FOR THE DISADVANTAGED STUDENT THE PROBLEMS OF COLLEGE ADMISSION AND FINANCIAL AID ARE INSEPARABLE, AND THE MOST HELP IS NEEDED BY THE STUDENTS WITH MODEST ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS--THE MOST TALENTED USUALLY CAN GET AID. SEVERAL KINDS OF PROGRAMS TO UPGRADE THE STUDENT'S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND THUS INCREASE HIS OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLEGE, HAVE BEEN HELPFUL--LOCAL COMPENSATORY AND ENRICHMENT EFFORTS, EXCHANGE PLANS, AND TUTORING, AMONG OTHERS. MOST CHANGES AT THE PRESENT TIME IN THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM BENEFIT THE ABLE STUDENT WHO COMES FROM A HIGH SCHOOL WHICH OFFERS ADVANCED ACADEMIC COURSES, BUT IT IS THIS KIND OF CURRICULUM REFORM THAT PRESENTS YET ANOTHER BARRIER FOR THE STUDENT FROM A DISADVANTAGED SCHOOL. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 47, NUMBER 7, MARCH 1965. (NH)

Breaking the Barriers of CULTURAL DISADVANTAGE And CURRICULUM IMBALANCE

By BENJAMIN W. McKENDALL, JR.

AMERICAN education, impelled by a variety of forces, has become a giant enterprise, so large and so complex that one of its segments, higher education, has developed into the subject of separate scholarly inquiry. Once characterized by its relative scarcity, higher education now reflects the abundance of American society generally, in the form of broad and seemingly open access to study beyond the secondary school.

Feverish building on college campuses; growing numbers of colleges, especially community colleges; and swelling enrollment figures reinforce the impression that college admission—in its broadest sense—is now or soon will be virtually an open-door matter for the young man or woman who wants to continue education after high school.

Below the smooth surface, however, lurk a variety of distortions, myths, and barriers which operate on altogether too many students, either blocking their access to higher education or making their transition to college a repetitious, traumatic, and often wasteful experience. There are a number of major restraints: financial need; poor or inadequate counseling; misinformation; social and political pressures; mediocre academic preparation; and, in some sections of the country, a lack of facilities.

Two barriers in particular highlight the strains on the admission process: *curriculum imbalance;* and the difficulties which operate under the cumbersome rubric, *cultural disadvantage*. These two restraints would seem to have little direct connection; curriculum problems emerge in part from academic and, usually, economic privilege, while the barriers for the disadvantaged grow from cultural and economic deprivation. Taken together, however, they illustrate the fundamental paradox and vitality of the American educational enterprise, which balances on an intellectual tandem, as it were, between diversity of needs at the one end and a concern for excellence at the other. Moreover, our sense of equality demands that we combine a maximum challenge for the brightest with a maximum opportunity for all, sacrificing neither.

"Cultural disadvantage" is an all-purpose phrase, and a somewhat self-conscious one. It refers, of course, to the variety of social, economic, and ethnic-interracial factors which impede full freedom of choice and which destroy an individual's right to maximum opportunity. In the South, and in most urban areas of the North, cultural disadvantage is primarily a Negro problem. Other groups—Mexican-Americans along the border states and in California; Puerto Ricans in New York; the American Indian in the Southwest; the indigent white of Appalachia and the rural South—also have been adversely affected by these forces, but the American Negro is more visible, and, with the thrust of the civil rights movement, more vocal. So that when colleges testify increasingly to a concern for the "culturally disadvantaged," their interest is generally, though not exclusively, with American Negro students.

The search by some colleges for talented Negroes antedates the pressures of the current civil rights struggle. The Demonstration Guidance Project in New York, which began in 1957, reflected the colleges' interest obliquely through support from the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) and the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students (NSSFNS). Indeed the experience of the Higher Horizons program, as it came to be called, clearly demonstrated the need for college participation in talent search efforts. If for no other reason, the interest of colleges, and especially college admissions officers,

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encouraged some hope among the students, parents, and schools involved. They could touch, as it were, the door to a world hitherto closed from their common experience.

Relatively few colleges, however, were interested then in socio-economic disadvantage. The enrollment surge had not yet begun, and admissions staffs were preoccupied with recruiting and financial pressures. School visiting by colleges increased, but largely in white, middle-class communities: few colleges left the mainstream to search for talent in urban or rural low-income areas. NSSFNS, founded in 1948 and for many years the only major agency seriously interested in interracial college opportunity for Negroes, fought an uphill struggle to gain access for its candidates to a wide range of colleges.

For a variety of reasons, of which the civil rights movement is only one, a concern for the "disadvantaged" has since become educationally fashionable. The college admissions scene has reflected, rather than led, the national interest, so that now a considerable number of colleges have particular concern for students from minority cultures. There are a variety of motives for this change: the social conscience of collegiate institutions and their representatives; a concern among college faculties with the relative homogeneity of their student bodies, and a consequent interest in creating more cultural, economic, and social diversity; the interest of major foundations in talent search efforts and diversity of college cultures; and probably, in some cases, a fear lest the college become the target of civil rights pressure.

Change at the admissions level is at best a palliative, for the real problem of deprivation begins far down the educational ladder in the elementary school. The educational imbalance reflects the entire vicious complex of discrimination and deprivation in housing and employment; yet educational improvement is necessary to ameliorate the other difficulties. Some colleges have come to recognize that while long-range improvement must begin at the very roots, they have a significant role to play now, to build aspirations in racial and ethnic minority groups and to search out talented students within them, early enough, before they atrophy from disregard.

The usual canons of admission selection are of little assistance: admission tests, which so often can work to discriminate and to identify hidden talent among whites, clearly reflect the cultural disadvantage. The colleges are unfamiliar with the grading habits and counseling perceptions of the urban schools, and they know that the level of preparation within them is not strong. At colleges where admissions selection is a necessity, it takes some degree of broad conviction for an admissions office to grant admission to one student with clearly lower credentials, while refusing a white student from a middle-class school with stronger tests results and a better academic preparation. An admissions committee may boggle even more at the almost certain knowledge that the student from such a background will need considerable financial aid.

On the other hand, soft-headed good will at admission time can create damage also. It is one thing to discriminate in reverse by seeking talented students from minority cultures, and to identify them by relying more heavily on other methods such as interviews, essays, and recommendations; it is quite another matter to overlook a student's deficiencies when his chances for success, by any standard, simply are not realistic. Some caution by admissions officers is justified, if they honestly seek diversity and are willing to gamble on other criteria. Caution can be, however, a mask for hidden prejudice or indifference: it is easier certainly for the admissions committee, for the personnel deans and the resident managers, for the faculty, and in some respects for the students, if they do not have to cope with the adjustments implicit in a diversified student culture. There are, moreover, a number of colleges where concern for minority group students is really an interest in token diversity. The one or two Negro students recruited provide the college with "instant negritude"; the Negro student becomes on that campus not an individual student in his own right but The Negro, with all the self-conscious solicitude this creates. There is then a need for balance between well-meaning but misguided zeal, and unnecessary conservatism with the welter of rationalizations it can generate.

College admission and financial aid are inseparable in the question of more fluid access to college for minority group students. If there is difficulty in establishing some reasonable flexibility in admissions, it is even more a problem to generate the substantial financial aid necessary. Reports published by colleges on the family income distribution of financial aid recipients suggest that a major portion of financial aid still goes to students whose families are at the middle-income level. Some colleges, concerned lest their financial aid resources be used to perpetuate the existing cultural homogeneity rather than to diversify it, have attempted to curtail smaller grants in favor of fewer but larger grants to truly lower-income students, permitting others to lean more heavily on other resources such as jobs and

loans. Though financial aid now is largely determined by financial need and competitive bidding has been sharply curtailed in the last decade, it is difficult for a college to refuse a scholarship grant to an especially attractive candidate with modest need, in deference to a somewhat questionable Negro or other minority student with a substantial need. Yet it is unrealistic to expect a heavy burden of loan and job obligations from a student whose admission itself involves a considerable element of risk. Such decisions would be easier if colleges with common interests, including "overlap" competition for candidates, were to cooperate in a common financial aid policy.

The most acute need for help is with minority students of modest credentials but substantial financial need. The relatively recent furor over the disadvantaged has opened college doors to the most able Negroes and, to some extent, to students from other minorities as well. There are a variety of opportunities—the NSSFNS Program; the National Achievement Scholarship Program conducted by the National Merit Corporation; the Cooperative Admission and Aid Plan sponsored by the College Admissions Center in Evanston; the United Negro College Fund; the United Scholarship Service for Spanish-Americans and American Indians; Project Opportunity in the South; and the individual visits by colleges to disadvantaged high schools—all of which afford increasingly open access to students who might have been ignored in previous years. The recent reports from Project Talent suggest that most students of high ability and achievement find access to college, regardless of family income, though the identification of such students in the report probably suffers from some cultural bias. But for the next tier of talent—and a clearly educable level—the prospects are more dismal. Their financial need is every bit as great, but their credentials are less impressive, certainly not enough to catch the fancy of any but the most enlightened and liberally disposed college financial aid committees.

Colleges recognize that work with high school seniors in disadvantaged high schools brings them too late on the scene: the essential damage, both to aspirations and to academic quality, has already been done. Through a variety of programs and techniques, some colleges have made an active effort to reach students earlier, at a time when critical decisions can be affected. NSSFNS, with the assistance of a special grant and the help of some college admissions officers and some staff of the College Board, has developed throughout the country a College Assistance Project whereby teams of college admissions officers visit junior and senior high school counselors and students. The Association of College Admissions Counselors, the United Negro College Fund, and the College Board have sponsored a variety of workshops for counselors at disadvantaged high schools. In the South, Project Opportunity has created a system of guaranteed financial aid along with early counseling and teacher education. Unrelated directly to admissions, but significant in their potential effect upon academic preparation, are the special summer programs for disadvantaged students sponsored by institutions such as Dartmouth, Brown, Princeton, and the University of California. There is an increasing number of tutoring programs managed by college students with the encouragement of their institutions. In a few instances, secondary schools, too, those located in the more affluent suburbs, have lent their resources to local pockets of deprivation through exchange programs, tutoring, counseling exchanges, and the like; but in general the response of secondary schools has been dilatory. None of these efforts solves directly the conditions which have generated the disadvantage, but they contribute heavily to the amelioration of their consequences.

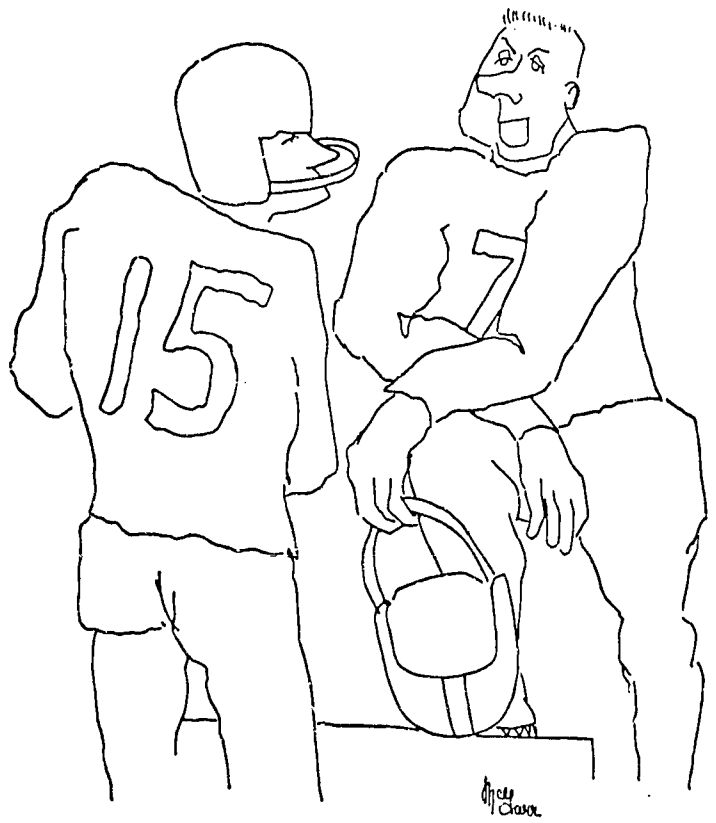
A VERY different sort of imbalance exists in the matter of curriculum. The academic road from school to college ought to be smooth and direct. Though clear at times, and even on occasion surprisingly open, the route generally is and has been badly paved. Attempts at repair are plagued by the vast diversity of American schools and colleges; the increasing mobility of students, especially at the college level; and the unhappily lethargic response in the colleges to the intellectual ferment within secondary schools.

The colleges will grant publicly that college freshmen are better prepared than ever. Some have responded to the pressure, belatedly but sincerely nonetheless, with a variety of curriculum reforms designed to challenge the most able and best prepared students. We read with increasing frequency of new independent study programs, year-round campuses, telescoped undergraduate-graduate programs, special freshman seminars, honors programs, unfettered curricula for selected students, and the like. Many of these are intellectually exciting reforms. But the drama of the changes simply underscores the general delinquency, and with it the fact that for a sizable body of students the freshman year program, and often that of the second year as well, are still repetitious of the secondary school academic experience. In

some cases their college offerings are inferior.

The notions of acceleration and advanced standing are not new. Many colleges and universities long ago made serious attempts to lend more flexibility to their curricular structure, with some pioneer efforts as early as the 1930's. From a national standpoint, however, the effects have been disappointing, either because they place unnatural demands upon students or because they involve often formidable procedures which defeat the basic premises behind the change. The colleges—again, with notable exceptions—have paid lip service to the work of the secondary schools but have been most conservative in pragmatic response.

Curricular movement is properly a faculty matter. When the faculty of a department or institution takes positive steps to identify able and well-prepared students, to treat their academic backgrounds with some sensitivity, and to encourage their placement and movement as a function of the fundamental intellectual premises which inform that particular curriculum, then the student interest usually is served. At one institution, for example, nationally known and a pioneer in advanced standing efforts, the faculty has attempted to relate the work of secondary schools and the individual differences of student abilities to their rather unusual program of interdisciplinary general education at the freshman and sophomore level. Their decision to rely primarily on special examinations at entrance does not reflect a refusal to inspect other possibilities, but rather has emerged from an honest appraisal of all avenues. Though the faculty at this institution feels it must rely heavily on its own devices, it does so with an open perspective and a willingness to use other methods, such as College Board Advanced Placement Examinations, as a means to identify and encourage students toward the opportunities available.



"Some school. It says in my scholarship I gotta choose between an Austin-Healy, a luscious blonde, and passing grades in English."

Students suffer academically, however, when a faculty resists change for fear of "losing" good students to other departments, or when it summarily refuses "outside" sources such as the Advanced Placement Program, or when it focuses more on the quasi-sanctified notion of "coverage" than on the extent and level of intellectual maturity and depth. Credit, or "challenge" by examination, for example, can be a legitimate device, especially for use with undergraduates, but its effect is feeble if it disguises faculty unwillingness to consider other alternatives in addition, or if it is used as a mild palliative to cure the ills of an overly structured, deadening curriculum.

The problem is partly logistic. In the structures of large university systems, it is difficult to develop policies of advanced placement and/or credit which are sensitive to the diversity of individual student backgrounds and needs. Too often, however, the difficulties of size and the consequent need for administrative efficiency usurp the student interest in favor of vaguely defined notions of "uniformity" or "fairness." Too often such concerns mask a provincialism and rigidity among institutions or within departments which bespeaks less a concern for maintaining high quality than the institutions' or departments' relative inexperience with superior students.

The Advanced Placement Program, which the College Board assumed in 1955-56 after two experimental years, has been a major contributor to curricular reform within secondary schools during the past decade. In the general experience of the program, colleges which have had considerable experience with Advanced Placement candidates tend to be more liberal in credit and placement provisions than those without such experience. The Advanced Placement Program has grown from a modest 1,229 candidates from 104 schools who presented examinations to 130 colleges in 1955-56, to almost 29,000 candidates from 2,086 schools presenting examinations to 888 colleges in 1964. College policies have shifted in this decade of growth, but not nearly commensurate with the expansion of the program. And the

dimension of difficulty extends even further when one considers the number of honors, accelerated, and advanced classes offered in many high schools, often with college-level demands. This very growth, while encouraging, also carries the seeds of yet another barrier—a growing disparity between the strong schools and the weak. If the disparity widens, the colleges may need to cope with an even greater diversity of academic backgrounds.

The difficulties of academic transition become more acute as the school and college population becomes more mobile. Increasingly, students move from one secondary school to another. Vast numbers of students begin their formal college work at community colleges, with an eye toward eventual transfer. Many study part-time, at both two- and four-year colleges, with a variety of extension programs, adult education programs, television courses, and independent study. Recent studies have shown that the number of adults taking college courses on a part-time or independent basis has increased substantially, to roughly five times the full-time enrollments. Mobility will almost certainly increase. The traditional procedures involving transcripts of credit and record will be taxed severely, with detrimental effects on students. The College Board's newly formed Council on College Level Examinations is a hopeful initial step in the direction of coping with this problem, but one can anticipate once again a slow and conservative response from the colleges.

The burden of responsibility for curriculum barriers lies not entirely with the colleges. Secondary schools have shown considerable reluctance to experiment with further curricular change beyond the ferment of the 1950's. Some college spokesmen have charged that advanced work in high schools has taken on the coloration of prestige aspirations and that such efforts have forced students into unhealthy early specialization. Such criticisms contain a germ of truth, especially in the strong secondary schools which have come to assume, with the colleges, a joint custody of the general studies program usually associated with the first two years of college. In a few high schools, some attempts have been made at interdisciplinary studies; if these experiments develop into a significant movement, it may become necessary to develop broader Advanced Placement examinations.

The teaching faculties of schools and colleges need to communicate more actively. The legal demarcation which separates the secondary school from the college must not serve as a barrier to a coherent curriculum experience for each student. There is need for a comprehensive, authoritative, national review of curriculum at both levels.

► Superior students from small high schools compete successfully with graduates of big schools at the University of Chicago, and in the long run they do better. Three years ago the university began its Grass Roots Talent Search partly to find out if the graduates of big city and suburban high schools are better prepared for college than graduates of small-town and rural high schools.

Of the three classes admitted to the University of Chicago since 1960, each small-town and rural group has had a slightly lower average score on College Board exams than the average score of the whole freshman class. The overall difference is twenty-eight points, but is as high as forty-nine on tests of verbal aptitude, since small schools tend not to work their bright students hard enough in composition and literature. Consequently, while the small-school graduates are reading hard in their freshman year to catch up with their classmates, their grades remain below average. However, in subsequent years they perform somewhat above average.

Last year, for example, the grade-point average for all University of Chicago undergraduates was 2.34 for men and 2.36 for women. The small-school students who were freshmen averaged 2.20, those who were sophomores scored 2.57, and those who were seniors attained 2.62.

The small-school talent search is reported to have contributed to a better "mix" in the undergraduate student body, as the students brought to the campus a small-town warmth and friendliness and an unusual quality of responsiveness to others.

► For students who have difficulty in selecting a college or in gaining admission, a number of national counseling services now operate. Among these are: College Admissions Center, 610 Church St., Evanston, Ill.; Catholic College Admissions and Information Center, Dean Thomas Garrett, Assumption College, Worcester 9, Mass.; the College Admissions Assistance Center, 41 East 65th St., New York 21, N. Y. For additional help students can obtain a college entrance kit containing four booklets: "How About College?" "How To Visit Colleges," "How About College Financing?" and "How To Express Yourself Vocationally." The kit costs one dollar and is available from Publication Sales, American Personnel and Guidance Association, 1605 New Hampshire Ave., N. W., Washington, D. C. 20009.